

# **ARE WE LEARNING FROM ACCIDENTS?**

A quandary, a question,  
and a way forward

**NIPPIN ANAND**



**ARE WE LEARNING  
FROM ACCIDENTS?**

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To my mother, who passed away on the day  
I finished writing this book. I love you mum.

Om Shanti.





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# Preface



Can we really learn from accidents? For a very long time I believed that when we humans are confronted by suffering on a mass scale, learning is difficult, almost impossible. I could have written an entire book to argue that there is little learning from accidents.

Since I embarked on this research I have experienced a shift in my perspective. Beyond safety science, engineering and human factors, as I researched more widely across disciplines – theology, religion, mythology, social psychology, analytical psychology, anthropology, linguistics, neuroscience and biology – I have arrived at a viewpoint radically different from where my journey started. As my perspective about learning from accidents shifted, so did my focus of enquiry. Beyond accidents, I became interested in understanding how we humans make meaning of misfortune. And, more specifically: when we are faced with misfortune, how can we really learn?

As I look back in time, I am coming to realise that my views about learning from accidents were far too

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focused on the external world – the policymakers who approve of tenuous regulations, the ship owners who invest in poorly designed ships, the ship managers who operate those ships at any cost, the meek seafarers in desperate need of a job, the paper-safe oil companies who play by the rules to manage their reputation, and the cargo owners who search for the cheapest rust buckets in the market to carry their goods. I had matured enough to understand the point that in a competitive world with questionable regulatory standards it is not ‘human error’ that is to blame for accidents. That much is expected of a student of philosophy and sociology who has been a mariner for more than a decade.

As I delved deeper to question my inner world, I found that my imagination was still anchored in the same place: not the seafarer but the ship owner to be questioned; not the standard operating process but the design to be made fail-safe; not the ship captain but the cargo owner to be held to account. But I have now realised that I was busy reallocating blame from one part of the system to another. When I look back, what kept me going in this unconscious mode for many years was a sense of righteousness that I was not part of this corporate, profit-driven machinery. I was more drawn to, and sympathetic to, the worker.

My worldview was, however, naïve. It took me a while to realise that I was sitting in a castle built in the air, reshuffling blame like a financier transacting currencies from one part of the world to another to maximise profits. The uncomfortable truth for me was that beyond this feeling of moral superiority nothing had really changed in my inner world. It

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has been a journey, and when I look back, much of my learning has come from stepping outside my comfort zone to arrive at a new point of view.

So many of us are wedded to our imagination, and we blame things wrong in life on bad luck. Jung summarised it so eloquently in saying, ‘If you do not make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.’ For how long are we going to hold fate responsible for recurring problems in our lives? At some stage we must learn to conquer inner fears and question the fantasyland within. Why does this happen to me? What am I missing? What can I do about it? These questions will remain unanswered forever unless we are willing to take a critical perspective of our beliefs and myths.

Learning from accidents – what does learning even mean? When I think of learning, I often question my role as a parent. What do we do when despite our best efforts our children refuse to grow, cause us too much pain and consistently point at others for their failures? For all the marvels of positive psychology and the happy-ending lullabies that our society has so uncritically embraced as an ‘innovative’ approach to parenting and schooling, children must learn to endure pain – hopefully, though, inflicted by others, not their parents and family. The suffering that comes from painful experiences is integral to learning and flourishing. Learning does not come from the comfort of the familiar but from the painful realisation that our worldview is so limited in this vast universe.

A large part of this book is devoted to learning from a specific accident narrative. I had the rare privilege of

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meeting face to face at length with the captain of the cruise ship *Costa Concordia*, to hear his perspective of the accident. But my focus in this book is less on the captain's narrative and more about my own meaning and learning. Through personal stories, reflections, confessions, trials, risks and experiments, this book is a documented account of my own assumptions, biases, fantasies, myths, and beliefs coming to the surface. You will find many glimpses of my life woven into this book – a master mariner with a history of working at sea; a PhD in social sciences with a master's degree in economics and social psychology; a safety inspector; an existentialist; a brown-skin man living in the West; a non-practising Hindu; a parent of two beautiful children; a responsible son; an annoying, but loving, husband to a very caring wife; and an imperfect person.

It is not my goal to assert the accuracy of my work in this book. I find solace in making my biases and assumptions known to myself and to you.

We are creatures of story. When we tell stories we create space for doubt and questions, but when we distribute facts and evidence we get busy filling those gaps. I have deliberately chosen to tell a subjective story in this book to help you learn to doubt your worldview and question mine. I would like to see you being critical and mindful as you read through this book; my overall aim is one of helping you mindfully tackle risks.

That is the objective of this book and in my view, the future of skills in an uncertain world. I hope that through this book you will experience the joy of learning and living by unleashing your imagination,

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unlocking your potential and recognising the bedrock assumptions in your thinking. I hope this book will liberate you from dogma, live without fear, and help you to show compassion, love, kindness and flourishing, and to practise listening. I hope that you will begin to question your beliefs at the deepest level, the level where most of us have simply accepted our life and matter as is.



# Author's Note



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Any typos or mistakes are the result of my own fallibility. I have come to realise that fallibility is an inevitable human condition, and one which, when it comes to learning, we must embrace.





# Acknowledgements



Everyone needs a mentor, but few are fortunate enough to find a good one. Thank you, Dr Robert Long, for walking alongside, sharing your wisdom, and for being a true friend.

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Irma, from you I am learning the power of critiquing with compassion to those who we truly care about. Our love is eternal.

# The Book Cover



## The front

Everything is significant. Nothing never happens!

The background colour grey represents ambiguity. The title colour, orange, depicts the connection between the physical and the spiritual world. We embark on a learning journey by submitting wholeheartedly to the unknowable and making a commitment to seeking wisdom.

The image of a lion and a mouse represents how we should think about learning. The emphasis is not on the mouse speaking *up* or the lion making the effort to listen. The image symbolises the power of relationship in learning. In this relationship, the mouse has the courage because it dares to come out of its burrow to meet with the lion. The lion has the power; it can choose to remain arrogant. But the lion is humble as well; it stays calm, and listens with patience.

In learning, what is needed is a meeting between the lion and the mouse. This book is an invitation for one fallible person to meet another with an open

## The Book Cover

heart and mind. One cannot deny fallibility, for that is the essence of all existence.

At the heart of the book is the idea of ‘embracing fallibility’.

### **The back**

The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza once said, ‘Not to lament, not to laugh, not to curse but to understand.’

On the back cover there are four monkeys. Their gestures follow Spinoza’s wise words symbolising our reactions when things go wrong – finger pointing (cursing); mocking; apologising (lamenting); and seeing life as a puzzle to be solved. Such is the delusion of control and the denial of fallibility that give human beings a sense of moral superiority over others, but neither is helpful for learning.

# How to read this book



In my workshops, I begin by saying, ‘Don’t believe a word of what I say.’ This book is written as a subjective, biased and open-ended enquiry into an accident. It is not to be read literally, but with feelings and emotions and by keeping subjectivity in mind. I do not wish my reflections and arguments to persuade you. In fact, the very idea of persuasion would mean an attempt to prove something that goes against the message of this book. It is not my purpose to win you over to my viewpoint.

That said, I have taken almost seven years to write this book. All these years I have striven for accuracy. But in the end, my accuracy is only as good as the limits of my imagination. Is it not paradoxical that I call something mine (my book, my writing, my opinion, my understanding) and then claim objectivity about what belongs to me? How can my truth be universal? That would be a denial of Self. Do not believe a word of what you read in this book; instead search for your own truth.

I would suggest reading the book in small chunks and taking the time to relax, meditate, go for walks,

## How to read this book

sleep over ideas, dream, think and reflect. There are several models, figures and personal stories included in the book to stimulate your reading experience.

But don't just read it. Do something with what you learn. Ruffle some feathers, blow a horn, make new friends, sing a song, dance in the rain, bake some bread, write a poem, visit a graveyard or just upset your boss (but not too much). Take a chance. There is no learning if we don't complement reflection with action. There is no learning without risk.

# Foreword 1



In industry, there is often talk about ‘organisational learning’. After accidents, the refrain ‘lessons have been learned’ nearly always crops up from organisational representatives. But organisations do not learn. People do. Equally, organisations do not care. People do. This might seem pedantic in that, of course, organisations comprise people. But organisations also comprise technologies, rules and procedures, infrastructure and assets, within a legal entity serving particular purposes. Even the people in organisations come and go. Many of us have experienced how much things can change – and how many ‘lessons’ are unlearned – when senior leaders come and go, as they do every few years. And there are many people, each with their own values, attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, practices, and histories. They all learn different things, in different ways, for different reasons, in different places, over different times.

The point is that we often like to anthropomorphise organisations as if each were a person. At the same time, we like to bureaucratised learning, caring and change. It is as if we can strip away that which cannot be controlled by process. This includes trust, faith,

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hope, and doubt. It includes compassion, empathy and humour. And it includes symbolic thinking, ethics, diversity of thought, complex and nuanced language, and cultural transmission. Most of these qualities or characteristics are uniquely human. We even talk about ‘changing culture’, and the need for this, as if this were an engineering project. We keep talking about this, over and over again, after and between every major unwanted event. I have sometimes performed a thought experiment about this as changing the values, attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, practices, and histories of one person ... then multiplying this by hundreds or thousands of people and their relationships.

For as long as I can remember, people have been my ‘special interest’. I remember studying human beings consciously as a small child, and from my early teenage years I bought and read books on people and relationships, and the curious things that we believe and do, from mundane rituals to adopting extreme beliefs and joining cults. As far as I could tell, few or none of my friends took such an interest. I felt like a stranger in a strange land, looking at something truly extraordinary: human behaviour.

I found a friend when I met Nippin Anand in 2018 at a workshop in Cardiff, Wales, on ‘Safety-II’. Safety-II was then an emerging theory about safety, organisations, work and people, proposed by the eminent safety scientist Erik Hollnagel. Five years or so after its birth as a concept, Safety-II was being put into practice by a relatively small bunch of confused but curious practitioners. At the workshop, Nippin talked about a tragic marine accident in a way that I had never heard before. He had talked in person to



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Captain Francesco Schettino, the main protagonist of the story, to try to understand his perspective. Nippin did this as a safety scientist, anthropologist and, importantly, as a former Master Mariner himself. He also did this as a *person*, displaying some of the characteristics that I mentioned earlier.

The method and style of this human encounter was very different from an accident investigation interview. The story and insights that emerged were very different from what one could find in the accident report, or any accident report, where such testimony is neglected, approached very differently, or else distorted to such an extent that it can become meaningless or misleading. This typifies epistemic injustice.

Nippin started to question assumptions and explore uncomfortable truths about not only shipping but the safety profession itself, and its myths and rituals. Since then, I have heard Nippin present on *Costa Concordia* several times. Not everyone would agree with the perspectives, insights or conclusions. That is not the point. Or rather, it is *exactly* the point: there are always multiple perspectives. Some are more convenient than others. Some are hard to accept, perhaps because they challenge deeply held assumptions and cherished beliefs.

In the years that followed, Nippin and I discussed psychology, anthropology, mythology, philosophy, and religion, in the context of safety, work and life. We often approached each of these from different schools of thought, and with different lived experience. But we seemed to think in a complementary way, valuing similar things, such as interdisciplin-

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arity (or transdisciplinarity), multiple perspectives, thick descriptions, synthesis, and ethics.

I have been especially curious about how Nippin has taken a wider angle on religion, and how this affects our thinking about organisations and safety. The religious origination that I have most identified with throughout my adult life has been Quakerism. It has affected how I've thought about many aspects of organisational life, such as hierarchy, leadership, followership, fellowship, group processes, and conflict management. It has influenced how I think about language, semiotics, learning, symbolism, simplicity, rituals. It has also affected my attitudes toward equality, diversity and inclusion.

Nippin's religious heritage in Hinduism could – on the surface – hardly be more different, in terms of history, liturgies, rituals and sacraments. But beneath this, there are similarities that may affect how we view people. Quakerism emphasises the concept of the 'Inner Light', the belief that every person has access to the presence of the divine within them. Hinduism teaches the concept of the 'Atman', the individual soul or inner self, which is considered a spark of the divine. Quakers have historically been involved in movements for peace and social justice. Hinduism's teachings include principles of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and the importance of treating all beings with respect and compassion. Quaker worship – especially in the UK – often involves silent contemplation, with individuals waiting quietly. Hinduism includes practices such as meditation (*dhya-na*) and contemplation, where practitioners seek to connect with the divine through silence and stillness. Both traditions encourage individuals to seek

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truth and spiritual understanding through personal experience and direct revelation, rather than relying solely on external authority or scripture. Two religious traditions, one well over 3,000 years old, and one around 370 years old. One born into, and one chosen as an adult. How can this be separated from ourselves, or our work?

I don't think it can. Our religious heritages and orientations infuse into our way of being. And then there is our broader cultural background and life experience. I grew up in a working-class family, in a small northern English former mining and textiles town, in a small family business, as a white-skinned, intellectually- and artistically-curious boy. I have carried this around with me throughout my life, moving around in the UK, then Australia and France. Nippin has his own very different story, but he too has moved around the world, carrying his culture and seeing those of others.

But what has any of this got to do with learning from accidents? Surely, religion and culture – with their values, beliefs, myths, symbols, rituals, means of transmission, and institutions – couldn't be further apart from accident investigation! Beneath the specifics, we carry our religious heritages around with us into our work, whether in safety or other professions. These heritages affect how we view truth, ethics, purpose, wealth, success, and relationships. It's a fascinating thing to think about. And yet, we largely ignore how our history and religious and cultural backgrounds, even those of our parents and grandparents, encoded as they are into our upbringing, affect how we approach life now. This is especially true for activities that we have deemed scientific,

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objective, methodical, and institutional, like safety management, including accident investigation and learning from accidents.

Whatever your story, it affects how you see the world, how you interact, and how you learn. No amount of bureaucratising can bleach this from your approach to work and life. The problem is that more often than not we cannot see our external (or internal) cultures. In his book, *The Invisible Language*, Edward Hall, an American anthropologist, wrote in 1973, 'Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own inhabitants'. Sometimes, it takes a non-inhabitant to 'make the strange familiar and make the familiar strange', as Nippin likes to say. I moved from the UK to Australia and there were differences, but they were not profound. I then moved to France, a metaphorical stone's throw from England, and the differences *were* profound. The shock of contrast and difference exposes to 'us' what is normal to 'them'. But sometimes, it might just take a different approach to seeing, thinking, feeling, relating, communicating, and learning. This means going beyond non-thinking and non-feeling, with their sentry slogans, myths and rituals.

That is what this book is about. It is unlike any other book that I am aware of about learning from accidents, and it shows why we – in our organisations – often don't. It goes beyond analysis, beyond theory, beyond disciplines, and beyond profession. You are likely to be surprised, challenged, and perhaps irritated. And if so, it is worth your time.

Dr Steven Shorrock

# Foreword 2



The first contact I had from Nippin was many years ago when he ordered a book. It was just a book order; how could I know that this would lead to the most invigorating experience in my life?

Let's jump forward to April 2023, and my plane lands in Chennai, India. Here I am to work with this man Nippin who I have only met on Zoom and by email. Yet, strangely I am nervous in this strange land, like nothing I have seen before. I had read *A Passage to India* by E. M Forster, completed a unit in the History of India as an undergraduate and have many Indian friends in Australia – but nothing had prepared me for this.

The purpose of my visit was to work with Nippin and his team undertaking the MiProfile Survey and to do work on leadership with executives from the second largest shipping company in the world.

When we exited the plane and the terminal, the first thing that hit me was the heat, the humidity and the poverty. The walkway was crowded with people, with many wanting to get my fare. I must

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have had a neon light above my head saying, 'Here's a sucker Aussie'. Our driver was not there to meet us; there had been some confusion in arrangement, but confusion is normal in this country and no one gets stressed about it.

After battling through the traffic madness, I finally arrived at the motel and meeting Nippin was like meeting my brother I had not seen in some time. We instantly resonated and were abuzz with so much to share and discuss. Luckily, we had time for several semiotic walks together and I felt at home in this place. The richness of myth, ritual, faith and love in this place knocked me over.

Then as we worked together with this company, I realised Nippin understood the Social Psychology of Risk like few others. This is helped by Nippin's voracious appetite to read and with no fear to read across the disciplines. His comprehension of life/being, phenomenology, existential philosophy and myth/ritual is extraordinary.

So, what can I say about this book? If you are a safety person looking for an endorsement of a comforting worldview, this book is not for you. If you are open to being challenged in thinking, prepared to embrace transdisciplinary thought and semiotics, and fascinated by the enactments of fallible humans, then this is your book.

Nippin's insightful discussion of the *Costa Concordia* disaster and his reflections on Captain Francesco Schettino are alone a good reason to read this book.

## Foreword 2

What can we learn from such an accident? What is our disposition towards accidents, incidents, harm and suffering? Where do we go for challenges in learning? Do we even know what learning is? What are our taboos, places we do not go in mind and spirit? Can we cope with dissonance and discomfort in learning? These are some of the questions this book will stir in you if you are one to read it. So, I commend this book to you. May you find it enlivens you to a better understanding of fallible humans and therefore better know yourself.

Dr Rob Long

Grandad, Guitarist, Journeyman and Friend





# Introduction: Failure was Never an Option



An unexamined life is not worth living.  
Socrates

It was 2 April 1995. At age eighteen, shortly after passing out from high school, I was going to join my first ship, as a deck cadet. At the time, my Singapore-based employer expected his Indian cadets to bear the travel expenses to join their first ship – a practice now considered a breach of maritime labour rights. Apart from the stress of organising the finances to fly me from Mumbai to Singapore (roughly US\$400), my working-class parents were worried about their elder son going away from home for an eighteen-month tenure. The rumour went around that life at sea was harsh. Most cadets would quit and return home in the first few months. Few stayed on board and survived until the end of their contract. As I was packing my bags on the night before leaving, my mother came to my room and said, ‘*Beta* (Son), I hope you will not return home like others and bring shame to our family.’ As the elder son in the family, I felt an immense burden on my shoulders. I knew in that moment that failure was not an option. And

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so I survived a job for eleven long years – a job that I hated from the very first day until failure came knocking at my door with a force that outweighed my resilience.

It was during the winter season of the year 2002. I was on a container liner service trading between Japan and West Coast United States. I was in the middle of my night watch, the ship approaching Irago Bay Pilot Station, and bound for Nagoya in Japan, ETA (estimated time of arrival) 0345 hours. As a seafarer you learn the metaphorical meaning of ETA and how it varies across geographies, cultures, trade sectors, from country to country, and from port to port. In Japan there were no written rules, but for a container ship the term 'ETA' meant 'PTA' (precise time of arrival); no allowance for flexibility in the timing. In Japanese shipping companies a popular myth floated around. Imagine two ships sailing from Seattle bound for Japan, and both are caught in a storm; one arrives late but intact, and the other arrives on time but has lost one of its anchors in the weather. The company fires the captain of the former and retains the captain of the latter. In my circumstance, no one said that safety was not a priority – but we all knew what missing the ETA would mean.

That night there were moderate headwinds, a swell of about 3 metres and visibility down to about 3 miles. On the bridge I had with me Melvin, an able-bodied seaman. We were about 20 miles from the pilot boarding grounds, and on a course parallel to ours, each about a mile way, were two vessels – a car carrier on our port bow and a Taiwanese container vessel on our starboard quarter. We were all going at approximately 20 knots, and bound for the same destination.

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That was my mental model – which was soon to be destroyed. Without warning, Ship A (in the diagram) on our port bow turned to starboard in an apparent attempt to cross our bows. For us, turning to port was not an option due to the shallows on that side. With the ETA ever-present in the deepest recesses of my mind, slowing down or stopping the engines never occurred to me, despite the bright luminous sign ‘safety first’ on the front panel, full-engine controls on the bridge and a friendly chief engineer standing right behind the bridge panel. Without hesitating, I rang the captain, saying, ‘I need you on the bridge *now*.’ He arrived in less than a minute. Still in his pyjamas, he ran into the chart room to check the ship’s position, came back to the radar screen, apparently took less than five seconds to adjust to night vision, and ordered Melvin to turn the wheel hard a-starboard.

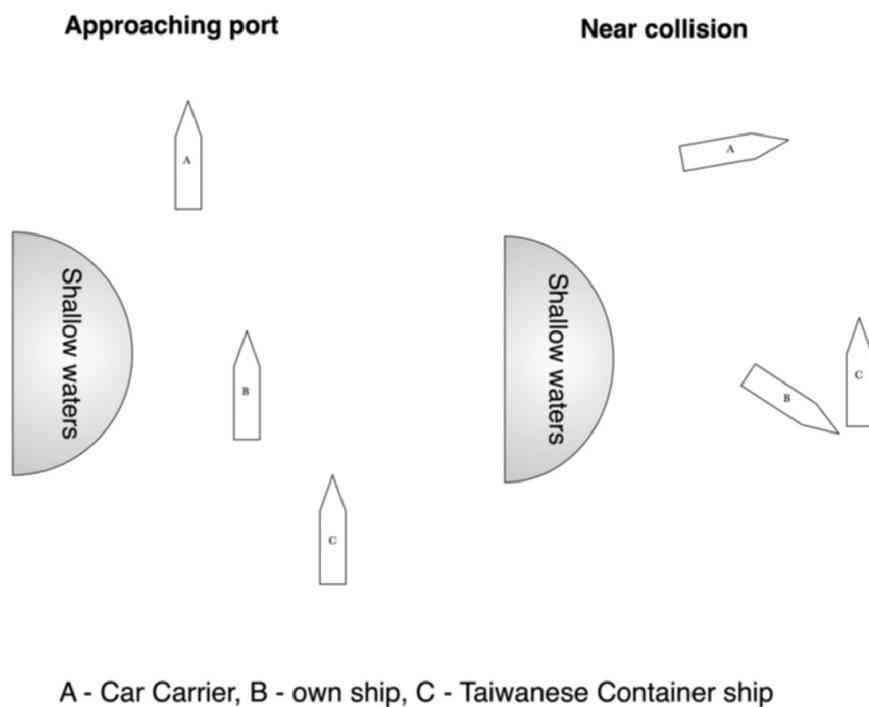


Figure I 1: A near collision

## Introduction: Failure was Never an Option

I switched to manual steering, and Melvin started executing the turn. As we were swinging to the right, the Taiwanese vessel (C) on our starboard quarter maintained its speed and course, apparently completely indifferent to the situation. It took about 45 seconds for our bow to swing down the length of that ship. Those were the longest 45 seconds of my life! I have no idea how close we came to collision, but to put things in perspective a bottle of water thrown from our ship could have easily landed on that vessel. I would have no difficulty calling it a near hit.

The next morning when I woke up at 10 am, nothing seemed normal. By this time, Melvin had leaked the news to all crew members. Everyone I met on the way to the bridge was smirking. I could sense in their eyes how badly I must have screwed up the night before. The chief engineer, a good friend who I enjoyed socialising with almost every evening, caught me in the alleyway. He was curious to know why I had not crash-stopped the vessel: 'After all, this is exactly why these devices are designed, Nippin,' he said in an uplifting tone. I felt apologetic and ashamed, and replied: 'I'm sorry, Chief, but I have *no idea* why I didn't.' As I arrived on the bridge to lay down the passage plan for the next port, the captain was standing at the front window, having a coffee. I said, 'Good morning, sir,' but his body language was reserved. He was not giving out the same friendly vibes I had felt in the past.

For context, I will say a few words about my past rapport. Arriving on time in port or negotiating heavy traffic had never been a problem for me. I was in my third year as an independent watch officer. I had never missed one ETA nor shown hesitation in a

## Introduction: Failure was Never an Option

difficult situation. But from here on, things changed. When I was on the bridge, the ‘call captain’ mark on the chart – the position at which the captain arrives on the bridge before arrival in port – shifted further down on the chart at every port arrival. And navigating high-traffic areas suddenly became a big deal, with doubled watches, increased presence of the captain on the bridge and detailed night orders. I started to lose my confidence. In every manoeuvre I performed, my watchman could sense my anxiety no matter how hard I tried to maintain calm. At the end of my time on the ship, I knew that the feedback from the captain wouldn’t be good. But after sailing with that captain for almost four months, I never expected just a dry goodbye. His metamessage was clear: ‘I hope I never get to sail with you again.’

Almost a decade passed, and the nightmare scenario kept recurring in my dreams. I felt ashamed, guilty and wholly responsible for the near-accident. I should have never allowed my own vessel to become sandwiched between the two other vessels. I should have slowed the vessel or crash-stopped it. What was the big deal in delaying the vessel? At the most we would have arrived a few minutes late. Why so much hesitation? And why had I not called the master much sooner? Questions of this sort kept haunting me, and I went into a negative spiral. I continued sailing for another year, but never really came out of the experience.

The motivation for writing this book started off with me questioning and journaling my inner world of guilt, shame, and trauma that followed from this near-accident. Over the years, these reflections and confessions have served to restore my self-esteem,

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health, sleep and more. Beyond healing, as I turned towards researching theories and stories of human fallibility I discovered that in most cases the purpose of learning is implicitly understood as controlling errors, preventing people from being harmed or enabling safe conditions at work.

But much of the literature is silent on articulating what learning even means. Where do we go for the cues and indications of learning? How do we recognise our assumptions and biases in investigating and sharing narratives of accidents to create better learning outcomes? What questions do we ask, and which do we avoid (even without knowing)? How can we better engage with people involved in accidents and learn from them? How can we truly and practically learn from accidents?

My thoughts on the matter have resulted in an attempt to provide a range of practical methods and intuitive tools embedded in a *coherent* philosophy to create opportunities for learning from accidents. It is my humble view that one cannot learn from accidents (and, for that matter, from life) without an ethic, a philosophy and a method of enquiry to understand fallible humans.

### **The outline of the book**

This book is intended to be a subjective, biased and open-ended view of one of the most famous accidents in the maritime history: the capsizing of the *Costa Concordia*. It is the story of a master mariner, the captain of that ill-fated ship, who through his actions and inactions became known as the

## Introduction: Failure was Never an Option

infamous cause of the accident. The story is told by another master mariner, one who met with a near-accident. Subjective reflection is therefore inevitable and intertwined in this story, but such subjectivity is an advantage in knowing and feeling the story of another. This is precisely the starting point for discussing an appreciation of learning. I am less concerned about what went wrong on the day of the accident. I am far more interested in bringing to the surface what is hidden in my own unconscious, Captain Francesco Schettino's unconscious, and the shared beliefs of our society. Both the maritime industry and society at large are convinced of the culpability and stupidity of a captain who navigated the ship into a rock and then irresponsibly ran away from the scene. This book stands up in contrast to a society that would rather scapegoat the captain and hold him single-handedly responsible for the accident.

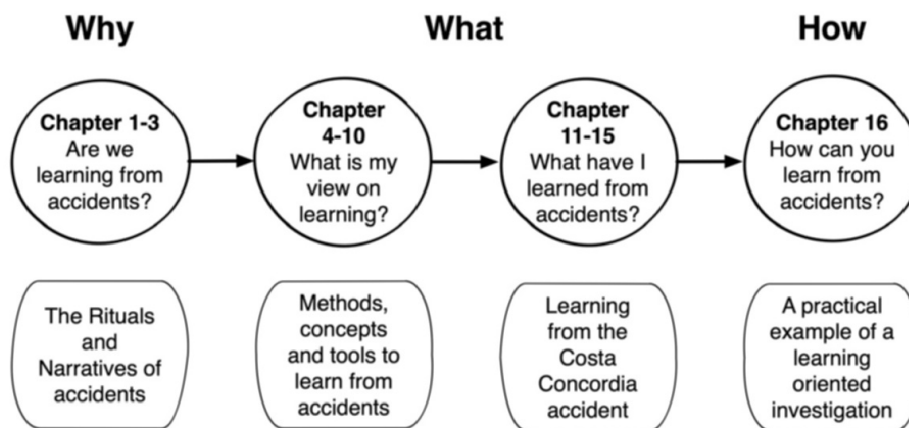


Figure I 2: The outline of the book.

Before I tell the captain's story, my intention is to articulate the current state of 'learning from accidents'. Chapter 1 explains the transdisciplinary

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approach to my work. I dedicate Chapters 2 and 3 to the rituals and narratives of accident investigations, to comment on the current state of affairs in learning from accidents. In Chapter 2 my aim is to help you appreciate that the human need to find meaning in misfortune has not changed very much in many centuries. To realise this, we need to understand the power and meaning in rituals and learn to question our existing approach to accident investigations through the lenses of ritual performance.

In Chapter 3 the focus is on how we create narratives of accidents. The assumptions and biases in our accident narratives illustrate how we relate to and learn from failures. In this chapter, I examine the two famous accident narratives – the Capsizing of the *Costa Concordia*, and the Miracle of the Hudson River. I try to bring to the surface the hidden myths, power and meaning in accident narratives.

Much of the literature on learning from accidents is silent on a basic question: What do we mean by ‘learning’? And so, my aim in Chapters 4 to 10 is to question some basic assumptions and beliefs about learning from accidents with a specific focus on how human beings learn. I deploy a transdisciplinary framework<sup>1</sup> to articulate the importance of learning, unlearning and decision making in accident models, methods and investigation processes. Through these seven chapters, I have drawn a contrast between the Cartesian model of education and training against

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<sup>1</sup> Using religion, mythology, theology, anthropology, social psychology, cognitive sciences, linguistics, evolutionary sciences and neuroscience.



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a holistic view<sup>2</sup> on learning. I have deliberately kept away from definitions and hypothetical testing of propositions, and have instead used stories and visuals to relate my experience of learning.

It is against the background of holistic learning that I turn to the next section of this book, Chapters 11 to 15. Chapter 11 provides a brief description of the *Costa Concordia* accident to set the background.

What did I learn from Captain Francesco Schettino during our meetings? What do I find worth sharing? Chapter 12 is dedicated to understanding the famous sail-past. In this chapter, I articulate my views on the culture of cruise shipping and how it had led to the normalisation of cruise ships 'kissing the shore'.

Once we have framed a problem, the rest of our life goes into reacting to our framed realities. Chapter 13 is an attempt to reframe a prevalent myth in our society – speak up, own your mistakes and raise your concerns if you want to be heard. By examining the team dynamics on the bridge of *Costa Concordia* shortly before the accident, Chapter 13 provides some critical perspectives about 'error management' and 'psychological safety' prevalent in the risk and safety industry.

Captain Francesco Schettino was formally accused and charged for taking a considerable time in deciding when to abandon the ship. His 'late' abandonment was considered by the formal investigation report as one of the main reasons for the rise in death toll

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<sup>2</sup> Relational, intuitive, unconscious, semiotic, experiential and embodied.

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when the ship capsized. In Chapter 14, my aim is to shed light on the assumptions within the emergency and contingency protocols about how professionals make decisions, and to compare those assumptions with the captain's lived experience in the handling of the crisis. This comparison is made within Karl Weick's framework of social sensemaking (Weick, 1979). The aim of this chapter is to understand how fallible humans manage the unexpected, as against how we think emergencies are managed, on paper.

Not a day goes by that we don't see people being shamed and blamed and held to account for their mistakes in populist press, social media and news. Within the risk and safety industry, there are even warning slogans against blaming others for their errors when an accident happens. Yet, as a society we humans have an inclination to scapegoat, and have done so for millennia. The *Costa Concordia* accident is a telling example of holding one person – the captain of the ship – to account for his decisions, and framing him as the main cause of the accident. Chapter 15 sets out to ask some foundational questions about the human tendency to find a scapegoat in an accident.

Can we find a balance between analysing failures and fixing problems in the outer world, and acknowledging and understanding the mysteries of our inner, unconscious being? How can we start to observe our subjective selves and our unconscious assumptions in our own accident investigations? How can we turn failures into opportunities for learning and self-reflection? The final chapter provides an ethical framework for how we can learn from an accident rather than be simply 'schooled'

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by accident investigation training and its associated mythology. In that chapter, I use the iCue method based on the Social Psychology of Risk framework to demonstrate a learning-focused investigation in practice.

Learning and change come with patience. One person at a time. One conversation at a time. There is no such thing as organisational learning. Organisations do not learn: people do.

I hope this book will inspire you to craft your own learning journey and realise your infinite potential.