

# From Strength to Strength: An Interview with Russell Deal

Hugh Crago

Russell Deal is the founder and managing director of Innovative Resources, the publishing arm of St. Luke's Anglicare, Bendigo. Russell is a social worker, who for the past 13 years has been a publisher. *Strength Cards*, now a widely used resource all over the world, were followed by *The Bears*, and more recently by *Koala Company*, *Name the Frame*, *Mates Traits* and many other resources designed to address a range of situations with individuals, families, teams and communities. Details available at [www.innovativeresources.org](http://www.innovativeresources.org)

**Hugh:** Russell, the first time I met you, you were dressed up as a pirate. You looked good in the role, but — why a pirate?

**Russell (aka Captain Grumpy):** Aye, Hugh, some folks find it strange to find a pirate at a conference but I find conferences themselves to be pretty strange. Captain Grumpy first started appearing at conferences to represent all those who find the left-brain domination at conferences to be oppressive. Down with cerebral imperialism! Let's get more colour and movement, music and humour into our conferences. Let's turn our conferences into festivals of diverse creativity rather than simply echoing the prevailing imperialism of rampant deification of linguistic intelligence!

Actually Hugh, Captain Grumpy is only a part-time pirate. The rest of the time he has to work as a publisher to pay dry-dock expenses. So when he goes to conferences he really goes to sell books but, having reclusive tendencies, he discovered some time ago that his pirate uniform was one way to be noticed. In fact, Captain Grumpy is both a publisher and a social worker, which many might think a strange combination. It was during one of his (numerous) midlife crises some 15 years ago that he decided to walk the social work plank and plunge headlong into publishing. Out of this fit of madness emerged Innovative Resources, the creators of *Strength Cards* and a bunch of other original materials that we like to call 'seriously optimistic', to reflect their origins in solution-focused approaches. Captain Grumpy is still known to make occasional



appearances at conferences and in schools, but most of the time these days he gets to sit around drinking copious amounts of coffee with graphic artists and other disreputable characters.

**Hugh:** Are you hinting that the 'out there' role of the social worker became a bit oppressive, and that you needed to explore the more creative and intuitive side of yourself?

**Russell:** I guess Captain Grumpy serves a number of functions for me. He certainly represents a shadow side which, judging by the number of copies of his book bought for male partners and loved ones, appears to be a pretty widespread shadow! Naming the shadow can be useful. But we can also be seduced at times into taking ourselves



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too seriously. Captain Grumpy is my antidote to the pretentiousness that sometimes takes control.

Actually, while I don't get to many professional conferences I do try to get to a number of live gigs by comedians. Comedy by nature is edgy but it doesn't have to be disrespectful. I really enjoy seeing comedians engage with audiences and build conversations in diverse and creative ways. I'm increasingly convinced that one of the reasons our publications at Innovative Resources are so loved is because we try to combine playfulness and soulfulness in just about everything we do. Captain Grumpy has provided a way for me to explore humour and playfulness outside some of the conventions of traditional practice. And, of course, Patch Adams remains a stellar example of the ability of humour to reframe, and inspire, and transform.

Now Hugh, all this is starting to sound bloody pretentious, so it needs to be said that the Captain also works as a useful marketing tool for us by reminding folk of the materials we publish. I also think that marketing should be a compulsory subject for all social workers, but that's another story. I'm not sure if Captain Grumpy is any more intuitive or creative than any other personas, but for us shy introverts 'out there' personas can be handy.

**Hugh:** Why should marketing be a compulsory subject for all social workers, Russell? That sounds a bit like economic rationalist philosophies that insist that human-service provision should be run like a business, doesn't it?

**Russell:** Aye, Hugh, it's hard to believe that such a long-in-the-tooth social worker (and aged hippie to boot) would be extolling the virtues of marketing. And, yes, without ever wanting to be known as an economic rationalist, I am certainly not alone in arguing that our human services should become more business-like. Firstly, 'marketing' has always received a bad press from us human-service types. It immediately invites people to imagine the most crass, exploitative, manipulative selling techniques known to personkind. But to sell all marketing in such a reductionist way seems to me to ignore the reality that we are all invariably marketing ourselves every time we attempt to connect with others. We might dress the language up and talk about how we create 'opportunities for engagement' but, to me anyhow, it is marketing in the sense of making sure that we are able to get our messages across to the right people at the right time.

And we also talk about being 'preventative'. If we took health promotion as an example of preventative strategies I'm not sure how anyone could go about this without a clear sense of needing to market a message. And I'd say that by not owning marketing as a social work skill we can close ourselves off from

the potential learnings from other domains such as advertising. I think this can make us myopic about mediums of change and reinforces the dominance of linguistic pathways into change. I think marketing can be an antidote to the passive expectation that government funding and/or philanthropy will continue to fund our programs.

**Hugh:** Which of course is exactly what economic rationalist governments want to hear, isn't it?

**Russell:** Active marketing of skills and resources doesn't have to be 'hard sell' at all, but if it generates income this can provide independence and flexibility that contrasts to merely conforming to the demands of bureaucrats. For me, 'good' marketing is all about not hiding our lights under bushels, being respectful, accountable and innovative. And it doesn't mean being competitive. I genuinely believe that Innovative Resources has no competitors — whether it is publishing, bookselling or training. I believe we have established cooperative noncompetitive relationships that are respectful. Blimey, with all this verbosity I think I need to do a marketing course!

**Hugh:** Russell, let me be blunt. I've noticed two things. One is that an enormous number of counsellors and welfare workers use St Luke's materials without ever talking about where they came from, or even (I suspect) recognising them as a distinctively Australian contribution. The second is that some family therapy people act like they haven't heard of St Luke's, and when we tried to get *Strength Cards* and *The Bears* reviewed for the *ANZJFT*, we had a lot of trouble finding people who felt willing or able to take up our invitation.

**Russell:** We know that lots of folk in diverse human-service professions and roles enjoy our materials and find them useful and for me that is enough. Even though we are possibly the only publisher in Australia that publishes from a distinct social work base, I am not fussed that some social workers look down their noses at us. And I'm not fussed that we have never been invited to participate in a social work conference. In fact, to be honest, I wouldn't be worried if social workers didn't even buy our stuff, because our whole vision is to take ideas that have grown out of the 25 years of social work practice at St Luke's and make them accessible a whole range of therapists. I'm sure some folk regard our materials as populist or reductionist or, because we use lots of colour and humour, they see us as 'children's publishers' or dismiss us as being flippant. Therapists can be pretty tribal, and because we try to sit outside any particular professional 'silos', some folk may not feel comfortable to 'own' us. So, for example, we

don't label ourselves as 'family therapists'. In fact, we don't claim to be 'experts' at all, which makes it difficult for some for whom being recognised as an expert is important. And we try not to take ourselves too seriously as well. When we brought Ben Furman out from Finland last year to launch his *Kids' Skills* book, I asked him to predict the next 'new thing' in the world of therapy. His answer was 'mainstreaming', by which he meant getting out of our 'castles of expertness' and translating our ideas into plain language and simplicity. In essence that is what Innovative Resources tries to do. And we know from the constant feedback we receive that many people find this helpful. It is this feedback that keeps us out of the pubs on most nights!

**Hugh:** Fair enough, Russell. And you are doing quite a lot of picture books, aren't you, and from reading recent issues of your newsletter, it's clear that you take stories very seriously. Would you like to say something about how you see the position and function of stories, as opposed to resources like sets of cards?

**Russell:** One of my favourite quotes is from one of our living legends, Stephen Page (director of the Bangarra Dance Theatre): 'Art is the medicine for humanity'. As therapists I think we need to take this to heart and reframe not only ourselves as artists but our clients as well. And the sort of art that fascinates me is not the art on the walls of art galleries but the art that's on our fridges and the art we dabble in every day, often without realising it. Stories and storytelling are amazing art forms that we can easily take for granted or simply leave to the TV programmers to supply us with. Many of the families we see at St Luke's have lost the skill to tell stories. In our organisations we are so often dominated by busyness that we don't give ourselves time to tell or listen to stories. When this loss of storying happens, our sense of identity is diminished. I think there is huge potential to rediscover the power of story to transform lives, and I guess a lot of what we do as *publishers* is try to invent a variety of ways to keep storytelling alive. Our card-sets work as simple prompts that invite folk to tell stories in maybe a different way. Our picture books do the same. Australia has picture-book artists like Shaun Tan and Stephen Michael King whose works are beautiful, soulful and playful and speak to us in profound ways — once we reclaim them from the 'Children's Literature' section! But we also love short stories and have published *The Harveys* (Lehmann, 2003) as an alternative learning tool to the 'case studies' that all human-service workers are afflicted with. And we love 'micro-stories', stories that can be written with a beginning, a middle and an end in

200 words or less. And we are fascinated by poetry, comics, journalling and multimedia applications of all sorts. Sadly, as a small independent publisher, we can only produce about 10 new resources a year, so we have to try to spread ourselves over a whole range of art forms.

**Hugh:** It's easy to see how a set of cards can act as prompts to tell a story — in fact, many different stories. But can you explain how a picture book can do the same? You mentioned Shaun Tan, and I guess I'm thinking of *The Red Tree*. How would you see that book working to help people 'tell stories in a different way'?

**Russell:** Picture books are such a brilliant resource because they can be read in a couple of minutes and, as well as being beautiful art objects, they can pack a real punch message-wise. I read picture books in as many different situations as I possibly can because they can add another layer to any conversation. Reading to a client is a wonderful way of 'gifting' clients. We gift clients with our time, our attention and our skills and resources and I am a big fan of finding other ways of bestowing gifts to help keep the memories alive of what we have discussed and experienced in our journeys together. Some people use letters to do this, some give away small tokens (like our cards and stickers — much appreciated!) But reading a picture book or a poem or an apt piece of prose might serve as one of those simple memorable gifts that stay in people's minds when all our words are forgotten. Like the youth worker I met whose role was setting up young homeless people in independent accommodation. He actually included a copy of the Dr. Seuss book *The Places I Go* in each client's 'survival pack'. No explanation, no moralising, he just left his clients to discover the book themselves and create their own meaning from it.

And *The Red Tree* is such a great message of hope for everyone, client or counsellor alike, who has had 'one of those days'. What a great message about keeping hope alive. And have you seen the illustrated poetry published by Stewart, Tabori and Chang (New York)? *Life Doesn't Frighten Me* by Maya Angelou and Jean-Michel Basquait is a brilliant book about confronting our fears, while *Dance Me To The End Of Love*, by Leonard Cohen and Andre Matisse, should be read by all lovers everywhere.

**Hugh:** I know this is one of those annoying questions that interviewers ask, but — (now you'll be really worried about what I'm going to ask, right?) — would you be able to say something about the people and the ideas that have, for you, been most influential?

**Russell:** My problem with this question, Hugh, is that I'm not sure who would want to go on public record as one of our influences! Can you be sued for naming someone as an influence if they think this destroys their reputation? I'm not sure, so I'll chance it. Unfortunately, I'm not very tribal, so any influences are going to be bizarrely eclectic and lots of the 'big names' would probably not be comfortable in bed together (as it were). So let me start with a little name: Stephen Michael King, who I mentioned earlier on. Not a name that appears in neon lights at most family therapy conferences, although his picture book *The Man Who Loved Boxes* won an award at an Australian Family Therapy Conference in the early 1990s. Anyhow, this is *the* book that changed my whole way of thinking about what I could do to remake my ailing social work career — and I have read it in just about every workshop I have run since. *The Man Who Loved Boxes* talks about transformational possibilities that are beyond words and for someone like me, who failed 'Wordsmithing 1A' in his social work course, it is a godsend that still inspires much of what we publish at Innovative Resources.

I also get lots of inspiration from people like Rosa Parks, Eddie Mabo and Vincent Lingiari — ordinary folk who did extraordinary things. Kevin Sheedy, longstanding coach of the Essendon AFL team, is a great example of the value of longevity! I have worked alongside Di O'Neil at St Luke's for over 20 years. She continues to come up with challenging and creative ideas. Di may not be well known in family therapy circles but she has had a great impact on shaping the nature of child and family services in Australia. She co-authored *Beyond Child Rescue* (with Dorothy Scott) and has been a constant voice for the adoption of strength-based practices. Rod Quantok is one of the comedians I always admire, and Michael Leunig has to get a guernsey as an influence, too. As for the Big Names, their influence should be able to be identified throughout our publications.

**Hugh:** You wouldn't be the only one to acknowledge Michael Leunig, I know! And I like your diverse range of 'little names', which somehow for most people don't get talked about when they publish. Humour has been a significant strand in family therapy, at least in its earlier phases, but I wonder if somehow people are scared to be funny now, in case they might appear 'disrespectful'. Maybe I'm quite wrong about that, but that's the impression I get. Would you like to comment on the way that you people at St Luke's see humour and its value in your own resources?

**Russell:** I guess for us at Innovative Resources we have gradually come to respect the transformative

power of humour. We deliberately try to build gentle humour into many of our tools simply because we have discovered that using graphics with nongratuitous visual humour can sometimes be hugely liberating for both clients and workers. Personally, I think that playfulness and soulfulness go together like a meat pie and sauce. From the feedback we receive it seems that humour that is respectful can be a shortcut to reframing and reimagining a more optimistic future. Not that humour hasn't got its shadow sides. Some therapists may dismiss our work as flippant or childish. And many people probably don't recognise the care we take to try to ensure that our decidedly odd sense of humour doesn't inadvertently cause offence. At the same time, like Michael Leunig, there is certainly a place for humour that is confronting and offensive to those who have a vested interest in maintaining traditions that discriminate against and disempower people. Expect some more grumpy humour from us over the coming months! I think humour is alive and well and should be treasured, especially because as Australians we do humour differently from the US. Anyhow Hugh, *Why did the chicken go to the seance?*

**Hugh:** I can't begin to imagine. I'm hopeless at getting jokes. I obviously should have had more exposure to St Luke's resources at an early age!

**Russell:** *To get to the Other Side!* — An oldie but a goodie, and about the only joke I can remember!

**Hugh:** I suppose you have been asked this a million times, Russell, and I'm aware that asking you this is a bit like asking Bill Clinton about Monica Lewinsky (well, sort of) but, where did the original idea for Strength Cards come from? Was there a particular family, or incident, that prompted it? How did it get developed from there? And how did you market it so successfully that the cards have now become virtually a standard resource?

**Russell:** Yes, *Strength Cards* are the ongoing evidence of our first naive stumble into the world of publishing, and might I say that a publishing house has never had a more humble beginning — no expertise, no vision, no business plan and no budget! But I guess the good news is that any organisation could achieve what we did. We thought up the idea for *Strength Cards* in the early 1990s when Intensive Family Services were just kicking off in Victoria. For some years, as a public welfare agency, we had had a fascination with solution-focused and Narrative ideas, and the advent of Intensive Family Services provided the catalyst that gave us permission to rethink our way of working with families. Working with families on the cusp of

having children removed led to wondering about tools we could incorporate into our practice that were respectful, change-producing, and aided the ability of stressed families to engage with ‘the Welfare’. A lot of the tools that came with the US Intensive Family Service models didn’t excite us, but the idea that did was for a simple tool that could help families identify, mobilise and celebrate their strengths.

We literally sat down with a dictionary and had a chat with one of our staff, John Veeken, who had a graphic arts background, and ended up printing 500 sets of cards for our family workers. Little did we know that we were creating a monster! And 13 years on, *Strength Cards* continue to be one of our best sellers.

I guess it is self-evident that we have learned a few things about publishing over the years and we have had to become comfortable with marketing, as our survival depends entirely on sales. It is gratifying that many workers like and understand what we are trying to do but we never set out to produce a ‘standard resource’. In fact there is something about your term that makes me a little uncomfortable, perhaps because for me it suggests that the cards might be regarded as a panacea.

Of course there aren’t any guarantees that any tool, including the words we use, will work in any given situation. All tools should be used in a way that is culturally and contextually relevant and respectful. For this reason I firmly believe that the best tools are custom-made by workers and clients. As you know, I make no claims about being a family therapist, but rather consider myself to be a ‘curious observer’ of ‘therapeutic processes’. I really react to the whole notion of celebrity (which I think is one of the shadow sides of ‘therapy’).

**Hugh:** As you say, Russell, words don’t mean the same thing to different people! I’m very aware that family therapy is only one influence on your work. But most of our readers consider themselves family therapists, of one persuasion or another, and I believe they would be interested to know where you think the ‘strength’ in family therapy lies.

**Russell:** As a social work publisher, what fascinates me about family therapy is the accumulated insights into the nature of transformational conversations. It is the invitations to change that family therapy has articulated so richly that excite me and, in particular, it is the transformative power of metaphor that Innovative Resources has tried to learn from and to translate into visual form. Family therapy of course is riddled with metaphor, and while we have been most influenced by solution-focused and Narrative approaches, we are driven more by the maxim ‘If it

works do it more’ rather than the boundaries of any one school. For example, *Shadows* and *Cars R Us* (currently in production) have been prompted by Jungian and reality therapy ideas respectively.

I am sure some would see us as shameless in our broad interest in metaphor but I’m afraid I have never been very tribal — except for my undying allegiance to the Essendon football club! Equally I would say that world music, comedy, bush poetry, creative writing and the visual arts stand alongside therapeutic models as key influences. I have always firmly believed that the more professionalised our society becomes, the more we have to resist being defined by any single discourse.

Finally, given the ‘strength-based’ approach of St Luke’s, the family therapy ideas that have most resonance are those that celebrate the strengths of our clients rather than our own professional cleverness. I would always hope in our publications that they open up possibilities for clients to make their own discoveries rather than adding to the glorification of the wordsmith skills of the therapist who introduces them.

**Hugh:** Russell, I have sometimes wondered if the family-therapy world has been more impressed with ideas than with simple, practical tools for change. There has been a big gap between the long, intricately argued theoretical debates in journals, and the practical techniques that most people at the coalface use with their clients. I think Innovative Resources has gone a long way towards bridging that gap. You’ve devised a wide range of tools that have multiple applications, and often are far less simplistic than they appear. Above all, as you say, they don’t take themselves too seriously. I’m proud that these resources have originated in Australia. I think you and your team have made a significant, original contribution. Thank you for giving our readers a chance to know a bit more about you, your colleagues, and the things you stand for.

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