
Nothing is Written
Learning is an Adventure
Johnnie Moore & Viv McWaters

NOTHING

IS

WRITTEN

Nothing is Written

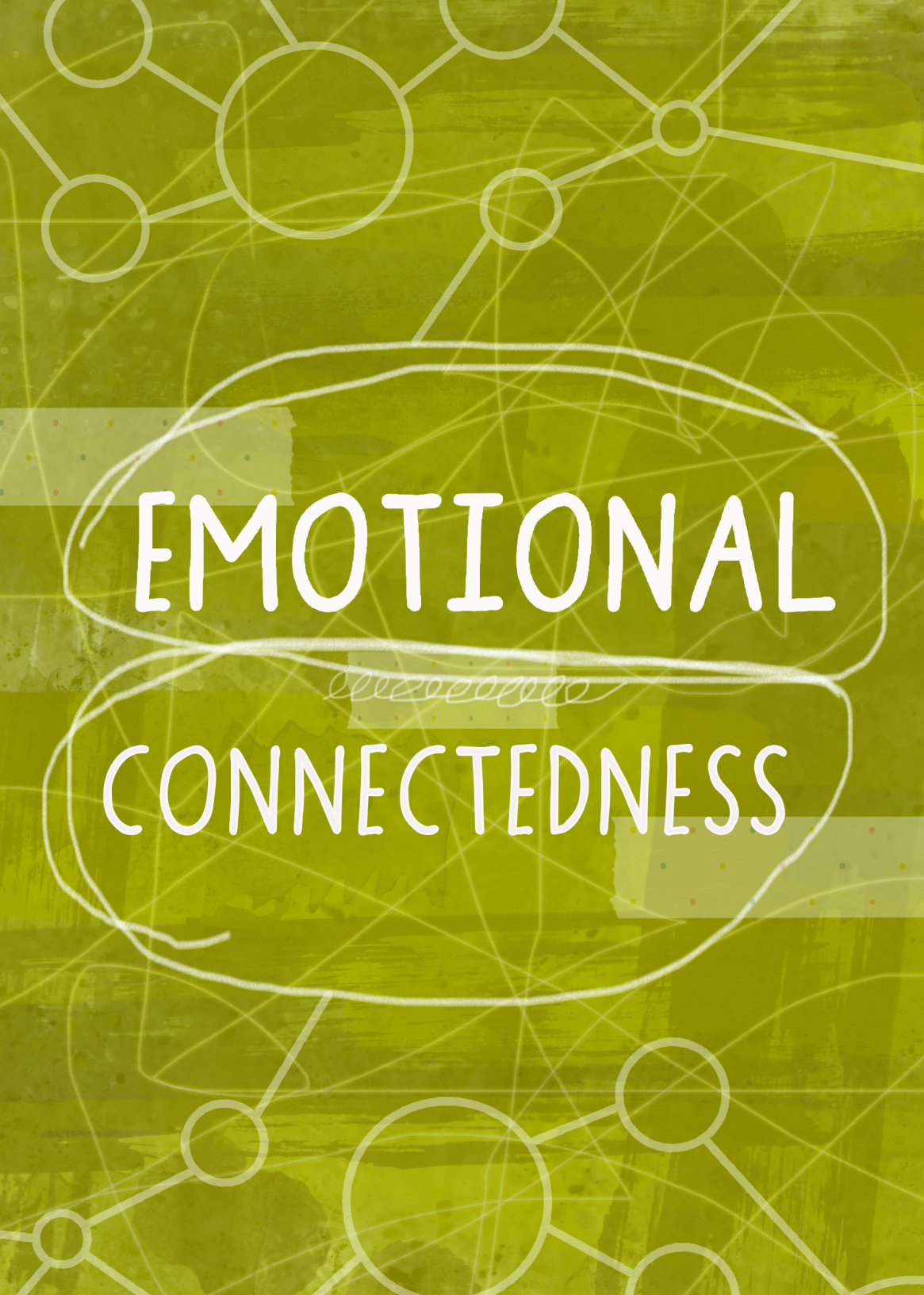
In the film *Lawrence of Arabia,* there's a scene where Lawrence is crossing the desert. One of his group, Gasim, has fallen from his camel and is lost. The tribesmen tell Lawrence that to return for him would lead to certain death under the unforgiving sun - "it is written".

It's a common human response to stress. Rather than admit to anxiety or doubt, we double down on vehemently held beliefs. We seek to tame the unknown and the complex by eliminating any talk of risk or possibility. We feel safer talking about the state of the world than admitting a humbler truth about our fears and uncertainties.

Rather than admit to sadness for Gasim, or fear for themselves, they talk about "the way things are". In so many work situations, people would rather say "that won't work" or "this is how we've always done it" than admit "I don't know".

Unwilling to leave Gasim to die, Lawrence defies this wisdom and vanishes into the sands in search of him. He subsequently returns, with Gasim alive, and tells the bedouin, "nothing is written".

Life is unruly and unpredictable - our best approach is to remain open, curious and flexible. Rather than giving people reassuring "right answers" we may do better to model experimentation, curiosity and openness.


EMOTIONAL
CONNECTEDNESS

Emotional Connectedness

A baby is playing with her mother, exchanging looks and gestures and smiles. This is happening over a video link, but the level of engagement seems like it's face-to-face.

But then, a small adjustment is made. A two-second delay is introduced to the video feed between mother and child. Quite suddenly, the child moves from contentment to distress. Just a small disruption of the synchrony has remarkable consequences.

This is one of many experiments described by Thomas Lewis and Richard Lannon in their book, *A General Theory of Love*. What emerges again and again is that good parenting maintains spontaneity and a sense of connection. The same may be true of learning.

Maybe we could use our time together to increase our emotional bandwidth, to complement the technological bandwidth we already have on our devices. This means sharing experiences rather than content.

In learning, maintaining a sense of care and attention may be the most powerful thing we can do. Passing on fixed ideas and knowledge is secondary.


EXPERIENCES
OVER
EXPLANATION

Experiences Over Explanation

In his book, *Friends in Low Places*, Dr. James Willis describes research in which two groups of people were shown a photograph of a face. After seeing the photo the first group was asked to recall details of the face. The second group didn't have to do this.

Later, each group was tested to see if they could remember the faces they had seen in the photos.

The second group - those left to use only their innate and wordless ability to remember a face - were twice as likely to remember it.

By attempting to make learning more detailed and explicit, we may be getting in people's way.

Malcolm Gladwell relates the studies of tennis coach Vic Braden. Braden would ask top tennis players the "secret" of their technique. He found that although they had detailed explanations for how they did what they did, these descriptions were inconsistent and often false. Famously, Andre Agassi insisted that he would roll his wrist as he hit his forehand shots. In fact, stop motion photography showed that this simply wasn't true. The fancy term for this mistake is confabulation.

Our rational mind invents a plausible explanation for a behaviour, and believes its own propaganda.

Fresh experiences beat old explanations.

AVOIDING THE TEACHER TRANCE

Avoiding the Teacher Trance

It's easy to slip into a teacher trance.

On the surface, it looks like serious learning is happening as the expert dispenses knowledge and the students appear to be respectfully appreciating it. The trainer is set up as an expert, giving her status over others. This can be flattering to the ego of the trainer, and quite comforting to the audience, reducing their responsibility for the learning. The trainer gets repeated signals that she's supposed to be authoritative, and becomes quite attached to the power and/or responsibility.

In the teacher trance, we all become attached to explanation and answers, and the surprise of discovery becomes a threat.

Discovery is what really imprints learning. As David Rock and Jeffrey Schwartz say in their article, *The Neuroscience of Leadership*: "For insights to be useful, they need to be generated from within, not given to individuals as conclusions.... Human brains are so complex and individual that there is little point in trying to work out how another person ought to reorganize his or her thinking. It is far more effective and efficient to help others come to their own insights."

By avoiding the trappings of expertise, the trainer is more vulnerable but creates more power and agency for those learning.


{SHARED PERIL}

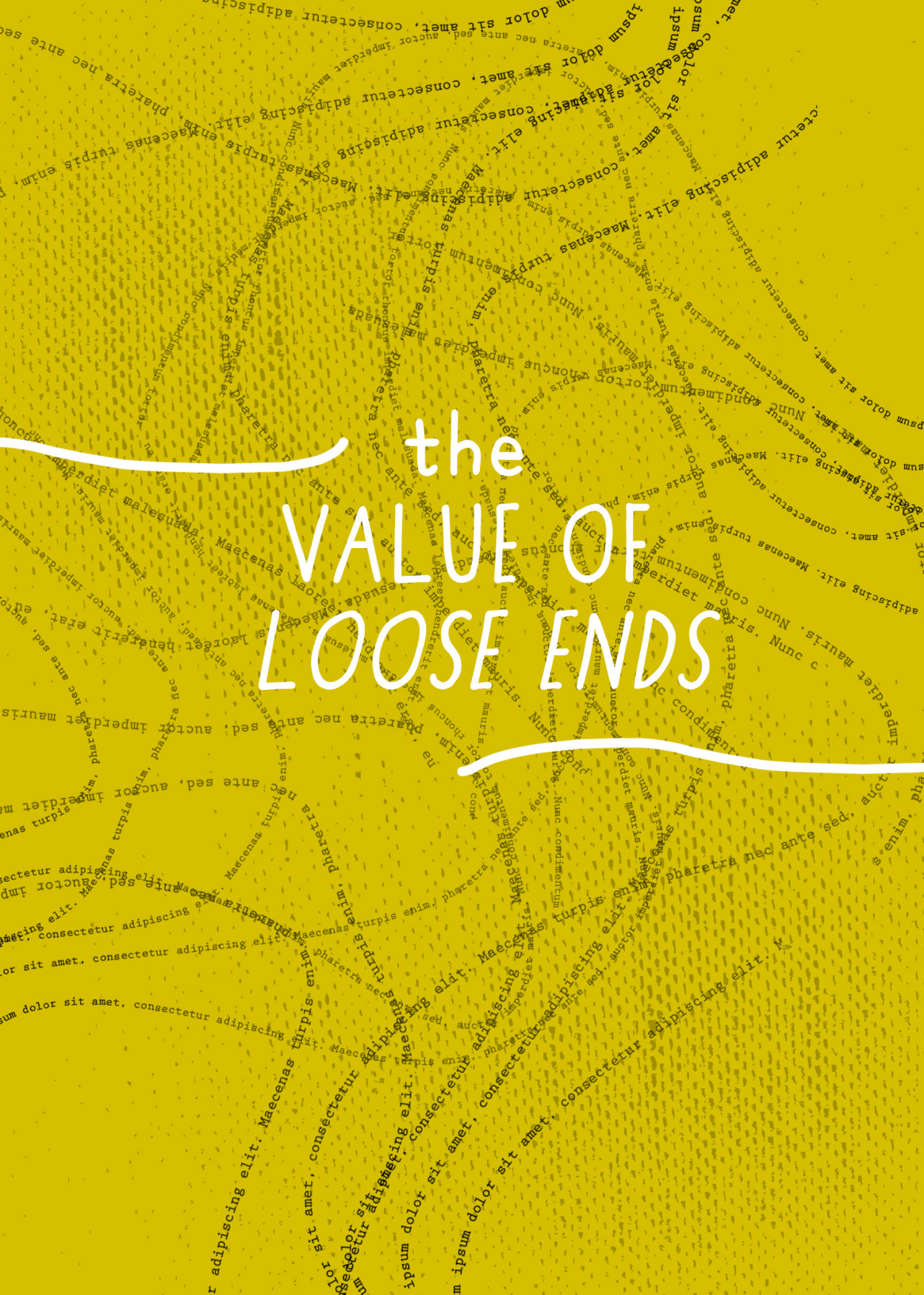
Shared Peril

Few things can bond a group of people like shared peril. If the group comes together in the face of adversity, its sense of camaraderie and trust increases. Without the element of shared peril, these moments of growth would not happen.

Of course, adversity can also break a group. So the focus must be on allowing participants to manage their own experience, so they can be on the edge of their comfort zone, and not pushed beyond it.

And the trainer must be willing to share in the experience. If they only create peril for the participants, that's more a kind of bullying than learning. Trainers should drop their masks of expertise and reveal their vulnerability.

There is nothing like the connection people can make by experimenting and discovering together. Be part of the adventure, not just the narrator.


the
VALUE OF
LOOSE ENDS

The Value of Loose Ends

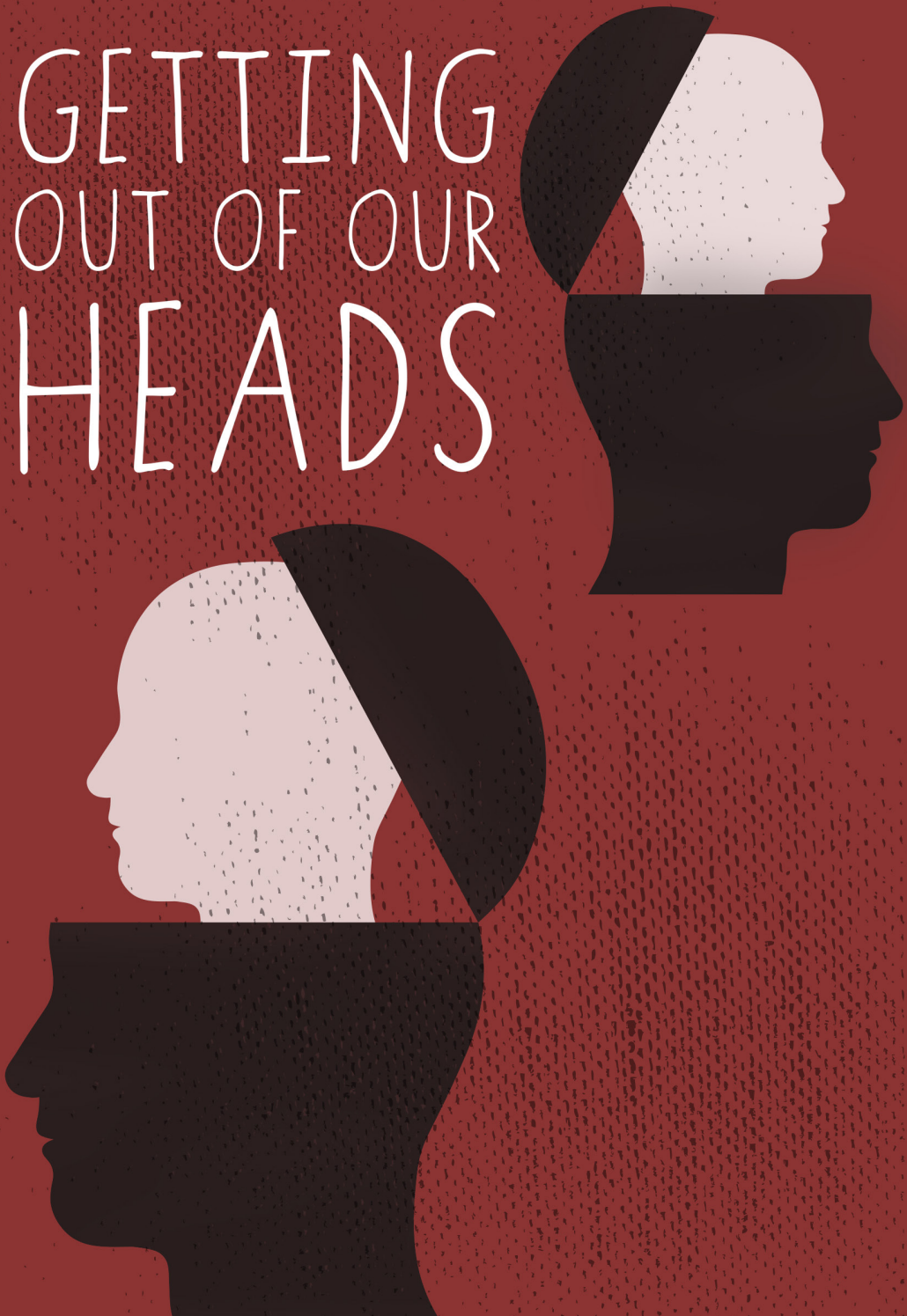
In Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, the eponymous antihero is fleeing a brigade of Roman soldiers. In his panic, he falls from a ledge into a spot where a variety of zany religious types are preaching to would-be followers. Brian nervously delivers a sermon in the hope of blending into the background and eluding his pursuers.

He's not very good. The crowd challenge the details of his story, and the more stressed he becomes, the less convincing is his performance. Fortunately, the soldiers pass by and he can relax. So he abandons his story mid-sentence. It doesn't really matter anymore.

But this is just the point at which the audience moves from scepticism to curiosity. The unfinished nature of the story hooks them. As a result, a massive crowd builds up, trying to make sense of what's happening, pursuing all manner of hilarious possibilities.

The value in training is to open up people to possibilities. It is the responsibility of the learner to pursue those possibilities. Being incomplete can keep people engaged.

GETTING OUT OF OUR HEADS



Getting Out of Our Heads

Many of the challenges we face are complex and will not yield to mere analysis.

Meeting them has more in common with learning to ride a bike than solving a puzzle. You don't learn to ride a bike by reading a book. You need practice and a willingness to explore.

As the saying goes, it's easier to act your way into a new way of thinking, than think your way into a new way of acting.

This is brilliantly demonstrated in the Tom Wujec's Marshmallow Challenge. Tom goes round the world with a set of sticks and marshmallows. He dishes these out to all sorts of groups of people. The challenge is to build the tallest structure possible with these materials. Typical managers spend their time in a talkfest, trying to work out the answer. Kindergarten kids just get stuck in trying building stuff. The kids usually get taller and more creative structures.

It's tempting to favour clever-sounding analysis over practical action. Trainers who fall in love with explaining things risk falling into the trap.

Many challenges need to be explored in three dimensions, not in analysis. Explore what's possible through action and experiment.

GETTING OVER OURSELVES

Getting Over Ourselves

> "In the process of adaptation, man persistently separates from his old self, or at least from those segments of his old self that are now outlived. Like a child who has outgrown a toy, he discards the old parts of himself for which he has no further use....the ego continually breaks away from its worn-out parts, which were of value in the past but have no value in the present."
>
> ~ Otto Rank

Unlearning and breaking from the past is at the heart of learning and creativity. As Rank observes, great artists like Rembrandt and Picasso were able to leave behind their greatest successes and move beyond old ideas of themselves.

In order to learn, we need to lose our attachment to old versions of ourselves.

Playful learning helps us to try out new versions of ourselves, bypassing some of the stories our minds invent about us.

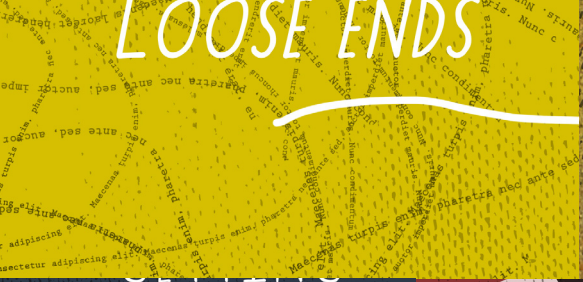
About Us

We run **creativefacilitation.com** and have worked with lots of different organisations in heaps of different places, from Scotland to the Solomon Islands.

To subscribe to our newsletter, please go to **creativefacilitation.com/news**.

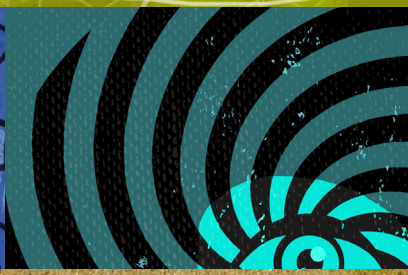
Viv McWaters, Melbourne, Australia +61 417 135 406
viv@mcwaters.com.au

Johnnie Moore, Cambridge UK +44 7973 414263
johnnie@johnniemoore.com

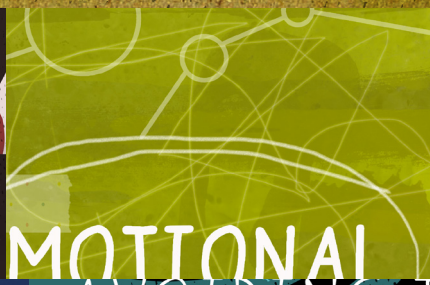

LOOSE ENDS


OVER
OURSELVES


CONNECTEDNESS




GETTING
OUT OF OUR
HEADS




{SHARED PERIL}