

# **Ever-Changing**

**by Kevin Jones**

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The offices of Erudite Publishing, Inc. were suffused with an electric tension. The anticipation was inescapable, no matter which floor you were on. Josh the intern paced the corridor, Shauna brewed coffee (which she *never* did unless she was procrastinating), and What's-Her-Name from documentation bit her manicured nails. Henry Danforth wasn't concerned. While others nervously tapped their feet, Henry sipped his coffee and reviewed his work from the previous night. Everybody had known that this day was coming all year, but now that it was here, they were too anxious to get any work done whatsoever. Project managers and new hires alike indulged in wild speculation to pass the time before the big moment came. Close to a century after the complete and total collapse of the world's financial system, and yet here they were, awaiting the release of the next year's global budget.

The global budget was an enormous document detailing all of the resources projected to be available worldwide in the following year and how those resources would be distributed. Everything from food, to raw materials like metals and plastic, to electronics would be assigned a destination somewhere in the world, whether it was to individuals, families, or companies. Most of the enormous, detailed report would be interesting in an academic sense; the budget geeks would be curious to see how many resources would be set aside for sectors like education or manufacturing, and more jobs to the entertainment industry usually meant that a good crop of music and movies would come in the following years. Henry kept half an eye on the music industry to make sure his favorite band, Photo Strip, would ever have to hang up their instruments and get desk jobs. The days of any kind of currency or finance were long gone, but everything that kept this organization running was at stake. A good report meant new computers and lunch choices; a bad report meant jobs were lost. In the past, a fascist government might have distributed these items to grow their own influence, but the Central Agency's methods, though imperfect, were designed to eliminate any possible abuses. Actuaries at two independent Central Agency groups calculated what to earmark for companies that published textbooks and curricula, and how much of that would specifically go to

Erudite. Most people didn't understand the multitude of items factored into Erudite's resources, but Henry certainly did. He was a licensed education actuary for Erudite, which meant that he knew how to build models measuring academic performance and study the factors driving that performance. And while he wasn't a resource actuary like those involved in producing this mammoth budget, he'd poked around enough of the actuarial models to know that Erudite was in good shape. Productivity was excellent, and their curriculum packets were getting positive reviews at primary and secondary schools all around the United States. It was his job to feel comfortable with numbers, and the ones that decided Erudite's portion of the budget were all positive ones. While numbers would decide his organization's fate, he couldn't control those numbers now. The most he could do was to make sure the numbers in front of him were the right ones.

"Henry, what's the good word?" He looked up to see Fred Cooper's friendly, angular features poking into his cubicle. Fred bounced his knuckles together in an effort to make nervous look cool.

Henry looked at his phone's display. "Well, since it's only 8:57, I'd say the word is 'three minutes to go'."

"Ha! Funny," Fred said haltingly. "We'll see how funny you are when you're exhausted from changing diapers in a few months. Maybe I'll go to my office with the view of the lake and wait for the announcement, Mr Funnyman." Fred and Henry had started at Erudite on the same day six years back, and Fred periodically felt the need to point out that he managed to get an office first.

"Yes Fred, I'm still so impressed with your office, slightly bigger than my cubicle, and with two chairs instead of one," Henry smirked. "Anyway, why are you so tense, of all people? You never let anything stress you out."

"Now you're just trying to flatter me."

"Come on, what's getting to you?"

"Maybe nothing, maybe something. With me, you never know." Fred arched his eyebrows and gave an affable, thin-lipped smile. Before Henry could push any further, a voice at a cubicle three rows down informed them all that the global budget had been posted on the Central Agency website. When he turned back, Fred was gone.

Holographic displays above every desk blinked open with an electronic copy of the budget, and before Henry could even find Erudite's section, cheers of success rang out around him, telling him everything that he needed to know. When he finally read the details himself, it was even better than he'd hoped. Erudite got high marks for their high school science textbook series, but the global budget for education had gone up as well, so there was a bigger pot to take from. The best part was that they'd soon be hiring for 14 new positions. In some actuarial model somewhere in the world, an array of numbers must have shown that devoting even more resources to education would bring about greater long-term economic health. Of course, Henry had already known that. His own models had predicted for quite some time that more time and energy spent on education caused a domino-effect that helped virtually every sector.

Elizabeth Rand, Erudite's CEO, would probably give a virtual presentation soon to the whole company, to go over what each piece of the budget means and generally make the rank and file feel good about their successes and good fortunes. There was plenty of time to listen to that later. Henry had more important things to do.

"Fred, what was that all about?" Henry found him in his office, regally staring out the window with his hands clasped together behind his back. Outside his window, a small family of geese enjoyed the finely manicured lake. As he turned, Henry saw that his face was beaming.

"Sit down, my good man. We've got a lot to talk about." Fred sat down behind his desk and folded his hands.

Henry furrowed his brow as he plopped into a cushy leather chair. "I know the budget's a big deal, but you've never been nervous about it before. And yeah, we made out well, but now you look a little too happy. You don't get all those new positions for *your* projects, you know."

"What, I can't be happy for the company where I spend all my waking days?"

"Nope. Out with it."

Fred chuckled. "You're a sharp man, Henry. That's why I like you. Do you remember what I told you about all those papers by Gardner about his 'Multiple Intelligences' theory? The basic idea is that everyone has their own way of learning that

matches their type of intelligence. One person might have a linguistic intelligence; another might be spatial or musical..."

"...or logical, or interpersonal, I get it. You've told me about this over and over." Henry leaned forward in his chair and put on his best diplomatic face. "You know that you'll never get a project approved on this, no matter how great our budget looks. There's just no data anywhere to either back or disprove those theories."

"I get where you're coming from, I do. This is your whole job, right? You look at all the data and use your actuarial magic to show the rest of us why this geography workbook or that chemistry video works so well. You can't do anything with Gardner's theories, because nobody's gathered the right data yet. But what if you *did* have some data, what then?"

"Well, that would be pretty interesting..."

"You'd want to rip right into that data and start building new models, wouldn't you?" Fred punched an imaginary set of data in mid-air.

"Yeah, but I'm telling you, nobody does this kind of research. The data doesn't exist." Henry felt a little excited at the idea, despite himself.

"Not yet, it doesn't." Fred tossed a piece of smart paper onto his desk. Henry picked it up cautiously and started swiping his finger through the pages.

"What's this?"

"What does it look like? It's a business proposal for a laboratory school. One devoted to figuring out which intelligence each student fits into, then giving them an educational experience tailored to that intelligence."

Henry kept swiping through the document with his index finger. "Wow. This is pretty in-depth. You've already got most of the angles figured out. And education is getting more resources next year...are you going to submit this to the Central Authority?"

"I already did. And my approval was in the global budget this morning."

"It was? That's incredible! Why didn't you tell me about this before?" Henry now swiped through the business proposal with a new fervor. Suddenly, each word held more weight.

"Didn't want to jinx it."

Understanding gradually dawned upon Henry. "When we interview people for those new positions we're getting, we'll have to put a new project manager on the list, won't we?"

"And maybe a new education actuary."

"You mean..."

"For a laboratory school, the regulations say I need a licensed education actuary to gather data, track students, and project future performance. You know the drill. What do you think?"

Henry stared off into space, watching the family of geese fly by the window. "I don't know, Fred..."

"Come on, you talk about wanting to find new sources of educational data all the time! This is your big chance!"

"No, you're right, and it looks solid. I'm sure you'll do a great job running it. But, you know, with Cassie being pregnant and all..." The implication hung in the air between them. Henry had worked hard to get his professional rating into the seventies, and while the new school succeeding would mean his rating might go even higher, a failure would mean a significant drop. One misstep and Cassie would have to go back to work instead of staying home with their child.

Fred's face softened. "I get it. It's a big move. Tell you what, go home and talk about it with the wife. Let her be the one to tell you you'd be crazy not to take me up on the offer." He smiled supportively. Fred had a wife and three children himself, so he knew to give family concerns a wide berth.

Even with risk following Henry around all afternoon, he found himself looking at everything and everyone with new eyes. He felt, not quite drunk, but certainly tipsy with the power of using tiny bits of information to understand how the world works. He passed a file clerk taking a coffee break and felt certain that he could find the optimal length and frequency of breaks to take each day, even tailored to each individual. If he could just track enough items, he could understand how each copy editor's minute actions would influence the students that used their products.

These new eyes were the ones that searched his car's destination panel for a place to stop on his way home that afternoon. Sure, he'd planned on leaving early to

make it to Cassie's OB appointment, but making a quick detour on the way there couldn't hurt, right? He scrolled through the choices for a few seconds. *There, perfect.* One tap later, the route was plotted, and the car sped off obediently to the new destination. *Nine minutes, twenty-four seconds until arrival,* the display proudly read. Henry reclined in the operator's seat and took in the details of the not-his-usual route. Trees overtook concrete more and more as he made his way out of downtown Chicago. Pedestrians enjoyed the mild April weather, and Henry couldn't help but think of them more like walking focal points of information as he passed them.

Soon, Henry's car effortlessly glided to a stop, a pre-arranged pause to allow cross-traffic to go by. *Even my car stopping is just bits of information at work,* he thought to himself. Then he noticed the shouting outside his window. Protestors with old-fashioned, hand-drawn signs orbited the entryway of a Central Agency labor department branch. The signs proudly declared slogans like "I AM NOT A NUMBER" and "COMPETITION = FREEDOM". Henry shuffled uncomfortably in his chair; these arguments were by no means new, but it was always disconcerting to see it in person. Behind the walls of this ultra-modern building, employees analyzed productivity reports for any and all employed residents, along with manager evaluations and anything else considered relevant. With all this, a decision was made when someone's professional rating should increase or decrease. Careers were decided in this building, and those outside were not happy with the arrangement. The system had been good to Henry, but in the split second before his car pulled away, as he gazed out at the weary, angry faces of the protestors, a nagging voice at the back of his mind said that maybe he'd feel the exact same way they did if he ever saw his rating as an actuary plummet.

Right on schedule, Henry's car pulled up to a spot in front of Diego's Designs, a locally owned jeweler which boasted some very high rankings. Just another perk of my professional rating, he thought. The atmosphere telegraphed by the storefront was a cultivated type of stuffy. The moment he stepped inside, a graying, weathered Latino man with a pony-tail descended upon him. "How may I be of service, sir?"

"I'm looking for something for my wife, a necklace, or maybe a bracelet..." Henry felt out of his depth.

"I see. Is there a special occasion? Anniversary?" The determination of the man struck Henry, the need to gather the relevant facts.

"Well, our baby is due in a month. Oh, and I might have a new job soon, so that's a reason to celebrate..."

"Ah! New beginnings, I see. One moment." The man, who Henry guessed was Diego, disappeared into a back room, only to reappear within moments. He proudly handed Henry a necklace with a gold pendant, which seemed to consist of a Celtic knot of paths weaving in and out of each other. For a moment, Henry could almost see his own path, Cassie's, and his daughter's intertwined with each other, with diamonds sporadically arranged to represent the high points. He guessed Diego must have had a jeweler rating in the nineties to have his own shop and find customers just the right piece in minutes.

"It's perfect, I'll take it."

Diego nodded politely, as if to say *of course it's perfect*. "Excellent. However, it is not cheap. Fifty-five units."

Henry pulled out his debit card. "Here you go. Can you wrap it up?" As Diego ran his card and printed up receipts, Henry thought of the protestors. They probably didn't have professional ratings that gave them debit cards with 250 units to spend each month, but they could if they worked hard enough. Besides, units were only necessary for hand-made, specialized goods. A person could go their whole life without a single unit and still be perfectly happy and comfortable. If everyone had access to mass-produced necklaces, as well as anything else they could want or need, why should he have to feel bad?

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"You're late." Inside the entryway to their apartment, Cassie tapped her foot with impatience.

Henry pushed aside Cassie's long auburn hair to give her a kiss on the cheek. "It was for a good cause." He handed her the small box, wrapped in simple paper with silver trim. "Open it."



She meekly unwrapped the box and held the pendant up to the light. "Oh, it's beautiful, dear! Thank you." She gave him a hug before trying it on. "So, is this supposed to help with your wife's crazy pregnancy hormones?"

"I didn't say that," he chuckled.

"Why then?"

"I got some good news today. Fred is starting his own company, and he wants me to be his chief education actuary."

Joy blossomed on Cassie's face. "That's wonderful!" She gave him a quick, passionate kiss. "Let's talk more in the car. We've only got half an hour!"

Doctor Shankar's office always seemed colder than necessary, and today was no different. They had already been through the ultrasound process multiple times before; today was merely intended as a "precautionary measure" to make sure their baby was getting enough oxygen. It had sounded a little too specific of a reason to be routine, but everything about this was new to them, so they trusted Shankar's calm demeanor. The ultrasound went as smoothly as ever, and Cassie and Henry were still in awe every time they gazed upon the black-and-white image of their unborn child. It wasn't until Doctor Shankar sat down with them in his office that they knew something was wrong.

"Now, I do not want to alarm you, but I am seeing signs of fetal distress. The baby's heart-rate is now dangerously low, which suggests that the umbilical cord is not letting enough oxygen through."

Henry and Cassie exchanged a glance of terror. "What do we do?" Henry pleaded.

Shankar leaned forward. "This is entirely up to you, but if we wait any longer, there may be serious complications. I strongly suggest that we perform an emergency caesarean as soon as possible. It is still early, but especially with the weight above 4 pounds, the baby's best chance is to come out now."

Henry stared ahead, trying to will himself to bring all the necessary facts together to make the right decision, but his brain refused. Instead, when he met his wife's glistening eyes, all of their hopes and fears were instantly exchanged. In her, he saw reflected his willingness to do whatever was needed to help their baby to be healthy. The decision was made. "Let's do it," she said with a resolve that Henry admired.

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The St Mary's waiting room was clean, quiet, and much too comfortable for Henry's tastes. A small TV screen on the opposite wall displayed a high school melodrama. Periodic rumbling from carts and patient beds were the only punctuation to his powerlessness. He attempted to clear all thoughts from his head and wait patiently, but this was more than futile. Thoughts flew past his mind, about what Dr Shankar's rating was, how many times he'd dealt with this situation, anything that might give him some idea of what his baby's chances were. He should've done his homework and found out all of this ahead of time, but he'd failed his wife and child. *No sense beating myself up about that*, he told himself as he tried to order his thoughts. *What good would it have done? I'd still be sitting here, unable to do even the smallest thing to help.* And yet, he couldn't help but imagine a world where he had limitless access to information. He'd build a model, probably something using quantum recursion, which would take the doctor's professional rating, the baby's condition, and any number of other factors, and project an infant mortality rate. He shuddered to think of what that model would say about the situation they were in.

In an effort to reign in his sanity, Henry reached for his attaché case. There had to be something which could distract him. Driving himself crazy wouldn't do anybody any good. The first thing he grabbed was a worn, hardcover edition of Adams's book, *The Post-Financial Actuary*. It was his favorite textbook by far, the first to definitively outline the roles that actuarial techniques would play after financial markets and currencies around the world had fallen apart. This was the book that showed how to manage resources the best possible way and to be ready for the worst. It was all about dealing with "tail scenarios", the worst possible situations which could arise. Adams had created a theory which quantified just how severe negative consequences were without attaching a dollar value to them, then used those severities to show that there was an optimal way to distribute resources, while holding a certain portion in reserve for potential catastrophes. Well, Henry was living in a tail scenario right now, so maybe there were a few words of wisdom to be found in the text.

But it was no use; the words bounced right off of him, refusing to offer any solace. His wife was just rooms away, fighting for their baby, and the idea that their baby might not make it was a black hole sucking him in with each moment. The truth was, nothing he knew about tail scenarios or doctor ratings could help him in any way. It was all chaos; an out-of-control train barreling over a cliff. And he was thinking about taking a new job, adding even more danger to their lives? Just so he could have some new data and models to play with? What kind of selfish bastard was he?

“Hey. You okay?”

Henry looked up to see Fred wearing an uncharacteristically solemn expression. “You know, I just asked you to send some files from work. You didn’t have to come,” Henry said.

Fred sat in a chair opposite Henry, crossed his legs, and waved off the comment. “Don’t worry about it. I get a message saying you’re at the hospital and won’t be at work, of course I come down. Can’t let you sit here by yourself, right?” An uncomfortable silence passed. Henry finally relayed the situation to Fred with cold, dry facts, and little else. When he was done, even more silence.

“I can’t come to work for you,” Henry blurted out.

“Okay...where did that come from?”

“I just...I’ve been thinking about it. And it’s really not a good time for me. I...I can’t.”

“Hey, we don’t have to talk about this right now.”

“No, I want to talk about it. I’m telling you, I’m not going to put my family on the line, especially after all of this. I can’t do it!”

Fred cautiously waited a few moments. “Okay, I get it. You’re going through a lot right now. Not used to problems you can’t solve, eh?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s life. Life throws you curveballs, and when it does, you can’t just curl up into a ball. You have to keep putting yourself out there.”

Henry winced. “You do realize what’s going on in there, right? Do you know what my baby’s chances of pulling through are? Seventy percent, I looked it up. Those aren’t great odds.”

“Yeah. Sorry, man. I don’t mean to be insensitive. I know it’s tough. It’s just that, I see you going through this, and you’re trying to fight it.”

“What, I’m not supposed to fight?”

“No, you’re not! The way you feel stinks, but you just have to feel it. Stop struggling against it!” Henry’s skeptical look spoke volumes, so Fred wisely backed off. “Look, I think I understand what’s going through your head. Starting a lab school with me, that’s risky. Becoming a dad, that’s a whole other level of risk, there. But risk is life. Let me put it this way. If you had known ahead of time that this was going to happen, would you have done anything differently? Would you have chosen to not be sitting here, becoming a father right now?”

*Who the hell was Fred to be lecturing him?* Henry felt the words “Of course” trying to leave his mouth, but he stopped and let the idea really sink in. Would he really have done anything differently? Guilt and doubt began to buzz around his skull once again, but the cover of Adams’ book caught his eye, and he remembered something from the foreword which stuck in his mind every time he read it. *Uncertainty isn’t something to be eliminated. It is a force which must be understood, an ally to help us realize all of our hopes and dreams.* Even after reading these words countless times, he’d never lost the nagging feeling that if he’d done exactly the right thing, there would be no danger. But the question was never “*What should be done?*”, the question was “*Is it worth it?*” Was the danger worth it, if he and Cassie could be parents to a brand-new baby? With that question, all the extra bits of data and self-doubt fell away, and the situation came into crisp focus as Henry imagined the two human beings, just rooms away, who were more valuable to him than anything else in the world. All of his hopes and dreams were with them. Despite everything, Henry gave a trembling smile. There could only be one answer.

“No. I wouldn’t have done anything different. Not a single thing.”

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Three weeks later may as well have been a year later as Henry walked into Fred's office once again. Fred paused from his packing to greet Henry with a broad smile and handshake.

"Welcome back, man! How's everyone at home?"

"Great," Henry beamed. "We brought Olivia home a week ago, and she's doing better every day." "Tired?"

"Oh, yeah. Coming in to the office today is my break. It's so *quiet* here. Nobody cries or fusses." Henry's smile said volumes about how happy he was to have something to complain about. "Anyway, what's with the packing? Are you out of here already?"

"Nah. I'm sticking around for a while to help interview potential replacements, and I've got a few projects to wrap up. There just doesn't seem to be any point in keeping personal items here when my brain's already..." Fred made a swift take-off gesture with his hand, "...checked out."

Henry leaned back in his chair to stretch. Fred fiddled with a few of the many knick-knacks which had accumulated on his desk. He smiled a thin-lipped smile at Henry, and Henry returned his expression by shrugging his shoulders. "All right, already!" Fred said with his hands up in defeat. "Are you coming with me or not? Don't hold me in suspense!"

Henry chuckled. "Yeah, of course I'm coming with you."