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International interdependence, global interconnectivity, societal and technological complexity, the Anthropocene – there are many explanations to why we are experiencing a growing number of contingencies that appears to be outside our control. This article adds the Cartesian scientific tradition of cognitive reason to the list. It demonstrates how today's scientific understanding of many threats is insufficient to help us avoid surprise because of its abstract and static nature that do not mobilise the requisite level of crisis awareness and imagination needed to anticipate local consequences and trigger preventive action by politicians and experts. By analysing cases such as the Covid-19-pandemic, the article reveals how national experts, despite analysing numerous international reports and facts and figures on crises in other parts of the world, are surprised by events because they fail to imagine that the threat would develop so quickly that it would reach their own country so soon and with such force. It raises the question of whether nothing less than personal experience of crisis (e.g. earlier pandemics: c.f. Taiwan during Covid-19) can evoke the level of emotional and 'bodily' (all senses) understanding (fear, vulnerability, urgency) required to avoid surprise. It discusses the possibilities of a more practical (less abstract) and time-conscious (less static) internationally transferable knowledge able to generate a deeper understanding and stronger imagination capacity, that can help us to 'Accept the things we cannot change; Courage to change the things we can; And wisdom to know the difference'.

Contingency: exploring an age-old concept for a new reality