

TJ Blog by Stuart Walkley

I could talk a glass eye to sleep

It was inevitable that she would sit next to me. I act as a magnet to little old ladies seeking someone to talk to whilst waiting for a train. There I was sitting quietly at Leeds Station, near Platform 11b waiting for my connection. There she was, plastic bag in one hand, metal walking stick in the other ambling towards the vacant seat.

“Let me catch my breath” was the opening remark as she puffed into her seat and it was indeed a portent for things to come. She had plenty to say and rattled on quickly and pleasantly. I use the term “rattled” not in a pejorative way but simply descriptive of the way her head, her teeth and her upper torso all rattled from side to side as she engaged in conversation with me.

Conversation may be a misnomer. I needed to say very little. A few “ums” and “yes” here and there, a repeat of one of her phrases “take it easy” – that was all that was needed. After the eleven minutes of our brief encounter (subtle reference there for the octogenarians reading this) I had learned the price of sugar at Morrisons, the quality of Taxi cabs in Sheffield, that her son still brought his shirts for her to iron every week despite having been married to a very nice girl from Pontefract for ten years now, and that she was not blessed with grandchildren but had a very good hospital consultant who understood her heart better than anyone. Her mother’s best friend had suffered terribly from heat rash and she herself could not abide mushrooms.

I was suitably engaged in this stream of consciousness, this depiction of life spread out before me on a Leeds railway station platform. Alan Bennett came to mind and I wished I had his talent to capture such conversations, not just the words nor the content but the cadences of the voice, the quirks of language, the very intonation. How well I recalled those “Talking Heads” with Patricia Routledge or Thora Hird rattling away as this dear lady was, filling time with words and making conversation. As she talked on I recalled those conversations and the richness of the dialogue. I remembered my Mum, who outlived Thora Hird by three days, and the way in which she loved anything at all “by that Alan Chappy” so long as it was not smutty.

My train arrived and I apologised clutching my case, and was about to leave when she grabbed my arm momentarily. “Thanks for listening, love, my late husband used to see I could talk a glass eye to sleep”.

Never to be seen again, the lady I mean, not necessarily the glass eye. But such chance encounters did indeed give the opportunity to talk, to listen, to connect even if to no great purpose and through that encounter to open up one’s own thoughts and memories.

Now for the irony of it all. I was on my way to meet the eight members of the Senior Leadership team of a company who seemed to have difficulties talking to each other. It was felt they needed help with their communication skills as a Board both in terms of talking to each other and then of talking to their direct reports.

Accomplished, well-educated and seemingly with a good enough reason to communicate with each other I was at a loss to know why they were making such heavy weather of conversations compared to my little old lady waiting for a train. What was their problem? What had they got to lose by opening up a conversation? Where were the barriers which seemed to separate them from working together in a positive and purposeful way?

It did not seem to be that they actively disliked each other. There were no formal language barriers. They knew each other and had worked together for well over two years. So what on earth was hindering them? I was too hot and bothered to want to be too psychoanalytic about it all and frankly I was not in the mood to uncover deep-rooted problems. In the end I put it down to two things that my old lady had and they lacked. The first was “space” and the second was “time”.

Space because they simply seemed to have nowhere to talk to each other. Now, my railway lady made her own space and took it with her wherever she went, and in creating this space she enabled conversation to take place. As she had ambled towards me either consciously or sub-consciously she was defining territory, building a space in which we could talk. It needed no walls or partitions but was every bit as well-defined as a coach’s office. She knew instinctively how to create these boundaries in which conversation could take place. My senior leaders simply did not know how to make space work for them in this way.

“Time” because those eleven minutes between her arrival and my train’s departure could be made into fruitful conversation time. She seized that opportunity and wanted to talk. And what a lot could be said in those eleven minutes --- medical, social, familiar, commercial, the range was considerable. Just eleven minutes could be turned into an engaging and meaningful conversation.

She teaches us an important lesson, and one I shall try to pass on. The will to make time and space work for you is all that is needed to make conversation begin to happen. And every time that conversation takes place then life is enriched even if it is only the detail of a man’s iron shirts, or the remembrance of an old film, or the pang of jealousy for a talented writer. Both the talking and the listening bring value, create opportunity, trigger thoughts and amuse. Certainly I have a new phase given to me as her parting shot and now passed on to you --- she could indeed “talk a glass eye to sleep”. Look out for her – remember, Morrison’s plastic bag and metal walking stick. She’s worth meeting.

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