



## When we Fail to Hear the Foghorns

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It's a funny thing you know. We journey somewhere with certain expectations and if we're paying attention we can't help but find out as much about ourselves as the places we're investigating.

A while back I was privileged to be asked to run a workshop in Mumbai, India. I found the trip enlightening, awe inspiring and a touch depressing all at the same time. Staying and working in a five star resort I was struck by the juxtaposition of life and poverty immediately outside the compound gate. The day after I finished my workshop there I booked a driver and took a tour of the city. I had just been driven through the biggest slum in the world when I saw down a side street a flash of vermilion moving in the distance but was unable to pick up what that might be.

I asked the driver what was down there and got nowhere given his English and my Hindi so I pointed to indicate I'd like to go. As we got closer I saw that the rich vibrant colour was the uniforms of beautiful young Indian children playing on equipment in a school. They were immaculately dressed, laughing, singing and full of youthful joy as they clambered over the equipment and played in the sunshine. To me, they were the hope of India as a developing country.

It would have been too easy for me to assume as I was driven through kilometres of slum and shanty houses that this first picture of India was the only accurate representation of that country. I was humbled and glad to be reminded that life is complex and multilayered and that it is arrogant and condescending to think that only we, living in civilised democratic countries in the west, have the answers.

Travelling again this week, but not nearly as far away, I went to Sydney for my own professional development. I decided to do dinner at The Rocks, a beautiful part of Sydney close to Darling Harbour overlooking the water and in view of the Harbour Bridge and the Sydney Opera House. I went in search of a restaurant at which I had eaten about 15 years before and was delighted to find it. The people at the next table and I struck up a conversation which was punctuated loudly and frequently by the foghorns of the tugboats and ferries across the water.

I observed that the wait staff seemed oblivious to the foghorns. They were of course habituated to the sound as it had been a pervasive and consistent feature of the backdrop of their work for as long as they had been employed there. As with my epiphany in Mumbai I was struck by how easily we become used to our own thoughts, mental models and beliefs about the world; our patterns in what we do, what we say and how we say them. There is no foghorn that shakes us out of our complacency or comfort zone unless we jar ourselves into thinking about them.

Some of our patterns will be adaptive, some neutral and of no consequence and others downright maladaptive like getting defensive each time someone gives us feedback because we perceive that as



criticism not opportunity. Have we slipped into a rhythm of telling or talking from a first person orientation? How often we in are second person and totally invested in what the other party wants to say or do? Even when we appear to be listening are we doing no more than conducting a conversation inside our own heads that has nothing to do with the moment and with them, and or are we really *there*, just busy preparing our response to something they haven't even finished saying yet!

The wait staff didn't hear the foghorns because they have tuned out and learnt not to listen any more. Those deeply ingrained communication patterns, the blind lazy rituals that have become conventions of the way we interact with the world may be bad habits that it is high time we break.

Dust off that journal, get that coach, have a brave chat with a trusted friend and ask for feedback and know you will survive it and then perhaps we will start one again to hear those foghorns or take that trip down the road to laughing children that shock us out of our prevailing views of the world and compel us to be more open, more humble and more responsive to others.

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