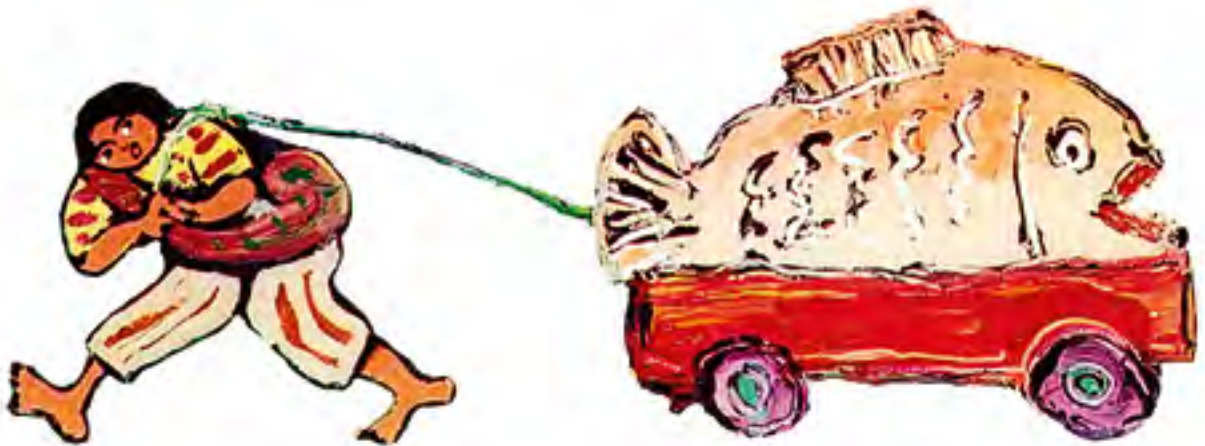


Lessons to be Learned from Robert McNamara and a Pair of Long-handled Toe-nail Clippers

By Jeremy Bullmore



Imagine two people, one on either side of a canal. The first one shouts across: ‘How do I get to the other side?’ The second one shouts back: ‘You *are* on the other side!’

At the heart of this primitive joke lies a form of blindness that has probably contributed to more wars, divorces, family alienations, political failures and wastes of marketing money than any other single cause. Yet many of us still communicate as if bound by a blindfold.

At the risk of being laborious, let’s return to that canal.

Both have assumed that what is true for them is true for the other. It rarely is.

For Person One, ‘the other side’ is the other side; but it’s not, of course, for Person Two. For Person Two, Person One is already on ‘the other side’; but not, of course, for Person One.

Neither has made any attempt to put themselves in the shoes of the other; and the result is a mildly amusing joke. (In real life, it’s usually given a little edge by making the protagonists blondes, Poles, Irishmen – or whoever happens to be the current butt of such politically incorrect humour.) But an inability to see things through the eyes of others is by no means restricted to those with slow minds.

Robert McNamara, former US Defense Secretary and a key architect of the Vietnam war, died in 2009. He spent much of the last 30 years of his life

What we think

Lessons to be Learned from Robert McNamara and a Pair of Long-handled Toe-nail Clippers

agonising over that futile operation and its deadly consequences. One of his conclusions was this: his central failure had been a failure to know his enemy, ‘To put ourselves inside their skin and look at us through their eyes.’

The result of that omission was not a mildly amusing joke.

Accurate inference

To see things through the eyes of another individual is an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. It doesn't even have a satisfactory name. Used properly, the word empathy would do well enough – but it's rarely used properly. We mostly use it to mean a sort of super-sized sympathy; indeed dictionaries suggest synonyms such as ‘understanding’ or ‘compassion’.

Real empathy goes much deeper than that. Psychologists call it ‘A Theory of Mind’ – which has been defined as the ability to accurately infer another person's thoughts; and then use that inference to construct an appropriate response. That's the full meaning that the word empathy, *positive* empathy, should carry – and so seldom does.

In his book, *Zero Degrees of Empathy*¹, Simon Baron-Cohen, a Professor at Cambridge University, contends that we all lie somewhere on an empathy spectrum. Those on the positive end of the spectrum are highly sensitive to the ideas and thoughts of others, and capable of adjusting their behaviour in response to them. Intriguingly, he goes on to suggest that acts of human cruelty may not be the result of some vague concept called evil, but of a total and absolute absence of empathy. For somebody right at the negative end of the empathy spectrum, utterly incapable of realising that other people have thoughts or feelings of their own, an act of cruelty is of course not seen as such at all. Psychopaths may possess zero degrees of empathy.

For those of us in the business of communication and persuasion, we need to be permanently conscious of the effects of both positive and negative forms of empathy; the first because it will save us from

inadvertently misleading, insulting or bewildering our audiences; and the second because it can hugely increase the clarity and acceptability of what we are attempting to communicate.

As long ago as 1996, in her Reith Lectures, Professor Jean Aitchison, Professor of Language and Communication at the University of Oxford, said this: ‘An effective persuader must be able to imagine events from another person's point of view. In fashionable jargon, he or she must have A Theory of Mind.’² And of course, it's not only events that we need to be able to imagine, but opinions, prejudices and experiences as well.

If you've ever had a telephone conversation with a four-year-old child, you'll know that we aren't all born with fully-formed empathy already programmed in.

‘What are you doing?’ you ask the child. ‘Playing,’ he replies. ‘What with?’ you ask. ‘This,’ says the child. ‘What's this?’ you ask. ‘This, this!’ says the child, deeply irritated by your stupidity. Instead of being on either side of a canal, you and the child are on either end of a telephone line; and exactly like Person Two, the child has failed to put himself in another person's place. He knows what he's been playing with, he can see what he's been playing with – why are you so ignorant?

Transmitters and receivers

Robert McNamara learned the hard way about the penalties incurred through failing to give enough thought and imagination to the contents of other people's heads. Half a century later, so did Colin Powell.

Asked in 2009 about the invasion of Iraq, and how it had affected US/European relations, he said this: ‘Our policies have grated and sometimes we have used language which was not selected with a clear understanding of how it would fall on European ears.’

We cannot, of course, ever be absolutely certain how our words or actions will fall on other people's ears; but there's no excuse for not consciously doing our best to imagine how they might; whether it's a

quick email to an individual or a mammoth marketing campaign directed at millions.

Politicians like to claim, ‘I’ve made it absolutely clear...’ They may think they have but they should never take it for granted. The only people who can know with certainty that something was absolutely clear are not the transmitters of messages but the receivers.

Primitive examples of poor empathy scores are easy enough to collect. You stop to ask the way of a local inhabitant and are advised to turn left where the mailbox used to be. You see a sign reading, ‘When this sign is underwater, the road ahead is impassable.’ You’re in an aircraft and are instructed, ‘If you are sitting in an exit row and you cannot read this card, please tell a crew member.’ In each instance, the transmitters have patently failed to put themselves in the place of their audience.

But most examples of such failures to empathise are of course invisible and probably go undetected. We may never know how, by omitting the most basic conjecture, we’ve failed to be understood as we confidently hoped and thought we would be.

At least as important as the penalties we incur for failing to put ourselves in the shoes of others are the potential benefits we stand to gain when we succeed.

In any debate, in any attempt to persuade or convert, the first thing you need to try and establish – to imagine – is the level of knowledge or ignorance, of prejudice for or against, in the minds of your audience. If you begin to understand this, you know not only what resistances you need to overcome, but just as valuably, what you may confidently take for granted.

Ask a 20-year-old copywriter to write some catalogue copy for a new pair of long-handled toe-nail clippers. His planner will explain that they have been designed for those of senior years. And the copywriter will dutifully write: ‘Getting on a bit? Back a bit stiff? Now new Extra-Long Snippex let you trim without bending!’

The copywriter is both to be commended for having attempted empathy and criticised for having failed.

Anyone in the market for a pair of long-handled toe-nail clippers, *already knows* that they’re getting on a bit and *already knows* that bending isn’t as easy as it used to be. All they need is the one bit of information they don’t already possess: and that’s the arrival of some new, long-handled toe-nail clippers. *They do the rest.* And when any communication is contributed to, and completed by, its audience, it’s infinitely stronger. That’s what Arthur Koestler meant when he wrote, ‘The artist rules his subjects by turning them into accomplices.’³

Like politicians, we strive to make things absolutely clear. Sometimes we make them clearer by leaving things out. ●

Jeremy Bullmore is a member of the WPP Advisory Board

¹ *Zero Degrees of Empathy*, Simon Baron-Cohen, 2011

² *The Reith Lectures*, Jean Aitchison, 1996

³ *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler, 1964

