



Gorillas in the mi(d)st

By Stuart White
Printed in the Sunday Standard
Sunday 13th February 2011

You may have seen on the internet a test using a 30-second video clip of a handful of people playing basketball, in which the viewer is asked to count the passes made by one of the teams. Most people get the correct answer but fail to spot a woman dressed in a gorilla suit who walks slowly across the scene for a full nine seconds. She goes unnoticed even though she passes between the players and stops to face the camera and thump her chest. When you ask people about the gorilla, more than half will swear emphatically that they did not see any gorilla and 'know' that there was no gorilla in the picture, so sure they are of what was really there. This 'won't-notice' phenomenon is well-known and called perceptual blindness. And it begs the question – how wrong can we be when we fail to see such obvious things within our sights?

This Gorilla thing got me thinking this week when contemplating truths between people. Most interpersonal problems come about as a result not of what really is but as a perception of what is. Like the video viewers, people are too busy focussing on what they want to see to take in the bigger picture. Now, it's been said that honesty is the best policy, and whilst that sounds like the simplest thing in the world to do and be – it's not! Being truly honest with others and yourself can be a real challenge. Peeling away the social layers of political correctness, being sensitive to other people's feelings, and removing your own mask to face uncomfortable truths about yourself and others usually requires a lot of patience, vigilance and hard work. And honesty doesn't just happen, nor is it something you decide to adopt – it can take years of soul searching, questioning yourself and experiencing emotional pain as you 'learn' to be honest and see what is really there – in yourself and others.

Each of us set up what we think as reality through our belief systems. Too often, that reality has nothing to do with the truth of your life. Having gone through a life of unexamined beliefs, most of us are full of invalid and conflicting beliefs, instilled in us by people and institutions we love and respect, and yet have little or nothing to do with our personal experiences. We take them on board to fit in and please without ever questioning them, and only synchronise our own inner world (of thoughts, ideas, emotions, dreams, intuition, etc.) when we question, examine and remove those that don't match our personal experiences.

For example, if you believe that all white people are racists from what your parents have told you, yet your experiences with white people have demonstrated that some are but others aren't, you will have conflicting and invalid beliefs. This is how we verify or invalidate beliefs, by comparing them to the experiences in our own lives. In consciously seeing in one's experience that there are good and bad white people, just like there are good and bad black people, you can then go through life allowing people to show you how they are, rather than pre-judging them. This leads to fewer conflicts with others, bringing in more positive experiences in one's life.

We live with lies and untruths all the time. In history Hitler, using Jews as the scapegoats, orchestrated what he and his partners in crime called "the big lie" (Jews were responsible for all of Germany's problems, engaged in ritual killings of Christian children, etc). This theory states that no matter how big the lie is (or more precisely, because it's so big), people will believe it if you repeat it enough. Everyone tells small lies, Hitler reasoned, but few have the guts to tell colossal lies. Because a big lie is so unlikely, people will come to accept it.

This week I was counselling two people who had to work together in order to achieve some specific goals. I asked them to discard their old beliefs about each other and open their minds to really 'see' the other person and talk openly and honestly. This was not the first time that I had tried to get this pair to move their relationship forward and deal with their problems. The last effort was a 'going through the motions' attempt which changed very little and the relationship continued as before.

There was quite a bit of learning all round this time. Where the last attempt had failed, this time it worked. Why? Because this time, both parties were truly willing to be open to feedback, even when it was at times unpleasant and painful. There was brutal honesty – delivered without the intention of hurting but putting on the table the truths as they were perceived and without blindness. Both parties showed bravery (honesty is Not for the faint-hearted) and a willingness to truly improve their working relationship so that they could derive the benefits that can only come from genuinely working together and synergising. Most importantly, this time they both accepted there was indeed a gorilla in their midst and they needed to acknowledge it and finally tell it to get out of the picture. That way they could get back to the task in hand without their previous guerilla warfare and without any monkey business.

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Managing Director

HRMC

Phone: 395 1640

<http://www.hrmc.co.bw/>

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