**Jackson’s Extra Slice**

***"People are like books with reversible covers. You never know if it's a comedy, drama, or mystery until you start reading their chapters." 1.***

So yesterday I was having a bad internet day. I could tell that it was a bad internet day because Google was determined not to answer any of my questions, save for the one that told me that I was having a bad internet day. Fed up with (mostly) unanswered questions I took a detour to the kettle, got a cuppa and a chocolate biscuit, well three, and headed for the TV.

A few years back I invested my hard-earned into a TV set that is almost but not quite the exact same size as my house. I turned it on thankful that something technical was working in my home and found a film that I hadn't seen before. I walked ten yards back and plonked my arse on my large orange sofa. Yep, Orange. And got comfortable.

All started off well enough with multiple scenes of carnage along with the sideline of introducing the lead characters that were causing said carnage, however, just as everything in the microscopically thin plot line was coming together the screen went from super high def to lousy no def, and whilst the film continued from fiery scene of death to fiery scene of death the sound stopped. This was not good. I ate my third chocolate digestive and slurped my tea in frustration. The picture didn't improve, the sound remained defiantly on mute. I watched the flickering screen desperate to gain an understanding of what was going on between the lead characters who were walking across scenes of fiery death and carnage. I studied their faces unable to read lips that may have been dubbed anyway, it was one of those types of films. I tried to make sense of things as the characters took a breath from shooting stuff to actually communicate to each other. I studied their body language and how they interacted and by the time the sound kicked back in I had pretty much deciphered what was going on. Then there was more shooting and the plot line disappeared forever in the smoke haze of burning bodies.

The reason that I mention this is not to extol the benefits of having a decent internet connection and streaming service but to remark on the humanbeings' amazing ability to understand what people are thinking and saying with the sound turned off.

Here's another example to consider; How often have you said good morning to someone? Maybe your partner, colleagues at work, or that strange guy who walks his rat-sized dog every morning just as you head to the car. Now if people are feeling a bit sociable they will answer "Morning" right back at you and if they are being super friendly may even add a smile and a "How are you?" back. Perhaps the same people have snuck up, catching you off guard some mornings with their own "Good Morning" and "How are you?". forcing you into a response which in general is a "Fine" or "OK" followed by the obligatory retort "How are you?" at which point they will return the response. All very jovial and polite and very very mundane.

Now I put it to you that for the vast majority of these sorts of encounters, we are just going through our preprogrammed social etiquette. Similar to "Oh sorry" when someone has just bumped into you with an axe. Well I'm English and we tend to apologize for everything including Liz Truss – no you may not have heard of her.

Anyway, back to my example. If you had been actually listening to the response back you may have immediately recognized that the word 'Fine' was certainly not how it sounded. If you had deeper emotional links to the person responding to your innocent inquiry you may even look up and see from their face that 'Fine' was only an applicable response if they had added the word 'Not' in front of it. But how many of us actually let others know verbally how we are feeling inside? How many respond by saying "Actually I feel totally shit today… thanks for asking" Mmm not that many. It is left to the other person to identify the true feelings that underly the response.

Some may simply call this good listening skills but I would tend to disagree. I'm not knocking such skills as they are really important, but it's far more than that or certainly more than what the term 'Listening skills' applies. It's like stating that the foie gras is your main meal of the day.

It's more a combination of interpersonal and observational skills. Perhaps we could include empathy, intuition, and understanding, that would certainly help. And then sprinkle a little body language appreciation, observing facial expressions and deciphering of gestures. Whilst we're at it we could add cultural sensitivity, open-mindedness, situational understanding, patience of course, some analytical thinking to connect the dots, great questioning skills, and finally 'Active' listening to top it off. Although the list extends somewhat further still. So in the future when someone you care about answers "Fine" to your morning inquisitiveness you may need to check off several more skills before agreeing with their evaluation.

Back to my beloved TV.

I have recently discovered the TV series, Bones – yes I'm about twenty years behind on this one. Anyway, if I am going to watch a 'new to me' series I like to watch it right from the start, series one, episode one, as I like to see the characters and plot lines develop from the get go.

For those of you who are familiar with the series (probably the vast majority of you), there are two leading characters; Bones the forensic anthropologist of the Jeffersonian Institute, and Booth The FBI special agent and liason to the same Jeffersonian Institute. The basic plot is that they and a broader team of regular and irregular experts in their field investigate a great many of the murders occurring in the Washington D.C. area. And there are an awful lot of them, most of which are bloody, grisly and involve maggots. Booth is unapologetically old school as he investigates and uses all of his experience and knowledge to identify the bad guys. Through asking a few relevant questions, observing and listening responses he is able to pretty quickly establish if the accused are telling the truth or lying out of their arses. Now this is an incredibly valuable skill and places Booth in the top percentile of his peers. He can read people using his special FBI training and an inbuilt awareness of people's core drivers and motivations.

Looking back at my career life and personal life It would have been great to have those skills already ingrained as if genetically passed on. Unfortunately, all I received in the gene pool pass-me-down was some dodgy toes and a driven personality of which only the second has been of any help to me. However having studied Psychology for a century or two, I was able to assimilate these skills over time and in so doing ensured that door-to-door salesmen no longer frequent my doorstep. Just like Agent Booth, these skills can be learned and honed with knowledge and experience. You don't need to be an FBI agent or a Psychologist to gain the ability to read people. These are all thoroughly learnable skills. And extremely handy ones at that.

Consider human relationships. The loving ones with partners for a lifetime or a short time. How great would it be to immediately understand fully what your partner was feeling at any given time just by using this skill set. Now this could also be a bit scary too. Take it from me, it keeps you on your toes and aware of just how your behavior can affect the other person(s) in your life.

In business settings, this skill can be extremely useful too. Think of all the deals and negotiations that could be improved with far better outcomes by fully understanding your associates and your competitors frame of mind.

And then there are the social settings with friends where understanding motivations and interests can be a boon for cultivating deep friendships or circumventing bad ones. Think of the time-saving and the commercial opportunities. Think of the personal growth and the possibilities to nurture deeper more loving relationships. Win, win ,win!

Reading people is the key to the lock of achieving the best you possibly can in all settings, as long as you act upon the information you are gleaning from the situation. Agent Booth would not be a credible FBI Agent if he failed to use his gained knowledge of someone's guilt to put them away.

So it is equally important to hone the adjacent skills of using that knowledge to shape your ongoing interactions. Or if we want to be a smarty pants, we could say that it is about **reading people like a book to rewrite outcomes**.

1. Jackson James, 2024, The Extra Slice