

# Prologue

---



I once saw a bleeding, severed hand from the window of a train. Then a few seconds later, another body part – it was as if they had been thrown out, one after the other. I felt a hollow just below my sternum, as I looked away quickly.

It was on my way to school – I took a train to a school in Calcutta, from a rural station some 25 miles to the north. There had been talk of political violence, but I was eleven, and had paid little attention to it. Newspaper stuff – grown up talk – they missed so much, reading bad things in newspapers and discussing it all endlessly. Pointless, I thought.

I got to school and told a couple of my friends. They thought I was making it up. These big city girls thought I was clever, but clearly not truthful. (They came to school in big cars, from the fashionable parts of Calcutta, with a ‘rice and two-curry’ lunch cooked at home, and packed into stacked tiffin boxes. I woke up every morning, had breakfast quickly, took some sandwiches, walked to the station and caught a train – and mostly did my homework on that train. They clearly thought it was a fantasy.)

As the day wore on, I wished I had made it up. I didn’t know then, that this would result in me learning a core skill I would use all my educational and professional life.

Through language and history, through geography and maths, the implications of what I had seen drifted through my head. I was not a fearful child – not much had gone wrong in my sheltered life, thus far. But that morning I had been forced to conclude that one person had got so cross with another, and stayed that cross, that they had done this to another human being. They can’t have known what they were doing, surely. How can anyone do that, knowingly? And then, gradually, I married it up with my parents’ discussion about violence – so how much of the world was really full of such people?

A week passed. I told my mother who said something trite about the Naxals<sup>1</sup> – their criminality knew no bounds, she said. Their objectives weren’t political, they were simply criminals. She pointed to the newspaper, where a picture above a centrally placed front page article spoke a thousand words – a black and white picture of a body on a stretcher, a police car, the name of our district. The English in that article was too advanced and I could not follow what it said, in any detail, so I put it down. I could see that my mother was preoccupied because some drama had unfolded closer to home – her older sister in law had said something unforgivable about her to her mother in law, or some such. It was an old tape. I said nothing else.

My homework marks fell over the next two weeks. It escaped my mother’s notice, because the household ‘drama’ had continued.

It was noticed by my Bengali teacher, however, who had also been noticing the slow withdrawal of two other girls in my class. She was keen to ensure that we picked up, from whatever was troubling us. She used to like my recitations of the poems she set – and of late, they had been lack-lustre - I had clearly been distracted by something.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Naxal movement was a communist movement in India. This 15 page open access [document](#) gives a sense of how widespread it is; I had experienced the aftermath of its regular violence in West Bengal.

It was this teacher, who took us all aside, listened to what we had to say, and told us, that despite our various difficulties, we still needed to pay attention in class. We each had a different story, which we narrated sparingly, hoping not to be judged. One girl's asthma flared up when she felt cornered, and other than in Maths, she always felt that she was behind. She found it hard to breathe.

The other girl was not interested in her academic work, on which her parents did not put much emphasis. She loved sports, however, and was concerned that her parents were stopping her from coming in early for the supervised training sessions – nice girls from a family like hers, did not rush around trying to perfect their long jump. She felt that nobody at home understood her. What was the point of it all?

And I of course was this child who was coming in from somewhere out in the sticks – and had seen this traumatic sight.

Her message was consistent – you have to pay attention, girls. You can't let all of this affect you.

Somewhat unusually, she then pointed out what that involved – this 'paying attention'.

She answered the question 'How should I go about the business of paying attention?' before we had quite articulated it.

====

This book is about paying attention, and its importance to the human condition.

I am writing this book because I have come to believe that unless we are all taught how exactly to locate what is our attention, and then how to deliberately and at will, pay attention, in class, at work, and in each room of the house we inhabit, we will perpetually live a life where we are doing one thing, but thinking about another.

We'll make the same mistakes, over and over again, and we will lose confidence in our ability to learn something and apply it with some degree of self-assurance and competence.

We will learn and rehearse something important, perhaps, but at the crucial point, forget what we rehearsed.



We will never feel 'grounded' enough to respond to the situation in front of us.

We will suffer for a long time, because we will imagine bad things, and bear grudges.

We will worry endlessly about how it all looks to someone else, rather than how it all feels to me, right now.

We won't learn how to enjoy the present moment.

There is a saying – every action has an effect. In India it is linked to the concept of karma. Being Indian, there are of course four classifications of karma. But for her band of eleven year old pupils our teacher summarised it as 'those perpetrators of hatred will not escape the consequences of their actions'. Today, I remain convinced that this is



not a bad way to set aside wrong-doing about which one could do nothing, as a child.

## Social Capital

I would like each government in the world to make this 'attention training' education a core part of its national curriculum.

You might say that this is all very well, but this is a recipe for the privileged child. There are those who need to be brought up to a minimum standard of reading and writing, and maths, and our efforts should be focused on them, primarily. Society as a whole will benefit more, by bringing up to a basic standard of education, those who are at the bottom of the pile, rather than those who can comfortably muddle through without becoming a burden to the state. The state therefore should focus on this, as its main effort. That is actually right – it will, by many measures.

What careers teachers in the public sector might identify, quite rightly, is that children who are typically from richer, better connected families, have something which has come to be called 'social capital'. These children go to public schools, which in the UK is the name we give to private, fee-paying schools.

Much is written about social capital. The paper most quoted on the subject arrived at the turn of the last century, which outlines the distinct elements which can be attributed to career success. *'Social capital was conceptualized in terms of network structure and social resources. Results of structural equation modelling showed that network structure was related to social resources and that the effects of social resources on career success were fully mediated by three network benefits: access to information, access to resources, and career sponsorship'*. (Scott E. Seibert, (Apr., 2001)

Sitting at the heart of what we call social capital is self-confidence. However much one is afforded information, resources or indeed have someone sponsor one's progress into the workplace, without the self-confidence to be sure that one can take what is being given and use it well, all of it falls flat.

There are lots of books about how to be more self-confident, but at the core of this attribute sits the ability to pay attention at will.

Its reach is so much wider than just confidence, though. Yes, self-confidence does matter, and its absence is the most visible difference between those resilient in the face of uncertainty, and those who succumb to their fears.

We therefore can't ignore it. And it is my contention that a growing respect for one's inner abilities and skills is the basis for self-confidence. Without the ability to pay attention at will, it is difficult to make a start – it's like starting to move forwards without first learning that it can be done using one's legs, straightened out, and the body held upright. Only then can one start to walk, and then gradually master running.

The young man who wants to be a car mechanic and the young woman whose ambitions don't extend beyond a desire to lead an enjoyable life as a nail stylist will gain just as much from learning to pay attention at will, as the high flying girl or boy whose disruptive financial product will take the City by storm.

And it is the purpose of this book to explore this for the teacher and the parent, so it becomes something we can, in either capacity, teach all the younger people for whom we are responsible.

But before that, I want to talk about how a corporate consultant came to write a book about life skills, and why she believes that the core skill sitting at the heart of every other is this ability to pay attention at will.