

THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable

Amanda's Thing

Mark Bastable



“I think you need to consider changing your interpersonal paradigm,” Craig Cliff said, leaning across the table towards his last client of the day. “You seem to work on the assumption that people always tell you what they truly think. But what if they don’t?”

The chubby IT Director frowned. “Why wouldn’t they? Why would they lie?”

“Well, it might not be lying exactly. There might be all sorts of other explanations.” Craig closed his file. “Tell you what. Before I see you next week, list all the reasons you can think of why people might not want to share exactly what’s on their mind. Okay?” He showed the IT Director to the door. “Have you found this session useful?” he asked.

“Not really, no,” came the reply.

Craig smiled. “See, a lot of people would have said yes, even if they felt it had been a complete waste of their time.”

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Vera Cliff carried a dish of lasagne to the table and placed it carefully on a trivet.

“How was your week?” she asked.

“Pretty good,” Craig said, opening a bottle of wine. “The MD has seen the first figures since I counselled his sales team. Performance was up twenty per cent. Now he wants me to offer sessions to the entire staff.”

“That’s great. But you’ll be away all next week too, huh?”

“Yeah, sorry. And maybe the week after. I’ll be having meetings with everyone from the Chief Accountant to the office-supplies clerk.”

“Why don’t I come with you for a few days?” Vera said as she fetched the broccoli. “Your mom would be happy to watch the kids.”

Craig poured two glasses of Chardonnay. “Yeah, do that. We could go to the opera one night, maybe.”

“I’ll make some calls tomorrow,” Vera nodded. She had no intention of doing any such thing – she hated New York. But she knew that her husband would feel less guilty about spending so much time away if he thought that she might have been able to come with him. She didn’t like Craig to be less than totally happy.

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Craig consulted his notes. After lunch he was scheduled to see one Amanda Matthews, who was a member of the cafeteria staff. It was gratifying that the MD of McGregor Plastics appreciated the benefit of recommending paradigm counselling to every single employee, from the highest to the most humble. Having been in the consultancy business for twenty years, Craig knew that there was no one whose operational efficiency could not be enhanced by a rigorous and open review of their engrained attitudes in the workplace.

He made his way to the cafeteria, where he took a tray and joined the line for hot food.

“What can I get you?” asked a slight, cheerful young woman with bright green hair and heavy eyeliner.

“What’s good?” Craig asked.

“Well, the lamb’s delicious. We called her Fluffy and she was – she still is – very sweet. The eggplants in the ratatouille were lovingly tended by Buddhist nuns and every shrimp in the seafood platter was interviewed by the chef personally.” She smiled. “Does that help?”

Craig laughed. “Yeah, okay. Dumb question. I’ll take a slice of Fluffy.”

As she served the food, the green-haired woman nodded at Craig’s name badge. “You’re the guy I’m seeing at two – the consultant, right?”

“Ah, you’re Amanda Matthews. Nice to meet you.”

“You too. How’m I doing? I mean, as far as fulfilling my duties and all?”

“That’s not what I’m here to look at, but you seem to be doing fine.”

Amanda grinned. “Here – bonus potato. Consider yourself bribed.”

“Yep,” Craig admitted, “that could swing it.”

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“Every human being – without exception – operates in a matrix of paradigms,” Craig used to tell his trainees. “Everyone has ‘a thing’. Some are useful, and some are obstructive. Our job is to help our clients overcome those that stifle potential.”

ShiftKey Inc was Craig’s invention. In the early days only Vera’s income had kept them afloat – but now there were forty consultants out there, all utilising the approaches that Craig taught. His methodology never failed.

“Remember – people are very attached to their entrenched attitudes, particularly to the bad ones. But what must we always keep in mind?” He tapped the white-board on which he’d written the ShiftKey slogan, and the trainees recited it in chorus.

“Pet paradigms prejudice peak performance,” they said dutifully.

“Damn right,” Craig nodded.

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Back in his office and full of potato, Craig called home.

“Hey, you,” Vera said. “How’s it going?”

“Real good.” Craig fired up his laptop as he spoke. “Had a guy this morning whose department was under-performing – and you know why?”

“They didn’t eat a proper breakfast,” Vera suggested.

“He worked on the assumption that women are indecisive. So his thing was to make unilateral decisions on behalf of his female staff, all of whom were truly pissed at him of course”

“Imagine that,” Vera said off-handedly. “Listen, we should go out for dinner when you get home Friday. Just the two of us.”

Craig picked up his mouse and shook it. The batteries were dying. “I dunno, honey. I’ll be pretty bushed by the time I’ve driven back. We’ll make it Saturday, huh?”

“Well...”

“Oh – wait. The Bills are going to Denver. I want to watch that. Sunday maybe?”

“Sure. Sunday. I’ll book Mario’s.”

Craig prised open the back of the mouse and flicked out the batteries.

“Please – not Mario’s. They have the worst wine list south of Niagara. How about The Green Dragon?”

“Oh. Well, okay. It’s just I have a hankering for pasta.”

“Pasta, noodles – what diff? You always have fun at the Dragon. Listen – I gotta go. I’ll call you from the hotel tonight. Say hi to the kids.”

“Sure. Work hard. Love you.”

Yeah, Craig thought as he replaced the batteries in his mouse, that’d be good, going out for a quiet dinner with Vera. Couldn’t make it a late night though. Have to be up at five on Monday to drive all the way back here.

There was a knock on the door and Amanda Matthews stepped in.

“Hi. Ready for me?”

Craig clicked the new batteries into his mouse. “Yep. Take a seat.”

“Like a Fluffy to the slaughter,” Amanda said as she sat down.

*

Craig’s first task was to establish Amanda’s Attitudinal Profile – her unique combination of Pessimist, Optimist, Enthusiast, Nay-Sayer and so on. He had her take a fifteen-minute multiple-choice test and then, while he was scoring it, she wrote a paragraph concerning how she felt about her job.

“Wow,” Craig said, when he’d totted up her scores. “Amanda – have you taken this test before?”

She looked up from her notepad. “Nope. Why?”

“Well, your profile is unusual,” he said, scanning the sheet again. “You score absolutely even across all the Attitude Types. I’ve never seen that.”

“Guess I’m just real boring,” she suggested without apparent concern.

“Hm.”

This was a new one on Craig. Without a bias in the Profile, he had no starting point for his investigation of Amanda’s paradigms. He asked her to hand him the paragraph she’d written, and she slid it across the desk.

Prep the food with the other guys. Cook the food with the other guys. Serve the food to coworkers. Do the dishes and straighten up the kitchen. That’s about it. It’s cool.

Craig read the loopy handwriting and then read it again.

“Er, I kinda wanted you to say how you felt about the work, rather than précis your duties,” he said.

“I did. It’s cool.”

“Yeah, okay,” Craig said. “But, for instance, what bugs you about the job?”

“Nothing,” Amanda shrugged.

“Nothing?” He considered for a moment. “Say someone complains that the vegetables are overcooked. What would you think?”

Again Amanda shrugged. “Everyone’s entitled to their opinion.”

All right, Craig thought, a little relieved. What we’ve got here is a confrontation avoidance paradigm. That’s her thing. I can work with that.

“So you wouldn’t feel, say, that they were telling you how to do your job? Or – I dunno – maybe you’d want to do it the way they wanted it – you know, keep the customer satisfied?”

“There are two hundred customers,” Amanda said reasonably. “Every one of them had a mom who cooked vegetables just so. I do my best and hope they like it, but I guess some won’t.”

Damn, Craig thought. No defensiveness. No mitigation. No blame transference. So she’s not an avoider.

He decided to strip the problem back to its fundamentals.

“But you agree that your customers prefer good food to bad food, yes?”

Pretty smart question, he reckoned. Totally unspecific about the definitions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, so she couldn’t disagree with the proposition. Once that woolly paradigm was established, he could push Amanda to really think about how the good-bad index was defined in her world-view.

“No.”

“What?”

“No, I don’t agree that my customers prefer good food to bad food.”

“You think they prefer *bad* food?”

“Not necessarily. I can just think of reasons why they might.”

Craig slumped back in his chair. “Such as?”

“Well,” Amanda said, pursing her lips, “maybe someone has a weight problem and they like when the food’s not too tempting. Or there might be someone who was always served mushy broccoli as a child so it has a kinda nostalgic resonance for them. Or say there’s a guy who...”

Craig held up a hand. “Yeah, yeah – I get the picture.”

“Well, you asked.”

There was a short silence while Craig rubbed his eyes with his fingertips. Obviously he was going to have to find a way to pin down a paradigm at an almost visceral level here. He looked across at Amanda who was wearing an expression of amused equanimity.

“What’s the most important thing in the world to you?” he said.

She tipped her head to one side. “In what context?”

“In *any* context,” Craig said a little too quickly. He could feel frustration percolating in his chest.

“Okay. Life.”

“Life? In what way?”

“In *any* way,” Amanda said, just as quickly as he had. “Unless you want to give me a context.” And then she laughed. “What are you trying to find out here?”

Craig winced and massaged his temples. “You know what?” he said. “I’m getting a migraine. Let’s take this up again the same time tomorrow.”

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Vera came back on the line after Craig had said goodnight to the kids.

“You sound tired,” she said.

“Not tired. Perplexed.”

He explained about Amanda. She just didn’t make sense. He couldn’t find an attitude in her that might give rise to a paradigm he could even identify. As he spoke, Craig fiddled with the loose change scattered on the night-stand. He rolled a penny over in his fingers.

“It’s, like, where’s the hook inside, you know? What’s her thing? Everyone has one. Most people have several.”

A lot of folk, he thought as he tossed the coin idly in his cupped palm, might see a penny and pick it up, because all that day they’d have good luck. Most would simply be conforming to a harmless superstition – the act would have no significance. But if, say, a person believed that the world somehow kept accounts of good fortune, and shared it around according to some

unknown ratio, then the act of picking up a penny would be the outward manifestation of that internal paradigm.

“That’s the whole basis of the methodology,” Craig said to Vera. “You figure what’s going on inside so that you can identify how that works in the outside world.”

“Sounds like a tough one,” Vera said.

He could hear her tapping a fingernail on her front teeth. It was a cute little habit that he’d always loved. It meant she was thinking. She was at her most beautiful when she was thinking. She got this kind of unfocussed, concentrated look in her eyes that made her look like a minor Greek goddess taking a pop quiz.

The tapping stopped. “Would it work the other way around?” she said.

“Huh?”

“If you could see how someone acted in a really open situation, could you get a clue what’s going on inside?”

Craig closed his hand around the penny and flopped backwards onto the bed.

“You’re a genius,” he said, looking at the ceiling. “You’ve just given me a great idea. Thanks. I’m sending you a long-distance kiss.”

“Call that gratitude? I want more than that.”

Craig laughed. “Okay. What do you want?”

“Mario’s Friday.”

“Sneaky,” he said. “Book it.”

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“I have to step out for five minutes, Amanda,” Craig said at the start of their next session. “While I’m gone, could you read through this?” He handed her a slender ring-bound file. “I won’t be long.”

He strolled down the hall to the water-cooler. The file contained ShiftKey’s marketing literature – but the reading material was irrelevant. Between the pages, Craig had put a penny.

He’d contrived a very simple but wide-open situation that offered many possibilities for action. Amanda might pocket the penny without a word. She might put it on the desk and forget it. She might give it back to him, assuming it was his. She might not make that assumption, and ask him if it were. She could drop it in the plastic cup full of pennies he’d deliberately positioned beside her, or she could hold it in her hand and fiddle with it while they talked. Whatever she did though, it would be a start. It would give him something to ask her about. *Why that choice? What would have happened if you’d made another choice? What habit of thought led you to this action rather than any other?*

Craig stood in the corridor and sipped ice-water, glancing every so often at his watch. He could hardly wait to get back in there. Not once in twenty years had he failed to identify and challenge at least one paradigm in a client. and he didn't intend to start now.

"Hey, I'm back," he said, striding through the door. "Sorry about that." He scanned the desk as he walked to his seat. No spare penny – so she'd pocketed it or put it in the cup. Or maybe it was in her hand.

"I understand what you're here for now," Amanda said, pushing the file across the desk to him. "Did you write all that? It's interesting stuff."

"Thanks." Simply to make it look as though he were considering how to progress, he picked up the file and flicked through it idly. "Oh, by the way, did you find a..." He stopped in mid-sentence, looking at the open pages of the file. The penny was still there. And so was a twenty-dollar bill.

"Did I find a what?" Amanda asked, wide-eyed.

Craig pulled the bill from between the pages. "What's this for?"

"Same thing as the penny, I guess," she said evenly. "I wanted to see what you'd do."

Craig sagged in his seat. He didn't have a clue how to interpret Amanda's response to his contrived situation.

"This paradigm thing," Amanda continued, reaching across to pluck her twenty from his fingers. "It's just a big word for an assumption, isn't it? Like, people assume that the world goes in certain ways, and your job is to give them better assumptions to work on."

"In an unmarketable paragraph, yeah – I guess so."

"There's your problem. I try not to make assumptions. It's a very complex universe and there's nothing you can assume that's likely to hold up for very long. Better just to figure it out on the wing."

"No, no, no," Craig said, pulling himself up in the chair and resting his elbows on the desk. "Everyone has paradigms. It's not possible to operate without them. Everyone has a thing."

"Well, in that case," Amanda smiled, "my thing is that there isn't one."

Craig shook his head, and looked out to the window, pondering.

After a few moments, Amanda leaned forward over the desk, her face a few inches from his.

"Penny for your thoughts?" she said.

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As it turned out, Mario had completely overhauled the wine list. Craig ordered a Chablis which lived up to its billing.

“I’m telling you,” he said to Vera, “that was a first for me. I really wouldn’t have thought it possible. No definable paradigm and therefore no challenge.” He sipped his wine, still bemused. “I’ve never before had a consulting session in which no paradigm at all was challenged. Never.”

After twenty-five years of marriage, Vera knew when to contradict and when to keep her mouth shut. This was definitely a case where the latter strategy applied, even though she could tell – just from his account of the meeting - that Craig was so evidently wrong. She was quite sure that eventually, without her help, the planted penny would drop.

“Never happened before,” Craig repeated. “A paradigm *always* emerges and gets shot down. Always.”

“You’ll figure it,” Vera said. “Cheers.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Craig said, touching his glass to hers. “It’s what I do.”

“Exactly. It’s your thing.”