CONSULTING

Why Do We Love Mysteries?

Our Personal Hero's Journeys

B. Kim Barnes
THE INFLUENCE GURU

From Nancy Drew to Dorothy Sayers, a lifelong love of mysteries, and why organization development consulting follows the same hero's journey.

As a child, I loved the books by Augusta Huiell Seaman, a now mostly forgotten author. Her novels featured a young girl and her friends solving mysteries – often involving abandoned houses, secret journals, or hidden letters. I read them and reread them. The children were curious and daring as they explored places their parents would not have allowed them to go had they known. Often, I imagined myself as the protagonist.

Later, I, like many of my contemporaries, became enamored of the Nancy Drew books. The teenaged Nancy had everything a girl growing up in the 1950s could possibly want – good friends, a boyfriend who respected her, and a wealthy and generous father who provided her with a light blue convertible. She was also smart and attractive and a leader among her coterie. The stories (written by many ghostwriters under the pseudonym of Carolyn Keene), while light and never violent or bloody, were classic hero's journeys. This structure, as identified by mythologist Joseph Campbell, involves someone leaving their comfortable world and venturing into the unknown to overcome a great challenge or achieve wisdom. Although there was no actual violence, there were plenty of scary moments and Nancy was known for getting her friends first into and then out of trouble. I admired her for her fearlessness; her adventurous spirit.

The personal qualities of the protagonist, evident in all these books, included curiosity, courage, a willingness to take risks, and the ability to lead others. As a child of the 50s, I seldom saw or heard real women described as having these characteristics, so Nancy became a role model for me as she was for many other girls like me – the ones who didn't like playing with dolls or jumping rope. We preferred reading, playing active games, or riding our bikes – and when we could afford it, horses. We thought most books written for girls were boring and loved the ones that described real adventures.

Feminism was at a low ebb at that time – and continued to be through my early adult life. I became engaged to be married before I turned 17, though I did finish college – something my parents encouraged – but I was always in a hurry to be an adult and by the age of 19, I had graduated from the university, was married and teaching in a one-room schoolhouse in the mountains of Pennsylvania. As a special education teacher, I supported my husband (whose sarcastic description of me was "self-certified expert,") through his theological graduate studies (we called it "getting your PHT" – for Putting Hubby Through) and we settled into a fairly typical marriage for the era. We moved to a small, very upper-middle-class

village (the kind you and your parents must have been born in in order to have any status), had two children, and I felt out of place and stuck. My husband was the curate (assistant clergyman) at a stuffy, though architecturally beautiful Episcopal church. I did my best to be a presentable clergy wife, but as a free-thinking Jewish girl from Minnesota, it was pretty tough going. I was lucky to find a few good friends and I tried earnestly to be a good wife and mother. One day my husband compared me unfavorably to our neighbor, Elaine, whom, he said, had "feminine wiles." I retorted, "So, you want me to lie to you and manipulate you?" I guess he did, as he did not respond. But I hadn't the faintest idea how to do it.

The marriage ended after twelve years. I was ready for some further education myself. While continuing to teach, I began a master's program in Human Development – a study of the biological and social bases of human behavior. This fed my curiosity – I particularly enjoyed studying first other primates and then young children over time and noting how relationships developed and changed as they gained skills and understandings about how things worked.

After several years of running a program called "Activity Rooms" which hired people with interesting skills and a talent for communicating with early adolescents (poets, carpenters, and other interesting folks), I moved to California to take a job with the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory. There I would be an organization development consultant, working with scientists and engineers to develop their teams and improve their communication skills. I enjoyed working with people who were curious by nature and didn't need to be experts in everything, but respected expertise in others.

Eventually, I realized that I had a desire to launch my own business and left the Lab to form Barnes & Conti Associates with friend and colleague, Isabella Conti. We began by focusing on skills related to creativity and innovation but soon expanded into some of the more complex and interesting human interaction and thinking skills such as influence, risk-taking, and strategic thinking.

Throughout my life and through these several career moves and personal changes, one thing remained the same: I read voraciously and often within the genre of mystery fiction. Not blood-and-guts or horror fiction, but the elegant, refined, often humorous, intellectually satisfying work of British or "former British Empire" writers such as Dorothy Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, Josephine Tey, and Margery Allingham. Later favorites include Martha Grimes, Iain Pears, G.M. Malliet, Sujata Massey, Richard Osman, and Kerry Greenwood.

The common theme of all of these books remains the hero's journey. The protagonist – whether an amateur or professional sleuth – is presented with an event, usually a murder, that requires action to identify, corral, confront, and eventually bring the perpetrator to justice. He or she works with a consistent set of helpers and friends to uncover motives, unlock secrets, and resolve the mystery.

Some years ago, I realized that my chosen profession, organization development consulting, requires a similar set of skills and follows a similar process. We learn that something isn't working right. We are engaged by a client to discover how the problem occurs, what causes it, and how to resolve it. Curiosity and persistence are useful qualities for achieving success. The ability to "speak truth to power" is essential. The willingness to move out of one's comfort zone and encounter some "good trouble" (the brilliant concept pioneered by the late Rep. John Lewis) is indispensable.

Life is full of mysteries. Some are insoluble, at least given our current human capacities. But every day there are opportunities to apply our curiosity and persistence. What's happening? Why is it happening? How can we improve, resolve, manage, or change it? Simply accepting things as they are leads to a boring career and life. Becoming the Sherlock Holmes or Nancy Drew of our time and place provides meaning, interest, better outcomes and a variety of ways to be successful.

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B. Kim Barnes

Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

bkimbarnesconsulting.com · hello@bkimbarnesconsulting.com · linkedin.com/in/bkimbarnes

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