Weapons of influence, or weapons of destruction?

I loved what Stéphan Möller says in his editorial this month, that words and behaviour can be weapons of influence. This is reinforced by what Johann Kruger says in his column, that people may not remember exactly what you said or did for them, but they will remember how you made them feel.

Isn’t that the truth? My own personal truth is that when I think back on arguments that I’ve had, personal ones that hurt, I have no recollection of what the words were. I just know that I felt lousy, and that it influenced how I felt about myself, and ultimately how I behaved. This sometimes lasts for years.

As much as I love words, I know that they can be weapons of destruction, as well as being a source of power with a positive influence. The scars that are left last long after the emotion dissipates. I trust that the same is true of words that encourage, but it’s not always easy to retain the warm feelings.

Remembering, while it’s fresh in your mind

I had an experience this weekend that I hope I remember for a long time. I attended the AGM of the Lesotho Pharmaceutical Society at Thabo Bosiu, which is approximately 25 minutes outside Maseru. It was a wonderful experience for many reasons.

It was not an ordinary AGM. In the middle of the afternoon, the AGM was halted so that delegates could visit Thabo Bosiu, and walk to the top of this historic site. My shoes conspired against me, ably assisted by my general unfitness. At least I was able to walk a third of the way up, and then sit and breathe in the tranquillity and beauty.

Afterwards, the AGM continued. Delegates had used the walk to discuss issues that had been raised at the meeting. I have no doubt that creative solutions to challenges were generated by the walk. What a brilliant idea!

I left the conference venue at 20h30, although the meeting was still in progress, because I wanted to arrive at the guesthouse in which I was to spend the night before it was too late. I had not envisaged the bumper bashing on the open road (not mine, thank goodness), or the four-car pile-up that stopped traffic in the city centre. These things happen and I just sat impatiently and waited, as one does.

The guesthouse was one block away from the national stadium. This wasn't on my radar. Had I arrived earlier or later, it wouldn't have been a problem. But at 21h30, the match was over and spectators were streaming out. The area around the stadium was completely gridlocked. It was obvious that there was no way on earth that I could get to the guesthouse from the stadium. Without panicking too much, I turned out of the traffic and tried to approach the guesthouse from a different direction and got hopelessly lost.

What do you do in circumstances like that? It was dark, my cell phone was on SMS roaming only, and nothing was open nearby. Eventually, I found that the wrong turns I’d taken took me to the border post, so I turned around again. I found a petrol station which was on the point of closing. Three young women were locking up. They tried to help me, but none of them knew how to direct me to my accommodation. You can imagine how I felt. What were my options: sleeping in the car, or trying to go back through the border post to South Africa in the middle of the night?

Two young men had just filled up with petrol. They saw me talking to the women, and came over to find out what was going on. They knew exactly where I needed to go and offered to lead me there via the back roads.

What would you have done? What went through my mind? Yes, I could end up dead in a ditch. But I realised that this was one of those occasions in which I needed to trust an offer of help. At 22h15, after travelling along numerous narrow, unlit roads, they stopped in front of the guesthouse, made sure that I was registered and safe, and then went on their way.

They don't know it, but they were my angels that Saturday night. I hope that I can retain the peace that I felt after I followed them blindly, and arrived safely.

Encouraging greatness

Stéphan says something else about people’s reactions to other people: “People are generally so gullible that they will believe compliments about themselves, even if they are not true.”

My mother took it a step further. She said: “If you tell people that what they’re doing is good, or that they’re wonderful, they’ll believe it, and then they’ll start acting as if it’s true.”

It becomes the truth! Sometimes it changes the entire dynamics of your relationship with that person.

So my wish for you, as the year draws relentlessly to a close, is that you will surround yourself with wonderful, positive people, and that if they’re not wonderful or positive, you’ll be able to influence them so that they become the type of people who we need to have in our lives.

Lorraine Osman