

# Anthropologist's Principles

## Four Ways of Thinking Create Great Life Lessons

How you take in the information around you can change lives—both your own and those you come into contact with. Genevieve Bell, a cultural anthropologist at Intel, says that to do good fieldwork, she has four ways of thinking that she keeps front and center when she's working. Here are her guiding principles:



**1. Be present.** Get in the middle of whatever you're doing. Talk to anyone who will listen; listen to anyone who will talk. Read the news. Shut off all your electronic devices and participate in what's going on around you. A young woman Bell once met in India told her that to be Indian was to know it through the tips of your fingers, to put your fingers in the *biryani* (a rice dish). Bell knew the young woman meant that to understand Indians, she had to eat like an Indian. She had to participate in what was going on around her to benefit from it.

**2. Be vulnerable.** Let go of any preconceived ideas you have. Get engaged—and if you get knocked off-center, pay attention. When Bell was in Korea, she was speaking with a shaman about honoring the souls who haunted the country. Unexpectedly, the shaman turned to Bell and said, “You are haunted, too.” Bell knew the reference was to her grandfather who had died when she was 13. The anthropologist broke into tears. When you're vulnerable and uncomfortable, she says, you're in a position to learn the most—about yourself and others.

**3. Be surprised.** When you're surprised, you'll ask questions. Be willing to ask stupid ones, she recommends, and be willing to look foolish. Once when Bell was exploring how technology fits into the lives of Malaysians, she found a replica of a mobile phone made from colored cardboard in a funerary goods store. She asked what it was for and learned that in Chinese culture, paper objects are burnt so that they may become real objects for people to use in the afterlife. “So are your dead relatives calling you then?” she asked. It directed the conversation toward exactly what she was investigating. She learned that Malaysia is teeming with technology—even in the afterlife.

**4. Be honest and brave.** Bell says that when she's asked questions like “What are the three key takeaways about China?” she resists answering. She tries to stay true to the stories she gathers. When people share their stories with you, you have a duty to guard the truth of the information with which you have been entrusted. Keep the details and nuances—no matter how contradictory or nonsensical they might seem. If you do, you'll give voice to those who might not be able to do it themselves. In business that often means asking hard questions—as well as not giving easy answers. It means telling the truth to those in power.

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*(Written for Hospitality client's intranet.)*