
FROM COMPETENCE TO INCOMPETENCE: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

Lynette Edge

Paris? France? Are you serious? I think I am going to join The Salvation Army!

This was a sentence I heard over and over in November 2000 as I announced that in my role as Salvation Army Officer, my next appointment was to Paris, France. Having been blessed with 5 great years as the Officer (Pastor) at Glebe in Inner City Sydney, Paris just seemed too good to be true.

Optimism, excitement and naivete accompanied me throughout my preparations to leave the only city I had ever known in my 37 years.

‘So, you speak French then?’ people inevitably and frequently asked. ‘Ah, actually, no’ I replied. ‘Well I am sure it will come back to you when you get there’ they would continue. ‘Ah, well I never did it at school, nor did I study any other language, but it’s OK, I’m sure I can learn French,’ I responded. I had studied before at a post graduate level so I was confident that I would cope with the academic demands of learning French and with that naive optimism I boarded my flight to my new life in Paris. If I had known what experiences were awaiting me in France I may well have turned around right there at Mascot airport and stayed in Sydney. However often not knowing is a blessing and so I took that life changing flight to Paris.

On my arrival I moved into my quintessentially Parisian flat, complete with balcony and views to other quintessentially Parisian flats across the road. My neighbourhood was a 10 minute walk to the Bastille or to the Seine. My *boulangier* was across the road and my markets not much further. I thought I would wake up some time soon and find out that this was all a dream.

But I was not in Paris to be a tourist, I was there to work for The Salvation Army, and to do that I needed to speak French, and fast. So I enrolled in the Alliance Française and put my mind into my language studies.

In my first class Didier seemed like a good teacher and the other 20 people in the class seemed nice enough too, but my ability to understand or converse with them was so limited I wasn’t actually sure. At the very first break in the class the women next to me turned and let out a stream of French in my direction of which I did not

understand one single word. *Desolé* was the one word of French I could muster in response. 'Do you want to have coffee? I know a cafe down the road' she repeated, this time, gratefully, in English. Nadia was Belarusian and, like so many other nationalities, she spoke her mother tongue, English and other languages as well. So we went to the cafe nearby and started our daily ritual where I would pump her for information about all that I had missed while sitting in the classroom for the morning. I was the class dummy without doubt, much to my chagrin.

As anyone who has learnt another language knows, the mistakes one makes are numerous but can be sometimes amusing. I got into some hot water early as I often mixed up the words for 'death' (*la mort*) and love (*l'amour*). When someone told me about a song which says that we all deserve to die, I thought they said we all deserve love and declared that I agreed wholeheartedly! Among the most common French words that I struggled with were ones which are called false friends, words which look like English words but have different meanings.

My adventures with the French language were only just beginning. There is a Spanish film entitled 'Without News from God' which is set in three places; heaven, earth and hell. It was also set in three languages. Spanish, French and English. I was intrigued to note that the film portrayed Spanish as the language spoken on earth, English was spoken in hell and French spoken in heaven. When I shared this quirk with an English speaking friend he happily concurred that this was, in fact, how it would be because French is a language which one needs a whole lifetime plus an eternity to master. That is a fact I had no trouble believing!

After a few weeks of being in Paris I started attending the English lessons which were being offered by The Salvation Army in the centre where I was living. Bram, a colleague, invited me to come along to 'help out'. Such was his generosity toward me, as the invitation was really a chance for me to meet some people and start making some contacts in Paris.

During the first class I met Lucile, a French women of my age, who I felt a certain connection to even though we couldn't really speak freely. I had my ever present French/English dictionary with me and with that as our intermediary we had our first halting conversation.

She asked what I was doing in France, to which I replied I was a Pastor. She shook her head sadly at my poor French and took my dictionary from my hands. She showed me the word in English for 'profession' and tried again 'what is your profession' she asked. I tried to assure her that I understood the question and said again '*Je suis pasteur*'. Again she took the dictionary and looked up Pastor, handing over the entry triumphantly as proof that I hadn't understood. When I nodded that that was exactly my profession, she sat back dumbfounded. '*Mais, tu es une femme!*'

But you are a woman! she exclaimed. Lucile was the first of many French people who thought my language skills were not up to answering the question of what my profession was. In a country with a Catholic tradition, a young single woman simply couldn't be a Pastor.

But explaining my profession to Lucile was child's play alongside other greater language feats that awaited me. Opening a bank account proved impossible without a translator and it wasn't even worth thinking of going to the Prefecture de Police about my visa alone. I was dependent again. At the age of 37 I was as unable to find out the balance of my bank account as I was unable to work out how the international phone cards worked. Without the help of Bram, his wife Irene and other English speaking colleagues – I was lost.

Not only was I lost – but also powerless. After 2 months in my class with Didier (who I had confirmed, *was* an excellent teacher), we had a change and in came Christine. She arrived with all the compassion and tact of the clichéd old school Head Mistress. On one memorable day I gathered all my courage and limited language skills and I dared to ask a question. Her response was swift and brutal. '*Mais Lynette, j'ai expliqué ça hier. Vous êtes stupide.*' (I explained that yesterday, you are stupid!) I was stupid? The limited sense of competence I had left drained from me. My confidence was shot. I sat in that class room, a grown woman having achieved in the past a certain professional competence and post graduate level studies, and I cried like a kindergarten kid who wanted their mummy. I wouldn't have minded having mine around at that moment either.

Christine not only told me I was stupid, but she quickly eroded the confidence of most other students in the class – to the point where no-one was game to confront or disagree with her. I would have loved to talk to the Director of the school, I would have loved to advocate on behalf of our class, I would have loved to discuss with Christine how her manner was effecting me and the others. But I didn't know how, I didn't have the words. I was powerless.

Was this what I dreamed of for my life in Paris? Sitting in a classroom crying over my incompetence and powerlessness?

After some months these feelings of ineptitude cracked the 'I'm coping fine, thanks very much' image which I had been working hard to maintain with my friends and family back home. So I started to express my real sense of failure and inability in my emails, reaching out for some support and understanding. However instead of receiving empathy and comprehension from the people at home what I received instead was constant reassurance that I was no doubt doing much better than I gave myself credit for, and often even congratulatory remarks for the progress I had made! After some months of trying to communicate my sense of desperation and defeat I

stopped trying to make myself understood and opted instead for trying to be encouraged by people's faith in me, a faith I did not share with them. When I finally sat my Diploma of French exam I was sure I had failed and I took some small comfort in the fact that this would at least be hard evidence to show the people at home that I was, in fact, failing badly in my language mastery. (Ironically I passed that exam which only made my desire to be understood all the less likely!)

One unfortunate friend wrote to me one day asking, with his tongue in his cheek, how it was to be 'suffering for Jesus' amongst the cafes and culture of Paris? I knew he was just jealous of this wonderful opportunity I was living, but the note came at the wrong moment. He was rewarded with a tirade back from me about how debilitating it was not to be able to make small talk with my neighbours, not to be able to watch the news and know what was going on and not to be able to contribute and do the job I believed I was sent to Paris to do.

Given how badly I was feeling about my lack of progress I felt driven to fast-track my language development, so after 3 months in Paris I headed to the South of France to help out with the Salvation Army's annual children's holiday camps. The plan was to have one month of complete immersion in French, where maybe I could help out a bit, but mainly where I could start to gain a little more confidence with my language skills. One month without a word of English, one month of living and working in a 100% French environment, that was the plan. And in theory I thought it was a great idea, however the practice was to be an entirely different story.

The night I arrived the staff were in a meeting starting to plan the four weeks to come and as I sat to join them I realised with dawning horror that I did not understand one word. Not one.

My confidence in Paris was already low, but what everyone had failed to explain to me was that in the South the French speak with an accent that made comprehension completely out of the question for me. And so commenced one of the longest months of my life.

A month in which every meal was spent deaf and mute. A month in which to ask someone to pass the salt was too much effort. A month where I would lay in bed in the morning and hear the French in the corridor and have to muster all my will power to get up and out into the day. I had been responsible for running kids camps in Australia and here I was feeling only just able to make the contribution of serving the meals or helping out with the craft.

Whilst it was not as dramatic as it may sound in summary, the sense of exclusion and incompetence I felt during that month are burned on my memory.

In Australia I had been an outgoing confident person, but here I was discovering a new persona. The less competent Lyn, the insecure Lyn, the timid Lyn. And oddly enough this journey, whilst not being pleasant, was not without recompense.

Luc was a 9 year old boy at the camps who came from a very unstable family situation and brought with him all the incumbent behavioural indicators of that dysfunction. He was not able to stay in the group for more than a few minutes before all hell started to break loose. A few days into the camp I noticed he often came or stood near me and tried to sit with me during group activities and more than once this boy with his anti-social behaviour was my dinner partner. I was unable to converse too much – I said a few basic words and smiled a lot – but he didn't seem to mind my lack of eloquence. In fact, I came to see that this was exactly what drew him to me. I, too, was a sort of an outsider here. I, too, struggled to fit in and make myself understood. I was something like him.

My normal way of functioning no doubt made me less accessible or open to people who felt on the outer. My self-assurance no doubt had been a barrier to many 'Luc's' that had crossed my path before.

Now I was learning a new way to connect. A new way to serve. From a position of powerlessness and vulnerability.

And from this new position I was discovering more about myself. More about how much I had judged who I was by what I contributed and how much my self-esteem was linked to my performance.

This was not a discovery that I came to easily or quickly. In fact, I finally articulated it to myself on my first anniversary away from home, on holidays in Prague. I got to thinking again how my ex-pat experience had been dogged by the feelings of uselessness. I believed that I was not able to contribute very much in Paris. I was neither confident nor competent in the language or culture of France. I kept thinking how much more useful I could be at home where I knew the language and the systems and where I had good networks.

However after a year in a non-English speaking country I realised I needed to reconsider the lenses through which I was evaluating my experience here. I needed to jettison the notions of value being gained through achievement or of worth being judged through abilities. I knew those things, I just had trouble living them out when it was my abilities and skills which were eroding, when it was me who was unable to contribute as I would have liked to.

Over time I began to embrace again my belief that relationships are more valuable than role, and that success is not about competence but the person who you are.

That holiday was a turning point for me. In my heart there was a shift. I started to let go of the success and achievement obsession which had dogged my time so far. I became less obsessed with my need to be as competent here as I had felt in Australia. I let go of my need to contribute or be a mover and shaker and more committed to trying to create individual relationships with the people I was working with and learnt to focus on who I was, not what I did.

This journey from competence to incompetence was not what I expected of my ex-pat experience. It was not what I signed up for nor what I would have chosen. But now that I have lived it, I know that the lessons I have learnt could have come no other way so I say *'Vive l'incompétence!'*



Lynette Edge is an Australian Salvation Army Officer and has been living and working in Paris, France since March 2001. In Australia she was a Social Worker before becoming a Minister of Religion in 1996 with the Salvation Army. Her current role is as a Chaplain at a women's hostel in Paris where they have 600 residents aged between 20 and 40. She is also a devoted Aunty to six beautiful children who all currently live on the opposite side of the world to her.

Copyright © 2003 Lynette Edge, All Rights Reserved