

markets FOR GOOD

The Bear and the Ladle

by Katya Fels Smyth | October 2012



Long before light pollution, some folks looked to the heavens, saw a couple of stars in a weird jumble and pronounced, “That’s a bear, and a Big Bear at that.”

Personally, I can’t see the bear unless I’m shown artfully drawn pictures, or unless a lot of little, less bright (and obvious) stars are included in the drawing. Most of the bright ones seem to be on its ribs—an odd place to start. So the bear was hard for people to see, and people drew the bear differently each time. It was mushy and not objective.

This is a lot like how we have approached data.

In the absence of any data, we didn’t know what we were looking at. So we began to collect data, such as how many people visited our food pantry each week, or how many bed-nights our shelter had, or how many 12-step meetings people attended. And these data left us with, well, the bright stars of a Big Bear—meaning data that didn’t actually paint a picture of what it was we wanted to know.

So we had to explain to people all sorts of things that required leaps of faith, such as how the number of people visiting our food pantry was somehow tied to decreased youth violence. And we’d tell a lot of stories that helped connect the dots in ways that fit our understanding of the world. We were drawing a Big Bear.

Then we began to collect more data to make our picture more complete. It was like looking through a telescope and finding the stars that, even though fainter, actually do a better job of outlining that Big Bear. As a result, we relied on fewer and fewer stories, leaps of faith, illustrated pictures, and myths to convince us that it was, indeed, a bear.

The more data we collect to outline the Big Bear, the easier it is for everyone to see what the real issues are and the less those original stars determine our interpretation. And these data, perhaps a little harder to discover at first (like the slightly fainter stars) are a lot closer to what we should track to evaluate our programs, track our outcomes, or paint real pictures of what we’re doing and what effect we are having.

After a while, we can see this sum of big and little stars and then all agree: we have a Big Bear. And once we’ve decided this, we can begin to really dig into the very important business of collecting our data in a standardized way, mining it, analyzing it.

Looking beyond the obvious gives us the clearest picture of what’s going on and whether what we are doing is working: these are vital dimensions for us to know.

That said, I also believe that there's an astounding presumption under all of this: that what we need data for is to draw and study a bear. Because the Big Bear is how we define success for people. We—policy makers, funders, researchers, advocates, programs—do it more and more, the more focused on outcomes and data we become.

I'm not here to say the Big Bear is wrong. I just don't know whether we check enough that it is right.

Isn't it possible that assumptions about success that are baked into systems and services and funding, assumptions which aren't necessarily wrong but aren't necessarily right either, confound the best efforts to make things better?

Before we gather, share and mine data, we need to ask some more fundamental questions about how people experiencing issues understand success and transformation. This is the step before a theory of change or a theory of the problem.

It is the step that asks, "How do people who are or have been homeless understand their lives and situations and what it means to be successful and thrive? What of survivors of domestic violence? What if it's not all defined though a prism of housing or a lack of violence?"

If I am a homeless survivor of domestic violence with mental health issues and a predilection for pain medication, who dropped out of high school to work but haven't actually worked in 20 years, I will encounter multiple well-meaning actors who each prioritize their solutions as *the* key for me to unlock a brighter future, whether by acquiring housing, securing safety from violence, gaining mental health stability, attaining sobriety, or obtaining my GED.

Forget about it.

Who could possibly manage all of those keys to the future, particularly if each is being presented to me as "the most important key" of all? Collect all the data in the world on me and how I do in each of those programs: even if I am successful in the short term in each of them, and even if they are evidence-based, they probably won't add up to my success.

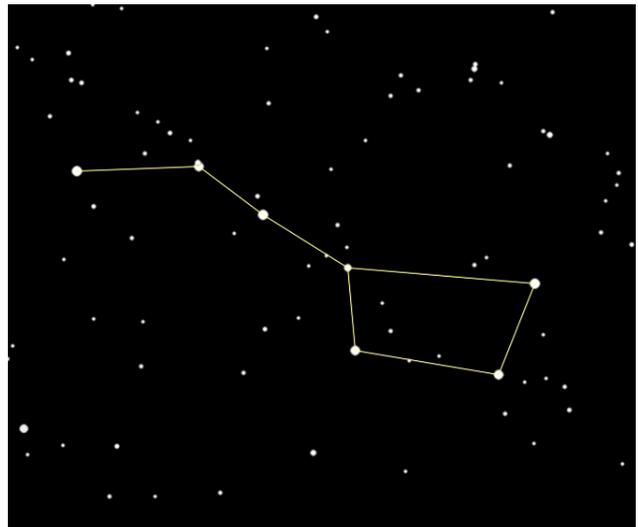
Even if they are all coordinated, they may still be connecting the stars to make a bear, while I have a very different way to see the same set of stars—a way that might send us down the road of collecting very different data and paying attention to data differently.

You see, I think the stars form a ladle. And so, I want you to pay attention to the smaller, fainter stars that make this a great Big Dipper. Not a bear.

Because for the "me" suggested above, perhaps the real key is connection with my kids and taking care of my mom, and having something to do where I can stop feeling like a burden on other people. Of course it would help if I were to stop doing drugs, get a job, take my medications, and deal with my homelessness. I'm all for that; but, I'm telling you about a ladle, and you're trying to convince me it's a bear.

There are new harms created when people live their lives striving honestly for one goal while we're gathering data to measure how we're doing in getting them to reach a different and competing one.

The point is not to say who is right: I'm not sure there is a lock on truth here. I just don't think we should automatically assume a bear. In our efforts to support change and transformation in people's lives, we haven't even created the space for the conversation about whether it's a bear, a Big Dipper, or something completely different. Thus, we are potentially creating a dissonance with the experience people actually live. The person left to sustain and resolve that dissonance is usually the survivor of violence, the client, the participant.



This isn't simply about participant voice in defining or evaluating services. It's more basic than that:

It's about understanding the multiple voices of a constituency not only to design services or programs, but to inform policy.

It means challenging our own assumptions about *why* people enter services to begin with, or why they leave.

We aren't talking about the difference between a Grizzly Bear and a Polar Bear here: we're talking about a large mammal and inanimate kitchen object. The difference matters.

What if the data we collect and crunch are making our analysis of problems more ossified and entrenched, instead of porous and assailable? What if the quest for data is moving us further and further away from doing the good we intend?

We risk creating new damage, inefficiencies, and barriers when those who have the power and privilege of defining the constellations and determining the definitions of success for other people are not even aware of where those constellations are either at odds with or aligned with the definitions of the people who live in them.

There's awareness of this problem.

In some programs, there is a real effort to ask the fundamental questions. But even in these programs, where does the data about what's wrong with how we're framing the problem trickle up to the rest of us? It usually doesn't.

There are no mechanisms, no incentives to broach the question without a lot of proof, proof that takes time and money to collect, time and money that are hard to come by, especially if you're a close-to-the-ground organization.

On a macro level, there are bright spots. A federal emphasis on "well-being" for families served by child welfare agencies—recognizing that safety is critical but not the whole story—may better match families' goals for themselves, allowing state systems to better support and channel people's aspirations and energy.

In another example, The Full Frame Initiative has recently received funding to work statewide in California to surface how definitions of success converge and diverge among survivors of domestic violence, advocates, service providers, funders, and policy makers.

The decision of what data we collect paints a picture of what it means to be successful for those whose lives play out in "target populations," "outcome measures," and "assessment scores." Paying more attention to this may be the ultimate arbiter of whether we—all of us, collectively—are successful.

Note: This blog post was originally published in two parts.

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