

Watson as Servant

The Essential Role of the Assistant in Investigative Work

As we consider our times vs. the time of Holmes and Watson, we see a contrast of times and cultures.

We live in a world today that focuses immense amounts of attention on celebrities and superstars:

- In many instances, we are fortunate to have such high performing individuals in our midst. They can often achieve on their own what might take groups of other people to accomplish.
- In other instances, they represent examples of human character that are not considered to be desirable.

During the days in which Holmes and Watson served their clientele, there were not so many of these high-profile individuals. In that time, the superstars were typically governmental leaders, super wealthy capitalists, and a handful of prominent humanitarians. Among them included:

- Members of the Royal Family
 - Queen Victoria
 - King Edward VII
 - King George V (If you include extra-canonical work like "How Watson Learned the Trick")
- Harry Gordon Selfridge (1858-1947). He's best known in this country as being the capitalist whose story Americans have recently viewed on *Masterpiece Classic* on PBS – He was an American businessman who brings a new kind of shopping experience to Great Britain and shakes up the retail sector of that conventional nation's economy.
- Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) who was the pioneer of modern nursing.
- Although he had passed before the first Holmes story, the influence of Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) who was a four-time Prime Minister and author was still felt throughout the land.

But we are not all such celebrities and superstars. Nor are we meant to be.

So, what role exists for us?

What role do we take in relation to a consulting detective?

In what ways are we able to make significant contributions to investigative work?

We Need Watsons!

Based on the canonical writings of Arthur Conan Doyle, this presentation proposes three ways in which, while not leading, we can all serve and assist, like Watson did Holmes, in the direct investigative work in which they found such great success:

1. Providing Insight and Unique Perspective
2. Bringing Unique Experiences
3. Adding and Using New Investigative Skills

❖ Insight and Perspective

- Holmes sometimes weakness in social skills is well-known. Watson sought to help him with that. In their work, Watson provided general understanding of people and human interaction in ways that Holmes could/did not.
- Watson learned to observe. As Doyle said, Watson undoubtedly soon learned from Holmes that “The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance observes.”
- As his observation skills grew, Watson must have also adopted Holmes motto of “Presume nothing.” – An approach that led him to unbiased investigations.
- Watson provided emotional comfort to clients – especially females. He married one such client – Mary Marstan from *The Sign of Four*.
- Finally, as Holmes once said, “The chief proof of a man’s real greatness lies in his perception of his own smallness.”

- Watson knew the size of his role in cases. Yet he loved the work and his role in it.

❖ Unique Experiences

- Watson brought the knowledge and discipline of his military experience to cases. He served in the Second Anglo Afghan War (1878-80) with the Northumberland Fusiliers as Assistant Surgeon. Holmes did not have this same knowledge and experience.
- Often, and often more importantly, he brought his revolver, along with the skill, and courage to use it when needed.
- He could also speedily learn a new field of study or master new knowledge as in his quick learning of the complexities of Chinese pottery in "*The Illustrious Client*."

❖ Mastering Existing and Adding New Investigative Skills

Of the 3 Areas I'm addressing, this seems to be the area that Holmes valued most:

- While Holmes practiced chemistry, Watson brought specific medical expertise to investigation in determining the cause of a victim's death, the length of time since a person had deceased, or some other unique area of medical knowledge. (Or, actually Conan Doyle did.)
- Watson was a learner – always learning from Holmes – frequently by error. – Holmes said, "You've made your mistakes Watson. So have I. And if there's anything that's become apparent during our time together is that a great majority of those mistakes are in the past."
- And later in their relationship, when Holmes said, "You know my methods. Apply them," he was confirming his growing confidence in Watson as an investigator, even though Watson was not successful in his efforts in that case.
- But there are at least 3 types of Watson's assistance that brought out the best in Holmes – areas where we can serve and assist in investigation.

- One of my favorite statements Holmes made to Watson is, “It may be that you are not yourself luminous, but that you are a conductor of light. Some people without possessing genius have a remarkable power of stimulating it.” Watson conducted that light.
- Watson was Holmes’ listener. Holmes seems to state the same sentiment when he said to Watson that, “nothing clears up a case so much as stating it to another person.”
- Holmes stated it a third way when he described Watson as having “a gift for silence. He said, “It makes you invaluable as a companion.”

While those in servant roles are often viewed as having lesser value, Watson’s example shows us how a strong assistant can be invaluable in investigative work.



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