

# Introduction

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## *Laying Down a Path in Walking*

*Joy itself is a form of wisdom. . . . If people were nimble enough to move freely between different perceptions of reality and if they maintained a relaxed, playful attitude well-seasoned with laughter, then they would live in harmony with the universe; they would connect with all matter, organic and inorganic, at its purest, most basic level.*

—Tom Robbins (2001)

When my son Joel was 7 years old, we visited an indoor climbing gym after school. There were 20-foot walls for climbing, each dotted with irregularly placed steps and handholds. I wrapped one end of a long, thick rope around my waist while my son slipped into a safety harness at the other. The first few ascents came easily, but as he struggled to complete the harder courses, I became frustrated and advised him on what looked to me to be the best route to the top. From my perspective on the ground, the optimal path along the rock face was clear. Nonetheless, as I tried to convey this information to my son, he cut me off. “It’s not like that,” he said from 20 feet in the air. “Until you *take* a step, you don’t know where the next step should be.”

Explanations and accounts provided outside of or following a stream of action can be wrong, misleading, and even harmful. This point has been made before through contrasting metaphors for leadership: the map and the compass (Weick, 2001). Using a map to lead presumes a deep level of prospective knowledge about the terrain one will encounter and a sure sense of the best route to take. In comparison, using a compass as one’s guide suggests both

a certainty about one's general direction and an openness toward alternative paths along the way. As much as the "logical next step" looks obvious in retrospect, it may not appear so in the ongoing stream of action. The urgent need to appreciate the "certain ambiguity" that characterizes contemporary human societies is both the alpha and the omega of this book.

Put more plainly, the specific impetus behind the essays in this collection—and indeed, the decision to collect them—is my frank desire to promote a more contingent style of living, one in which people are serious about their attachments but not seriously attached (Phillips, 1996). Making this case requires your indulgence for a brief recap of the nature of human being, focusing specifically on our species' trademark qualities, language and reflexive consciousness.

People emerge from worlds not of their making but, unlike other living creatures, are not content merely to participate in the ebb and flow of life. Instead, language and reflexive consciousness (the ability to think about our thinking) goad us to construct an überworld, an elaborate system of meanings in which (unlike the real world) all things appear possible. Much has been made of the essential link between language and civilization, yet considerably less attention has been paid to what is *lost* in learning to communicate, most notably the ability to live more simply in a world of signs (Phillips, 1999).

But as humans, we have no choice. We face the predicament of immortal souls trapped in mortal bodies (Becker, 1997). We are marked by an uneasy duality that both differentiates us from angels and evokes a host of expectations and desires. If there is a Creator, she is a co(s)mic tailor who carefully takes our measure and consistently produces suits that never quite fit. The secular version of this insight is not much different—even if we believe that reality is "socially constructed," it is so only in an ironic sense. We rarely get the reality we favor or set out to create (Ortner, 1984).

Human beings are unique among animals in their tendency to organize experience into plots (Bruner, 1990). These plots sprout from the gaps we perceive between our lived experience and our expectations (Ochs & Capps, 1996). The difference between the way things are—and how they could be—continually cries out for explanation. Language lures us out of the present tense into ornate images of the past and future, into talk of aspirations and traditions, dreams and regret. But it is the strength of our belief in these constructions—our degree of attachment to these beliefs—that has an overwhelming impact on how we live our lives, through its influence on our thoughts, actions, and relationships.

The call of language intoxicates even the sober. Although everyone is aware to some degree that we are subject to the hazards that affect all animals, we also imagine ourselves a breed apart, a species uniquely qualified to be stewards of the world, if not the universe. In our efforts to achieve

*dominion* over the Earth, we come to believe that evolution ends with our species (Quinn, 1993). Sadly, this could turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. There is a cruel irony to a species that can speak with such certainty but inhabits a world so ambiguous and unmanageable (Lennie, 1999).

The desire for certainty permeates every human psyche born of the West. We long to replace our internal conflicts and anxieties with “something clearer, simpler, and ultimately more permissive” (Edmunson, 2006, p. 16). As each individual soul struggles to make sense of his or her existence through identification with a transcendent set of institutions or beliefs (Taylor, 2000), however, the identities that emerge from this struggle diverge considerably in degree of certainty and attachment. On the one hand, some individuals declare adherence to what might be called “dominion narratives,” characterized by single meaning, heroic individuals, and the importance of centralized and singular control. Fundamentalisms of every kind can be understood as dominion narratives, rigid responses to a perceived gap between one’s ideals and the state of the world. Examples include certain extreme religious sects and corrupt governments that require the blind loyalty of their followers.

Others seek to live in accord with what might be called “engagement narratives,” characterized by multiple meanings, vulnerability, participation, and inclusion. New organizational forms and network organizations use technology to open up lines of communication and encourage participation. Many local schools and communities promote the value of diversity and of holding space for difference. And certain religious sects are known for their commitment to inclusion (e.g., Quakers, Jesuits).

Problems invariably arise when people with differing narratives and attachments to their beliefs seek to live together. The central challenge in human relations is communicating with people who hold radically different worldviews from us and who are passionately attached to the veracity of their perspectives. The source of the difficulty, however, is less in the fact of the difference and more in the strength of the attachment, in one’s certainty about certainty. Although we should encourage a wide diversity of beliefs among people, we must also make a fundamental commitment to oppose fundamentalism of any kind, a refusal to tolerate the intolerant (Popper, 1971).

Although this may seem like a logical contradiction (similar, for example, to promoting “serious play”), it is in fact a starting point for cultivating a new kind of systems logic. Consider this: In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is not money per se but the “love of money” that is claimed to be the root of all evil. *The central problem is not belief but attachment.* For this reason, we should encourage the promulgation of beliefs worldwide but actively discourage fanatical attachment to any of them. There are distinct parallels to the call for ecological systems thinking; any overemphasis on

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the needs of the individual always impacts others and may over time destroy the whole. A more peaceful world begins with heightened systems consciousness (Lifton, 1993; Senge et al., 2005).

This collection of essays was assembled with this new story of identity and communication in mind. People are seeking new ways of coming together across differences, discovering commonalities, and learning to live and work together. To the extent that we cling to dominion narratives, we resemble the computer operator who seeks to make changes in an electronic document by dabbing Liquid Paper on the screen; the change is illusory, and the world rolls on. A certain degree of nonattachment and vulnerability with regard to one's identity and beliefs is essential to the survival of our planet and our species.

What follows is a series of essays organized chronologically, charting the development of a set of related ideas about communication, organization, and identity. Part I, "Embracing Ambiguity," includes four essays that seek to shift attention away from a focus on clarity and openness toward a very different definition of effective communication. Specifically, the notion of "strategic ambiguities" refers to the human capacity to use the resources of language to communicate in ways that are both inclusive and preserve important differences. Written in the 1980s, this work appeared at a time when interpretive research and qualitative methods were just gaining legitimacy in organizational studies. In this spirit, these essays attempt to shine a brighter light on questions and problems of meaning in organizations.

Part II, "Transcendence and Transformation," includes a broad range of work aimed at exploring the consequences of this expanded definition of communication. Many of the pieces are expressly counter-rational, celebrating miscommunication and interpretive diversity as sources of organizational and relational strength. Recalling Burke's quote from the beginning of this book, I seek to connect ambiguity with the potential for meaningful change while at the same time debunking attempts to "fix" meaning through communication.

The third part of the book, "A New Communication Aesthetic," takes this expanded definition of communication and develops it into an aesthetic for experiencing organization and identity. Bringing together work from numerous disciplines, I attempt to articulate an aesthetics of contingency that both edifies the value of nonattachment and has significant implications for individual identity and interpersonal relationships. To the extent that this aesthetic can be realized in communication, we stand a good chance of developing new models for human relationships that will sustain us in a complex, interdependent, and diverse world.

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