

Sensemaking, Organizing, and Surpassing: A Handoff [1,2]

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A commemoration is an invitation to go beyond the thing being commemorated. Such an invitation to surpass becomes more compelling when the thing commemorated is summarized and updated and the surpassing more vividly illustrated. This essay does the former by means of selective references to both editions of the “Social Psychology of Organizing” (1969, 1979). The essay describes an evolving vocabulary intended to focus on meaning and collective action. The three associated studies in this special section extend that vocabulary.

At the outset I want to be clear that my work is that of a generalist. This is apparent if you simply scan the bibliography in the 1969 book, where Allport (both Floyd and Gordon), Blau, Garfinkel, Mead (both George Herbert and Margaret), Perrow, Simmel, and Skinner join one another. There is the suggestion of an author building a collage in the hope that someday it will evolve into a mosaic where the parts form a more coherent image. That hope persists. But that is not to dismiss a collage. ‘Collage, the art of reassembling fragments of preexisting images in such a way as to form a new image, was the most important innovation in the twentieth century because it’s all been said before’ (Shields, 2011, item 44). A generalist works at the intersection of vocabularies, which means he or she is known as much by their inputs as by their outputs.

The evolving vocabulary of organized sensemaking is primed by a provocative moment captured in William Shakespeare’s “A midsummer Night’s Dream” (1922). In Act V, Scene I. Theseus says,

The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,

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Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;

And as imagination bodies forth

The forms of the things unknown, the poet's pen

Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing

A local habitation and a name."

The poet's eye reenacts sensemaking. Flux in the form of 'airy nothing' begins to materialize when it is imagined into hunches about forms and shapes which are then given a name and pinned down to a "local habitation" that can be shared.

Shakespeare's basics are also fleshed out in William James's description of a similar progression. The flux of pure experience "no sooner comes than it tends to fill itself with emphases, and these salient parts become identified and fixed and abstracted; so that experience now flows as if shot through with adjectives and nouns and prepositions and conjunctions. Its purity is only a relative term, meaning the proportional amount of un verbalized sensation which it still embodies." (James, 1987, p.783).

The vocabularies of sensemaking and organizing were pinned down in a more mundane manner by two early definitions. In 1969, organizing was defined as "the resolving of equivocality in an enacted environment by means of interlocked behaviors embedded in conditionally related processes" (1969, p. 91). Ten years later organizing was now defined as "a consensually validated grammar for reducing equivocality by means of sensible interlocked behaviors (1979, p. 3). These days sensemaking tends to be referred to as "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing." (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409).

Common across these various descriptions are references to retrospect, plausibility, images, reasons, intersubjective action, and constructing. The unifying mechanism is one in which micro level activities enact order which is then read off retrospectively as justification. "Past deeds are made to appear sensible to the actor himself and to those other persons to whom he feels accountable" (1969, p. 38). Organizing, thus becomes an interpersonal process that brackets and stabilizes some segment of ongoing flux. Taylor and Van Every (2000, p. 40)

suggest one such sequence when people turn “circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard for action.”

The preceding components can be converted into a workable sequence built around sensemaking if we focus on movement from flux-> hunches->words-> actions-> back to flux. In 1969, an equivalent progression was movement from enactment to selection to retention back to enactment and selection (p.87).

The movement from flux to hunches is a pragmatic simplification that creates a workable level of certainty (1979, p. 6). The movement from hunches into words is crucial since “there is no such thing as non-discursive access to truth” (Rorty, 2016, pp. 52-53).

The movement from words into actions produces meanings of varying depth. This variation is implicit in John Dewey’s categorical imperative: ‘So act as to increase the meaning of present experience.... (S)tudy the needs and alternative possibilities lying within a unique and localized situation’ (Dewey, 2002, p. 283). He urges that we do this repeatedly so that it becomes a habit and the way in which we approach every situation. Whether meanings are increased or not, the actions associated with them alter the flux and in doing so, reconstitute the enactor.

Having suggested a scaffolding for sensemaking and organizing built from the materials of 1969, I want to say more about what is behind and between those four connected elements of flux, hunches, words, and actions. After I sample four of those nuances, I comment on the three studies that make up this section. And finally, I conclude with a handoff composed of a dream about magic and a conceptual postcard.

Nuances that underlie sensemaking and organizing

To introduce additional nuance, I add Soren Kierkegaard to the duo of William Shakespeare and William James. All three of these thinkers make an effort to address the disjunction between experience and understanding. That disjunction is especially clear in Kierkegaard’s (1843, p. 306) discussion of his insight that life is lived forward but understood backward. "It is really true what philosophy tells us, that life must be understood backwards. But with this, one forgets the second proposition, that it must be lived forwards. A proposition which, the more it is subjected to careful thought, the more it ends up concluding precisely that

life at any given moment cannot really ever be fully understood; exactly because there is no single moment where time stops completely in order for me to take position [to go] backwards”.

Kierkegaard’s pattern is consistent with an existential treatment in which forward existence precedes backward essence -, we can know what we’ve done only after we do it (Weick, 1969, p.64). “Pragmatism is a philosophy of finitude. We can’t know if we’re headed in the right direction..... ‘The only sure test of utility is unfortunately retrospective” (Rorty, 2016, p. 56). ”

Organizational life lived forward and backward maps readily onto the distinction between an immanent practice lived forward and a deliberate practice lived backward (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020). Immanent sensemaking is characterized by the forward experience of absorbed coping. Deliberate sensemaking is more thematic and abstract and more suited to restoration or renewal. Sensemaking in a practice world is immanent, until there is an interruption in which case the sensemaking becomes involved-deliberate which might necessitate that it become detached-deliberate if resumption becomes problematic.

Since immanent forward experience is fleeting and less visible, it is tempting to emphasize activities of deliberate backward understanding as the primary site for sensemaking. To yield to such temptation is to neglect the interplay of experience and understanding. I want to illustrate that interplay by exploring four possible relationships between experience and understanding: self-validating prophecy, partiality toward similarity, ambivalence between belief and doubt, and understanding as ongoing accomplishment.

Self-validating prophecy. The prototype for a close relationship between experience and understanding is the self-fulfilling prophecy (SFP). It serves as a prototype because it is a mechanism of self-validation. Gregory Bateson describes the mechanism as the partial production of epistemological and ontological premises that are self-validating. “Beliefs about what sort of world it is, will determine how he sees it and acts within it, and his ways of perceiving and acting will determine his beliefs about its nature” (1972, p. 314). William James (1984), similarly, argues that “The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth on one side, whilst on the other he registers the truth which he helps to create. (p. 908).

To be a coefficient of what you confront is to bring agency into sensemaking. Prophecies give form to experience. The resulting forms produce an enacted environment of ecological changes that are more likely to fulfill than subvert the beliefs that gave form to the enactment.

A powerful example of the effect of an SFP is Wilkinson's (2009) discussion of sensemaking and decision making in an intensive care unit where patients are predicted to have bad outcomes. The possibility of an SFP becomes salient when there are decisions about the withdrawal of life support on the basis of predicted high mortality (e.g. the prediction of high mortality for extremely premature infants at 22 or 23 weeks gestation). Predictions can affect the outcome, and, in the case of uncertainty, "the SFP is a necessary consequence of decision-making" (p. 409). Wilkinson alters the phrase "self-fulfilling prophecy" and re-describes it as a "self-reinforcing prophecy." He does this to distinguish the medical case from Robert Merton's original example of a run on a bank triggered by a false initial rumor that the bank is failing. The ICU setting is one where a self-fulfilling prophecy is "a prediction (that a certain outcome is likely or inevitable) that independently increases the probability of the outcome actually occurring" (p. 403).

Wilkinson argues that it is imperative that doctors be honest with themselves, their patients, their families about uncertainty and the limits of knowledge. "In many cases it is simply not possible to know how likely it is that a patient would survive if all supportive treatments were provided. It might be difficult for families to accept, but it still might be the best course of action to withdraw treatment and allow that patient to die" (p. 409).

Partiality toward similarity A different relationship between understanding and experience is one where understanding is biased toward an emphasis on similarity. This bias was implied in 1969. "An organization attempts to transform equivocal information into a degree of unequivocality with which it can work and to which it is accustomed" (1969, p. 40). That word "accustomed" means that "People strive for a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity. We hold a theory true just in proportion to its success in solving this 'problem of maxima and minima.'" (James, 1987, p. 513).

Minimizing jolts is evident in the much discussed sensemaking practice of "normalization". Diane Vaughan (2005) described the practice in the context of the Challenger disaster. Anomalies "were not interpreted as warning signs but became acceptable, routine, and

taken-for-granted aspects of shuttle performance” (p. 34). This is why some organizations, such as High Reliability Organizations (e.g. Ramanujam & Roberts, 2018, Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015) are designed to help avoid traps such as this. Their attention is more focused on failure, unwarranted simplification, present operations, resilience, and distributed expertise. These tendencies are sensitive to the fact that same and different are mixed, they do not give off clear signals. This means that analysts have to construct these differences through a process of sensemaking that involves “interrelating current events, prior knowledge, and future expectations” (Macrae, 2014, p. 204).

A bias toward similarity creates two additional vulnerabilities. First, identification of similar origins is flawed because the observer keeps changing. “(E)very experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experience. For it is a somewhat different person who enters into them” (Dewey, 1997, p. 35). Second, origins themselves are elusive. “The activity of the individual is only in a certain sense caused by the stimulus of the situation because that activity is itself helping to produce the situation which causes the activity of the individual....We shall never catch the stimulus stimulating or the response responding” (Follett, 1924, p. 60).

Ambivalence between belief and doubt Efforts to treat experiences as similar often are accompanied by quiet doubts of whether those judgments overlook crucial differences.

The duality between belief and doubt has remained prominent since 1969 (pp. 88-89) when it was portrayed as a means to preserve adaptability. A decision to doubt and believe past experience simultaneously was accomplished by linking each with a different process. For example, past experience could be treated as a reliable guide in the process of enactment, but questioned in the selection process when the “familiar” enactment is interpreted. This duality of belief and doubt is preserved by Milosevic, Bass, and Combs (2018) in their study of a multisystem hydroelectric power producer. They discuss a recurring pattern where individuals face unexpected events that require timely action but where the wrong response may have grave consequences. “As such, individuals must simultaneously utilize and question their current knowledge to make appropriate distinctions and generate a preliminary understanding of the event” (p. 1188).

In previous discussions of sensemaking and organizing, the co-presence of dualities, especially that of belief and doubt, has been preserved in Donald Campbell's (1965) important insight that "in multiple-contingency environments, the joint presence of opposing tendencies has a functional survival value. Where each of two opposing tendencies has survival relevance, the biological solution seems to be an ambivalent alternation of expressions of each rather than the consistent expression of an intermediate motivational state. Ambivalence, rather than averaging, seems the optimal compromise" (p. 305).

This optimal compromise is apparent in wildland firefighting. When firefighters engage a fire burning in different kinds of foliage that could be fanned by shifting winds, they manage that knowledge with a protocol built around ambivalence. The protocol calls for them to deploy Lookouts, Communication, Escape routes (at least two), and Safety zones (**LCES**: Gleason, 1991). Belief in what they know is enacted in the form of Lookouts and Communication for a "known" fire. And doubt about what they know is enacted by Escape routes, and Safety zones if they need to retreat from a potentially "unknown" fire. All of this can be rendered pragmatically as "ambivalence creates resilience" (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, p. 167).

Belief and doubt have adaptive potential, but considerably more so when they are embedded in wisdom. Meacham's (1990, pp. 187, 210) detailed analysis of wisdom illustrates the parallels. "To be wise is ... to both accumulate knowledge while remaining suspicious of it, and recognizing that much remains unknown....The essence of wisdom is in knowing that one does not know, in the appreciation that knowledge is fallible, in the balance between knowing and doubting." Birren and Fisher (1990, p.326) make a similar connection.. "Wisdom is a balance between opposing valences of intense emotion and detachment, action and inaction, and knowledge and doubts".

Wise ambivalence may sound like an oxymoron, but in multiple-contingency environments where the contingencies are both novel and familiar, wisdom does not mean the inadequate balance of averaging but the enlarged balance of meaningful oppositions.

Understanding as ongoing accomplishment. The relationships between experience and understanding can be tightened and treated as an ongoing accomplishment. This changes the disjunction of a duality into the conjunction of a dualism (Farjoun, 2010). An exemplary description that accomplishes this was created several decades ago by Pondy, Frost, Morgan,

& Dandridge (1983, p. 24). “The concept of sensemaking focuses attention upon the idea that reality of everyday life must be seen as an ongoing ‘accomplishment’ which takes particular shape and form as individuals attempt to create order and make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves....The sensemaking metaphor encourages an analytical focus upon the processes through which individuals create and use symbols; it focuses attention upon the study of symbolic processes through which reality is created and sustained. Individuals are not seen as living in, and acting out their lives in relation to, a wider reality, so much as creating and sustaining images of a wider reality, in part to rationalize what they are doing. They realize their reality, by ‘reading into’ their situation patterns of significant meaning.”

These tightened interdependencies between experience and understanding, are vividly illustrated in Scott Snook’s (2001) marvelous analysis of a friendly fire incident over Iraq in April 1994. Two F-15 pilots shot down two friendly helicopters, killing 26 people. As Snook says, “this is not an incident where F-15 pilots ‘decided’ to pull the trigger....Framing the individual-level puzzle as a question of meaning rather than deciding shifts the emphasis away from individual decision makers toward a point somewhere ‘out there’ where context and individual action overlap. ...Such a reframing—from decision making to sensemaking—opened my eyes to the possibility that, given the circumstances, even I could have made the same ‘dumb mistake.’ This disturbing revelation, one that I was in no way looking for, underscores the importance of initially framing such senseless tragedies as ‘good people struggling to make sense,’ rather than as ‘bad ones making poor decisions.’” (pp. 206-207).

Shifting the locus for meaning and action from an individual head to “out there” suggests that human decisions are “not so much deliberate choices as they are arbitrary ontological ‘incisions’ made....into the flux of reality to temporarily stabilize an ever fluxing and changing world in order to render it more predictable and hence more liveable.” (Chia, 2014, p.20). The enactment is “ontological” because it reifies a subject-object split. And the enactment is an “incision” because it carves brackets around some portion of the flux.

Extensions: Organizing, defending, intuiting

Given the preceding ideas, I want to comment briefly on the three studies that accompany this essay. Their intent, form, and substance provide models for going beyond.

Glynn and Watkiss (2020)

Glynn and Watkiss (2020) have written a historical review of ideas that invites elaboration. The authors change the connection between sensemaking and organization from sensemaking IN organization to sensemaking AS organization. They underline this shift when they use the word “fuse” to describe sensemaking as the vehicle for how organizing is accomplished. This fusion makes organizing a stance rather than a place. The stance is one in which members move sequentially from shared cause maps to sensemaking to interpretation to coordinated action and then cycle back to reflect on the adequacy of the map and the presumed sharing.

Cause maps themselves are reinstated (Bougon, Weick, Binkhorst, 1977) as noticing repertoires that attach ‘labels to the discrete events parsed out during enactment and that were causally connected to one another.’ Those labels stand for shared equivalent experiences, which means they are connotations of overlap. The word “Equivalent” is noteworthy here because it means that the shared experience is “sufficient for coordinated action.” The word is also noteworthy because of a shared family resemblance to the word “equivocal.” Equivocal environments have multiple meanings and multiple overlapping equivalent interpretations of those multiples are sufficient to produce the stability of one among the many.

The importance of multiples is evident in the fact that when meaning is mentioned, those mentions are plural rather than singular. That was the original reason for using the awkward word, equivocality, when there were more familiar words such as ambiguity and uncertainty. To be equivocal is to be open to more than one meaning. That’s why sensemaking is about frames and not decisions. When I see what I say, it is seldom singular and the same holds true for the thoughts that derive from my interpretation.

Other details in this paper help connect its several themes. Ecological change is redescribed as changes involving experience rather than changes involving physical events. The purpose of organizing has been simplified to enabling ‘coordinated action in a world of multiple possibilities’ (Weick, 1995, p. 75). Some of the details in this paper are organized into a contingency model where the cycle varies in the tightness with which the elements are coupled. In a loosely coupled system, maps can be separated from coordinated action more readily. As a result, improvisation, work arounds, and experiments are more common. In tightly coupled systems, the map becomes the territory and its constraints reshape the territory. If relations

among labels on the maps are treated as expectations, then the tighter the coupling, the higher the probability of surprise.

Given the authors' attempt to cover at least 50 years devoted to updating a gerund (organizing), one can put a context around those years with the help of Will Schutz (1979). He argues that understanding moves from superficial simplicity, through confused complexity, and can result in profound simplicity. Glynn and Watkiss document movements from one confusion to another, but in doing so hint at a deeper simplicity. The experience of meaning "reconstitutes an evolving present." (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010, p. 13). Those four words connote reaccomplishment, change, a fleeting present, construction, interruption, a blend of past and future, continuity, and activity.

Mikkelsen, Gray, and Petersen (2020)

In this important paper, conscious, unconscious, cognitive, and emotional aspects of sensemaking are combined into a more holistic view. The paper is important because other investigators have "paid less attention to the contested nature of meaning." That is certainly true in my Mann Gulch discussion (Weick, 1993). For example, when foreman Wagner Dodge yells at second-in-command Bill Hellman to move into the safer area being cleared by Dodge's escape fire, Hellman yells back "to hell with that, I'm getting out of here," surely a very brief moment of contested meaning.

The larger sequence of defense is one in which threat leads to anxiety which leads to unconscious emotions and desires and to defenses against the threat and the emotions by means of rationalization, projective identification, and fantasy. This progression is profoundly emotional and largely unconscious. It affects both intergroup relationships and accomplishment of the primary task. The Mann Gulch firefighting crew splits up, runs past Dodge's escape fire, and 12 of the 15 firefighters die as the fire they were assigned to put, out sweeps over them,

The authors argue that "strange associations and contradictions are clues to unconscious work". Those clues can also foreshadow work that is more conscious such as the reduction of cognitive dissonance. Dissonance theory "is essentially a theory about sense making: how people try to make sense out of their environment and their behavior and, thus, to lead lives that are (at least in their own mind) sensible and meaningful" (Aronson (1999 p. 105).

Ongoing relationships between Hospital and Community, in the context of revolving door readmissions, increasingly contain stereotypes of incompetence on the part of the other party. The tensions associated with these threats can be represented less consciously by psychodynamics or more consciously by cognitive dissonance (Beauvois & Joule, 1996). Dissonance can be visualized as a ratio of relevant cognitive elements that are consonant or dissonant with a generative cognition, such as “I am professionally competent” As the ratio of elements that are dissonant with the generative cognition increases relative to the total number of dissonant and consonant cognitions, sensemaking becomes dominated by thoughts, feelings and actions that operate in the service of dissonance reduction. Thus, we see conscious substitutes for rationalization, projections, and fantasies in the form of consonant interpretations, such as the relationship is required by the government rather than chosen, unimportant, proof of one’s own competence to manage their mistakes, temporarily unsettled, etc. Whether accomplished more or less consciously, social defense and dissonance reduction produce the appearance of calm and what looks like logical coordination. But the assumptions that make this façade possible are misleading, detrimental to task performance, and unfavorable to relationships.

The work of these authors is a clear example of the complexity of going beyond. Using enactment, selection, and retention as a platform, they show how the products of these three generic processes are significantly influenced by the unconscious social defenses of rationalization (enactment), projective identification (selection), and fantasy (retention). However, each defense seemingly could be associated with any one of the three evolutionary processes. Fantasy limits the intensity of emotion and is primed by retained experiences, but the fantasy that Hospital could be in charge not only incorporates retained themes, it also selects consonant interpretations that explain enacted deference. The authors neatly handle these complexities when they introduce the contingency of the magnitude of anxiety. When anxiety is low, the defenses flow “alongside” the unfolding evolutionary process. When anxiety is high (“inordinate anxiety”), it’s as if the evolutionary processes now flow alongside and subordinate to the defenses.

Meziani and Cabantous (2020)

The title for this article is perfect. The authors add specificity to the phrase “people act their way into sense” by focusing on the act of intuition. And they generalize that specificity by incorporating the typically missing role of the body and affect in those actions. Recall that sensemaking is often portrayed as an episodic deliberate activity that invokes a mind separated from a body. If one replaces the separations with relationships, then the treatment becomes more holistic and more aligned with experience.

This study describes a nexus rather than a disjunction. The disjunction between experience and understanding shrinks when the incipient understanding in an intuition provides a vague outline for an evolving experience. When intuition is described as a “non-sequential, and non-conscious information processing mode that comprises both cognitive and emotional elements”, this description suggests a parallel between intuition and the activity of improvisation. Improvisation also tends to be rapid, non-conscious, non-sequential (Miner, Bassof, & Moorman, 2001; Kamoche, Cunha, & Cunha, 2003).

When the authors mention bodily reactions (e.g. we examined “how they made their intuitions happen”), they refer to a “rich repertoire of bodily actions.” This adds intriguing complexity since response repertoires can control noticing (Weick, 1969, p. 26), As Ron Westrum puts it, “A system’s willingness to become aware of problems is associated with its ability to act on them” (1993, p. 340). What’s intriguing here is that abilities in the form of “hands-on” capability could, if present, affect the content of intuitions, feelings and assertive speech or could if absent reduce all three. The authors do mention that expertise strengthens intuition.

The word “intuition”, like the word “organization”, lends itself to the image of a thing rather than a process. For example, the movie script is an object that is intuitable. That being the case, an actor may or may not have the abilities to convert the intuitable into sense by means of displaying, working, and expressing. Gerunds keep sensemaking moving. Intuiting, rather than intuitions, is what moves an initial tacit, intimate, and complex sense into a public, simpler, ordered sense.

The fact that filming involves a temporary organization, multiplies the contingencies that trigger intuition (e.g. the hairstyle of an anonymous extra). What is less clear is the effect of these contingencies on the generation of intuitions. Consider Tsoukas’s characterization of

organizing: “Organizing implies generalizing; the subsumption of heterogeneous particulars under generic categories. In that sense, formal organization necessarily involves abstraction.” (Tsoukas 2005: 124). In settings that are less temporary, there may be fewer triggers, more reliance on generic categories, fewer expressed intuitions and less adaptation and adaptability.

This article made me even more conscious of the missing body in sensemaking. As I searched for explanations of why I missed that aspect, I remembered a remark made by the archivist at the University of Michigan who is working with my collected papers. She said “theorists tend to work in their own heads.” That remark hits home. It’s hard for me to get excited about the body’s role in sensemaking when I spend all day becoming enchanted while immobilized at a desk, vigorously raising and lowering my desk chair, leaning forward and backward, staring out the window at a real world, gripping and releasing a pen, and power-lifting 3 x 5 cards. That’s not to disparage the desk work or the body, but only to contextualize them. There are other contexts in which to go beyond, like making a film.

Conclusion

To help put a frame around this essay, I want to recount a nighttime dream I had shortly after the Call for Papers for this section was announced. In the dream I’m on a stage in a large auditorium that is filled with people celebrating a birthday. I am standing behind a table that is full of magic tricks, some piled on top of others, most of them still in their cellophane wrappers and sealed boxes. I have no idea what the tricks are or how they work. I begin my performance with the two magic tricks that I do know how to perform. They are small sized “linking” rings, and the disappearing ball-in-a-cup, the kind of beginner magic tricks you’d find in a cheap magic set. Once I’ve performed those two, I look down, see the mass of remaining tricks, pick up the whole table and dump all of the tricks into the audience. I do so not in anger but in the spirit of, you figure them out. I briskly walk offstage and out the door hoping to get away before the crowd catches up to me and asks, ‘what was that all about?’

That five-word question, “what was that all about,” is a perfect example of sensemaking. Two of those 5 words, “that” and “what”, point respectively to flux and sense (James, 1987, p. 782). The “that” of a dumped table of supposed magic tricks could become any one of a number of “whats” including a publicity stunt, an accident, an allegory, misguided sharing, a confession, or another magic trick.

The present essay fits the same pattern. It now becomes a “that,” subject to interpretation into any one of a number of “whats.” To assist that interpreting, think of this essay as a conceptual postcard. That image derives from a tactic found in Ross Parmenter’s book, ‘The awakened eye’ (1968). He suggests that when you visit an art museum to view a painting, you first stop at the gift shop and buy a postcard reproduction of that painting. When you then view the original painting, hold your postcard reproduction up next to it. What you will discover is that the postcard reproduction is imperfect. You may see that the original has highlights that are more vivid, textures that are more visible, there are more gradations of color, the shadows actually contain figures, etc. A similar act of comparison occurs when you hold up concepts next to everyday life and see what the concept fails to register. My job has been to hand you a postcard that is imperfect in ways you can now see more clearly.

Footnotes

1. Acknowledgement: I am deeply grateful for the help of Kathleen Sutcliffe, Hari Tsoukas, and Kyle Weick in the construction of this essay.
2. The following discussion includes several quotations. The intentions are to preserve the original context of the idea; to make it easier for readers to develop their own interpretations of the point being made; to document that my “evidence” lies in a lineage of ideas; to preserve abstractions that facilitate generalization; and to avoid the removal of subtleties by rough paraphrase. Walter Benjamin, an avid collector of quotations, put a more spirited spin on the practice when he said that the role of a quotation is not to illustrate but to arrest and disrupt complacent understanding. Quotations “are like wayside robbers who leap out and rob you of your convictions.” (Sniedzewski, 2017, p.138).

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