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know fear, know courage™

Essays

LinkedIn

Would what you do every day make sense if your child drowned in front of your eyes?

Yes? You have a reason to get up in the morning.

At work, your communications communicate and your organisation runs the way it should. So does your life. Your love. Your passion.

I work with individuals and organisations on answering that question. It changes things.

To communicate,
or not to communicate?

There is no word for ‘paradox’ in Chinese. This is because there is no concept of paradox in Eastern thought.

Eastern thought is rooted in the interconnectedness of seeming opposites. This puts it a few thousand years behind Western thinking, and a few thousand ahead.

Its symbol is the curl of black entwined with the curl of white. The dot of black in the white, the dot of white in the black.

The truth of hot cannot exist without the truth of cold. The truth of love without the truth of hate. Remove either and you are left with neither.

To the Western mind, the coincidence of opposites that forms the basis of Eastern thought is called a paradox. You can trace the term back to the early days of The Enlightenment.

If you want to speak to the whole of humanity, speak to one person. If you want to speak to one person, speak to the whole of humanity.

Speaking to the whole of humanity means to speak to what will resonate with every individual on earth, at the deepest level:

Love, fear, hunger, home, yearning, regret, joy, grief.

To speak to the whole of humanity, speak to one person.

Your audience is not a market segment or a target group. It is Ellie Taylor, heading to a mega-gig that cost more than her winter coat. Speak to Ellie, and you speak to your entire audience.

Another seeming paradox: you cannot start work on a campaign until you have found the soul of the client. Until you have that, it's just noise.

Unless your creative work speaks to as close as you can get to 100% of the client's people, it will never speak for them.

If you want her to hear you, do her the courtesy of finding out what moves her. Clue: it's not a commitment to excellence.

What is progress?

Apart from that thing sold to us as the one pursuit meaningful; the guiding star of our existence. Progress towards what, and in which terms?

We in what is called The West and includes former and current colonies of Western imperialism, live in the most technologically advanced era in history. Armed with that advancement, we set off to conquer the world; force-feeding that technology to the whole of humanity, whether the whole of humanity wants it or not.

It is the same logic applied by the Christian and Trade missionaries of the 16th-19th centuries. “We know better and you need to know better too, or we will destroy you. Come to think of it, we will take from you what we want and destroy you anyway.”

The thing called AI – the apotheosis of number crunching – is the lovechild of a process of hubris that began with The Enlightenment. That movement killed the thing called God and inseminated the God called Reason. If nothing else, hubris can be said to have progressed; progressing from the theme of all Greek tragedy to the earthy-neutral wallpaper of modern life.

Over the past 300 years, we in The West have reasoned our way to the thing called AI. Artificial, yes. Intelligent, no (inter legere: to read among or between). Artificial intelligence? Genuine stupidity. Stupidity of a weight the word is not strong enough to support. At its heart, lies the Enlightenment fantasy that we are capable of becoming God. Asked in interview if God existed, the head of Google’s version of the thing called AI replied, “Not yet”.

Isaac Newton (1642-1727) was a big name of The Enlightenment. His laws of motion and universal gravitation dominated scientific thinking until Einstein turned up with his theory of relativity. Being the polymath he was, Einstein knew he was late to the party. Heraclitus (ca. 540-480 BC) had got there 2,500 years earlier.

Where Newton claimed that the universe began from nothing – from a condition of stasis, or no movement – Heraclitus worked out that stasis is one thing you would never find in the universe. If you wanted it, you needed to invent it. He came to this conclusion by watching his local river and staring into his fire. Quantum physics proves him right. Niels Bohr's observation that the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth was Heraclitus too. Philosophy (love of wisdom) calls that 'the coincidence of opposites'.

You can read all of what remains of Heraclitus' writing (The Fragments) in an hour or so, and spend the rest of your life thinking it over. Apart from stasis, there are two other things you will find nowhere in the universe: a straight line and a machine, in any form whatsoever. Both are human inventions, invented to facilitate human ends.

The point of the machine is to make life easier; that cunning seducer, Ease. Easier to do what? Life is meant to be difficult. Nothing worth doing is easy, and without difficulty there can be no ease. The thing called AI makes it easier to do the worthless tasks with which we have filled our lives. Easier to crunch data. Easier to run systems that run systems that run systems. Easier to generate floods of words no one reads; oceans of images no one looks at. Easier to create deepfake porn videos.

A 2025 EU report into cyber-bullying among schoolchildren (not students or young adults; children, which is what they are) estimated that 90% of AI's global capacity is absorbed by the generation of deepfake porn, an unknown volume of it paedophilic. That tallies with the trade of 90% of global internet traffic. According to the report, decent deepfakes

“Give me your watch and I’ll tell you what time it is.”

A senior manager in a global mega-corp I once knew used those words to satirise consultants. He was right. At their best, consultants will show you what is staring you in the face. The question is; do you have the courage to act on what you see?

When Japan Airlines was on the brink of bankruptcy, some years back, they hired a Daoist monk as a consultant to identify what they were doing wrong. He spent some time going through the organisation, talking to people.

When he was ready, he offered his recommendation: “Respect your people.” Japan Airlines acted on his recommendation. The company is now where it is now.

A history of philosophy in 271 words (including headline)

Philosophy comes from the Greek 'philo' (love of something) and 'sophia' (wisdom). To love, according to Simone Weil, is to give pure attention. Wisdom, according to Heraclitus, consists in speaking and acting the truth. To do that, find the truth.

The practice of philosophy dates back to the birth of human consciousness. It began with the original question: Why? (the question infants utter without being taught). To that was added two further questions: What? and How?

1. What is the universe?
2. How did we get here?
3. Why are we here?

The answers are:

1. We don't know.
2. We know.
3. To serve beauty, goodness and truth.

2,500 years ago, four people caused the source of these answers to be written down: Confucius, Lao Tse, Siddartha Gautama (The Buddha) and Heraclitus. Some believe Lao Tse and The Buddha were the same person, so it may have been three.

Four or three, they were alive at the same time. The optimistically named homo sapiens (wise man) has been around for 300,000 years, give or take. This means that the best thinking of which we have a record, absorbed ca. 0.023% of human existence.

Philosopher A. N. Whitehead observed: "The European philosophical tradition consists in a series of footnotes to Plato." He meant the European academic philosophical tradition. That is, the business end of the subject.

The human philosophical tradition of the last 2.5 millennia consists in a series of footnotes to Confucius, Lao Tse, Siddartha Gautama and Heraclitus. There has been no meaningful advance on the thinking they left us.

How can you transform your organisation?

It depends how you understand your organisation. Do you see it as a machine, whose parts need optimising; or an organism, whose sum is more than its parts?

Go into any company today, and you will find some version of ‘we are one big family’ or ‘we have flat hierarchies’, or ‘we live a spirit of open and respectful collaboration’.

All of that should be true and, in the best-run organisations, is. Healthy families are one, have flat hierarchies, and live a spirit of open and respectful collaboration.

Like the rest of the universe, healthy families are defined by flow; constantly creating and recreating themselves, according to common values. Values on a higher plane than a commitment to excellence or diversity, or exceeding customer expectations.

Healthy organisations, like healthy families, are constantly coming into being. They do not stay the same from one day to the next. Relationships evolve; dynamics evolve. The only constant is change. Managing this process needs courage.

No family is not faced by crises. Its success in overcoming them rests on the clarity and strength of its values. What are we for? What sort of family do we aim to be, and why? What would the world be missing if we were not in it?

A founding principle of Lean is that anyone in the organisation has the power to stop the production line if she or he spots a fault: something that is blocking flow. Stopping the line means taking a short-term hit on cash in the interests of avoiding a long-term hit on value.

In the case of Toyota, who gave the world Lean, that value would be integrity: the integrity of its processes, its quality, its responsibility to its customers, its responsibility to itself.

Good people can work with clunky systems. No system can work with clunky people. A good sales director can justify a year's salary with a one-minute phone call. A bad sales director cannot justify one minute's salary.

Do you fix the system, or the people? Systems are systems. People are your organisation.

How can you sell a boring B2B product or service?

There are no boring B2B products or services; just boring ways of selling them.

Roughly, B2C is selling people things they want but don't need. B2B is selling people things they need but don't want.

Many people want the latest BMW. Few people want an industrial fastener. Until that fastener fails and the wing comes off the plane you are flying in.

An industrial fastener is not world-class technology delivering innovative solutions. It stops the wings falling off planes.

Find that place for your B2B product or service that nobody wants, and people will want it.

What price can you charge for an industrial fastener that holds the wings on planes? A higher one.

How can you boost the effectiveness of your marketing?

Start by showing your marketing materials to your office cleaner. If they say nothing to that person, they are saying nothing to anyone else.

There was a time when advertising understood itself as the left hand to sales' right hand. Then it became a thing in itself.

There was a time when marketing understood itself as the left hand to advertising's right hand. Then it became a thing in itself.

Over the 25 years I spent working with advertising and marketing departments, I rarely came across a marketing team that felt its job was to sell. Some advertising teams did.

The corporate marketing function is mostly that. A function. No one is too sure what it does apart from spend its budget. Ask it to show some cash return on your investment and it will explain that it's hard to prove such things.

That may be true, but it is not hard to prove what is not working. Back to our office cleaner. If your marketing department's work does not speak to that person, it is speaking to no one.

The surest way to generate a return on marketing is to close your marketing department. If your EBIT is 10%, you have just made 10x its budget. That is money your sales team no longer needs to earn you.

Alternatively, consider changing the name from 'Marketing' to 'Communication', which is the least it should be doing. You will have evidence fast enough if there is any communication happening.

Find a way to measure the effectiveness of your marketing or stop doing it. Until then, it will remain a fixed cost, like electricity, minus the juice to run your business.

What is truth?

Not the same thing as something that is true. It is true that I eat too many cakes right now. It would be untrue to say that I didn't

Truth is something you can't argue with. Well you can, but it won't get you far. It is a truth that boiling water scalds human skin.

Truth is found in questions like: "Would you do what you are paid to do if you weren't being paid?" Or, "If not, why are you doing it?"

Or, "Are you doing something you would do if you weren't being paid, but in the wrong context?"

Truth is love, friendship, courage, honour, integrity, humility, compassion, dignity, grace, humour, gratitude. Falsehood is their opposites.

All of us have all of those things. All of us have the choice. Truth is what stares back at you from the mirror, if you recognise it.

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