

Riddling the Business Narrative

Clare Morgan proposes to show the benefits from exposure to written poetry, as directed toward the discipline of business. She is a writer, DPhil scholar and instructor of literature at Oxford University. The program of her new book unfolds as an individual discovery over a period of time roughly covering five years, between 2001 and 2006. A series of seminars and workshops were structured to include a focus on the purposeful utility of poetry, mostly in cooperation with a respected international business consulting firm, The Boston Consulting Group (BCG). The book traces different observations and encounters along the way. *What Poetry Brings to Business* was published in the Spring of 2010.

The discussion is very perceptive and measured, as could be expected with this level of involvement and authority. Specifically, the approach addresses how a dedicated exposure to reading poetry can contribute toward an enhanced understanding, by the corporate executive concerned with business strategy. Some precise and well stated observations come forward. One extremely beneficial aspect is the inclusion of over fifty separate short poems, arranged to be especially suitable within the logical context. Some poems are familiar and obvious: *The Road not Taken*, *Mending Wall*, and *Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening* by Robert Frost. Others are surprisingly evocative and challenging.

What Poetry Brings to Business is separated into three sections. Each section chiefly seems to collect reflections around some particular business presentation: at Downing College, at The Boston Consulting Group/ARM Thinking Strategies forum, and at BCG Tokyo. A few other working sessions occur along the way as well, at additional locations across Europe and America. The topic is cajoled and prodded mainly through the first person experience of the author.

ONE: Clare Morgan arrives at Downing College, in Cambridge not far from London, to participate in a two day strategy session with fourteen business managers and executives.

Poets don't focus on facts. Poetry readers have to deal in something other than logic. The poem is made up of words, but it is also made up of other elements. Grappling with the relationship between these elements, immersing oneself in the mode of expression, can be of significant benefit to leaders and strategists, to executives facing infinite complexity and armed with finite resources in a changing world. (WPBTB P. 17)

Instead of confronting the anticipated strategy session immediately, the time frame jumps backward three years to initial involvement with The Boston Consulting Group. A few preliminary points of reference are quickly established.

Advertising slogans may have strong poetic connotations. That can be good. "Wonderbra for the Way You Are" and "Have a Break: Have a Kit Kat." However, the choice of these two particular examples taken together may happen to raise more side associations, which Clare Morgan does not mention and probably does not intend. "Wonderbra" is close to the German word "wunderbar." Es ist wunderbar.

And, the Kit Kat Club was the bawdy German nightclub in the stage show and film *Cabaret*. Liza Minnelli is singing: "What good is sitting alone in your room, come to the Cabaret." This may be a pertinent caution, since words, expressions, and images can take on characteristics not originally envisioned in many circumstances, without special attentiveness.

If you can tolerate ambiguity, you will tend to have in your armory of thinking strategies the ability to recognize, and the willingness to take up and sharpen, nuance and difference. If you are not trained to handle ambiguity, you will tend to adopt a strategy whereby you minimize differences and level out shades of nuance. These are known in psychology as the cognitive strategies of sharpener versus leveler. (WPBTB P. 36)

Certain statements about psychology may be meaningful, but here these are not qualified as being specific Gestalt theories, and these are not necessarily commonly known and accepted truths. Any absolute need for training to appreciate ambiguity would seem somewhat questionable.

Dana Gioia, who is a published poet, was once a marketing director of General Foods. He managed to revision the Jello-O brand, as the product grew from a loss of seven million to a profit twenty million dollars. The no-nonsense CEO at General Foods at the time was absolutely astounded to realize a possible connection of poetry with business.

The discoveries of the author now become augmented with the opinions of various imaginary second person observers. Occasionally, fanciful business readers appear, struggling to understand and accept the line of discussion. With considerable effort, a tentative hypothesis is derived early in the game.

1. Thinking is more complex process than we give it credit for.
 2. Thinking contains rational and non-rational elements, making effective decisions depends on accessing both.
 3. Poetry brings together these rational and non-rational elements more clearly and intensely than other modes of expression.
 4. Reading poetry can encourage the play between the rational and non-rational processes.
 5. This improved confluence enhances your decision-making abilities and therefore enables you to operate more fully and effectively in a complex, decision-led world.
- (WPBTB P. 55)

We are reminded that decision-making has to interface with emotion and feeling. Now, the scene can flash forward again to the anticipated strategy session at Downing College. *Traveling through the Dark* by William Stafford is brilliantly offered and considered.

TWO: Next, it is time to delve directly into the complexities of the act of creativity. Strategic thinking is, or should be, a deeply creative process. Mental preparation is underway for The Boston Consulting Group/ ARM Thinking Strategies forum on March 24, 2004. About fifty business people will attend.

Again, time is sliding back and forth as Clare Morgan adjusts her scope. *The Thought Fox* by Ted Hughes captures the intricacies of the creative instant quite well.

The poem suggests there's a strategy involved. The strategy involves a predisposition of attitude: (1) boldness, keeping on even though you're "wary"; (2) tolerance of delay, keeping going through the lean patches when nothing is coming, maintaining that intensity while knowing what approaches may come to nothing; (3) opportunism, not only *seeing* the fox but *tuning in to perceiving* its relevance, *recognizing* its significance, *opening up* for its entry, *translating/utilizing/capitalizing on* what it offers, *cherishing* its otherness; and (4) holding perception in an acute state of readiness; having your antennae on the alert to pick up signals. (WPBTB P. 100)

If a creative instinct is a positive and beneficial thing, however complex, there is also a negative aspect in resisting or avoiding creativity. Here the coverage unfortunately resorts somewhat to cliché: George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, the Thought Police; *The Emperor's New Clothes*, which are not really there.

We tend to structure the world we inhabit through the models of the dominant system. This isn't just a matter of individual perception. Groups tend to transform their own models in terms of the received (dominant) ones. The ability of individuals and groups to "see," in other words, is heavily influenced by the dominant knowledge systems within which they operate. (WPBTB P. 116)

It seems the going has gotten a bit heavy. A mature business person may or may not be ready to agree; yes, of course, under all circumstances. One would think that the colleagues at The Boston Consulting Group might have contributed relevant business case studies. There has to be material in the general business literature, and there has to be suitably dated information going back over past history that would not compromise any confidentiality or professionalism.

Here a few observations may be offered, beyond what Clare Morgan has to say. Poetic resonances can spill into the brand marketing message at any time, so a company is better advised facing this directly and guarding goodwill capital, rather than proceeding with ignorance or letting accidents happen. It doesn't necessarily help the image of the Goldman Sachs investment bank when the CEO talks about doing God's work in front of a Congressional inquiry, during the onset of a huge financial crisis. In a way, creative anticipation is a necessary part of risk management. Creative awareness helps to envision potential problems. Poetic resonances can inadvertently emerge through personal pressure or personal internal self-discovery, by responsible business executives, in ways which may or may not be most appropriate. Imagine an office building with long, long deep corridors in relation to the expression, "tunnel vision." Or, imagine a bank building with delicate, slender, almost invisible columns of support carrying a huge, heavy roof. This happens, and this cannot be the right appearance to give to the public. Imagine how the three top executives of Detroit auto companies can arrive in Washington, D.C., traveling on expensive corporate jets, in order to plead for a government bailout to avoid bankruptcy.

Poetic resonances affect interpersonal communications, including bureaucratic organizational structures and behavioral expectations. Corporate blindness or deafness can inadvertently build up metaphorical internal towers of babbling or internal towers of jabbering. Bureaucratic constructions of incredible, unnecessary complexity can practically beg to fail. Poetic resonances can also relate to alignment with outside perceptions and realities in the open marketplace, seeing necessities before issues become emergencies or commonplace contingencies. Hard facts and figures could be available to address the dollars and sense of using creative awareness to best advantage.

“A whole world of pathways and signposts and dwelling places and intersections is set up out of our sight, outside our (rational) ability to know.” (WPBTB P. 125)

A reference comes from *Business Week*, July 25, 2005. “Meeting what is fast becoming the Holy Grail of innovation – the ‘unmet, unarticulated’ needs of consumers – is paramount. It underlies the successful shifts in perception that have changed corner coffee shops into Starbucks; old radio into new satellite radio, old crowded electronics into new Apple computer stores.” (WPBTB P. 134) Or, imagine the beneficial public relations impact of changing the night lighting of the Empire State Building, in coordination with colors suggested by seasonal traditions or specific current events.

A few impressive, practical, conceptual tools are offered. A clear distinction is indicated between “P-creative” as new to you and “H-Creative” as new to everyone. Permission can be granted to follow hunches and intuitions. The actual lineup of words in a sentence may be delineated as “syntagmatic,” as opposed to the many possible alternative choices as “paradigmatic.” What the listener hears can wander far afield from whatever the speaker may have wanted to convey in many instances. This is useful to keep in mind with regard to any business process planning. Customers or consumers can be very creative in inventing any number of ways to go around tightly contrived business means and methods. Again, there would be a lot of business examples of this idea which could easily be brought into play. Someone who writes computer code for an Internet web system can spend a lot of time trying to de-bug the problems implied by overly adventurous user experimentation, well beyond what time would be spent just setting up the immediate planned functionality.

THREE: Some more expansive characteristics of poetic nature deserve exploration. Let us get serious.

The military mindset may take poetry seriously. Lieutenant General James Lennox at West Point, with responsibility for the training of cadets, includes extensive exposure to poetry as part of the curriculum. Patriotic dogmas or belief structures about duty, glory or honor can be severely challenged in the theatre of reality. It is proper to be equipped with an awareness of oppositions that poetry can engender.

The scientific mindset may take poetry seriously. Professor Vilayanur S. Ramachandran, Director of the Center for Brain Cognition at the University of California in San Diego, understands how sound patterns are registered deeply in the mind. Properties of poetry convey elements of comprehension that cross language barriers and cultural barriers. Modalities of abstract thought can come into consideration.

The design mindset may take poetry not so seriously. The Coudal Partners in Chicago had a project called *Verse by Voice* (2005-6) encouraging people to read favorite short poems into an answering machine, after the beep. These are registered for listening through a web link.

Inside of graduate business schools, certain professors endorse literature as an avenue for a larger appreciation of business issues. Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr., is John Shad Professor of Business Ethics at the Harvard Business School. Contemporary circumstances require a fresh look at the balance between pragmatic and moral elements of decision. Jim March is Emeritus Professor of Business Strategy at Stanford University. Poetry assists in rescuing necessary meaning from the simplification of direction often needed for action. Roger Martin is Dean of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. The capacity to develop imaginative engagement is a fundamental skill, in addition to efficient routine administration.

Bolko von Oetinger and Martin Reeves, of the BCG Strategy Institute, may have an especially extended agenda, directed toward business and society.

The serious preoccupation with climate damage due to industrialization is also triggering a reappraisal of what economists term externalities. . . . The more we realize how sick the planet is, the greater will be the pressure to interact with it. . . . Insurance companies like Münchener Rück, Allianz and Swiss Re have for a long time been passing on to their customers the additional costs caused by climate changes. (WPBTB P. 164)

Corporate social responsibility is an accelerating, impending imperative. Business trust, increased regulation, price controls, consumer pressure, contentious litigation are matters arising on the horizon. Poetry can challenge values and emotions in a way that may help predict essential social and cultural change.

1. Empathy and imaginative engagement are necessary for the development of an ethical sensibility.
2. Ethical sensibility is an important component in the development of business leaders who can address the burgeoning complexities of contemporary commercial and economic activity. (WPBTB P. 194)

Additional encapsulations might be offered. March, 2006, Clare Morgan is departing from Tokyo with the final observation that poetry can also speak capably on behalf of itself.

A new joke is going around among friends. Most people know about the new film "The King's Speech," concerning how the British monarch, George VI, overcomes a stammering problem. So the joke goes; there is a new sequel already being planned, and it will be called "The King's PowerPoint Presentation."

Poetic associations can touch upon genuinely mysterious and frightening realms. Historically, there is poetic irony in imagining the arrogant goose-stepping of Nazi troops or the electrifying rhetoric of a Nuremberg rally, along with the depiction of a crippled American president, Franklin Roosevelt, in a wheelchair or Britain's King George VI talking with a stutter. A number of years ago the media philosopher, Marshall McLuhan, pointed out the poetic irony embodied by the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., as a military headquarters, since the shape stands out as such a distinctly identifiable target for threats. On November 11, 2001, successful terrorist suicide attacks were directed at the Pentagon building in Washington and also at the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. A moment of reflection would quickly suggest that a lot more damage could have been done if a nuclear power plant, a large dam, or an important seaport had been destroyed. The motivation of the perpetrators was clearly to attack highly visible poetic-like symbols of power, instead of maximizing actual damages. Poetic images and symbols can convey cultural potencies in a highly concentrated form. This would apply to visual as well as written poetic depictions. It may be worthwhile to remember the sweeping scope of the power of poetry, aside from the private pleasure of reading a book in an easy chair beside the fireplace. There is a poetic irony in how another blazingly popular film appeared in 2002, part of the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, where "The Two Towers" represents the physical depiction of evil, necessitating destruction by a noble band of heroes. There is also poetic irony in the fact that by November 11, 2011, several of the most significant business institutions on Wall Street, near the site of the World Trade Center, will have imploded due to internal financial causes rather than outside force.

It has been mostly acceptable to constrain the role of the creative poet or artist or writer as a gentle eccentric, providing useful amusement and entertainment within suitable boundaries. Creative products can be admired in protected settings, like museums or concert halls. The odd vision of an artist as harbinger is occasionally whispered but not much believed.

It is about time for the compelling necessity of a truly better understanding of creative expressions like poetry, here and now. Larger understanding and greater acceptance must happen, in order to reactivate potentialities that may have become suppressed or stifled. Depth Psychology is another field, where quiet work has been advancing for many years toward clarification of significant common formulations. The poetic imagination ultimately may be most closely related to the psychological function of intuition, as taken in an inwardly, introverted manner. Business entrepreneurship also may be most closely related to the psychological function of intuition, but taken in an outwardly, extraverted manner. Curiously, practitioners of Depth Psychology can point out that comprehension of extraverted and introverted utilizations of the same psychological function will usually raise difficult and distorted challenges for individual realization, taking much discipline to overcome. Pure, good intentions may not go far enough. There are miles to go before we might sleep.

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