5-4-2015

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.wpi.edu/oa/vol4/iss1/4

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Well Versed in the Art of Work: How Poetry Can Help Us Make Sense of Nonsense

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A poem records emotions and moods that lie beyond normal language that can only be patched together and hinted at metaphorically.

W. H. Auden

The forces driving human behaviour in the workplace often remain below the surface, not explored or discussed. Day to day activity comprises people seeking (or seeking to be seen) to conform to espoused rules, values and performance requirements, while at the same time exhibiting resistance, anger, disruptive and damaging behaviours. How easy is it for us to articulate our feelings of resentment, disempowerment, vulnerability, boredom, disinterest etc. in a situation where we need to “be good”? Is there existing poetry shining a light on the darker side of working life? If so is it being used as data? Could poetry be self-help for workers and for organisations?

This paper explores, in poetry form, the role of poetry in making sense of the “darker” side of organisational life. Given the smorgasbord of existing perspectives on what makes organisations “tick” the poem presents one experience of organisational life while drawing on academic literature spanning some 30+ years.

The poem then provides an argument, supported by reference to literature, for the use of poetry to make sense of organisational complexity, to give people a voice and to develop a deeper understanding of what really drives organisational behaviours and subsequently affects organisational outcomes.

Please note that it has not been possible to follow protocol with regard to referencing, for the sake of the poem. A complete list of references is provided at the end.
Making Sense of Nonsense

This workplace confuses us, day after day
The people here do and say things in a way
That has nothing to do with the strategic goals
Or the statement of values or even their roles.
We all do the same, it’s the rule here, I guess
But we don’t know who wrote it or who to address
To find out what the game is – the real one, we mean
Not the ones in the boxes we’ve already seen
With the company name on them, board games with rules
Snakes and Ladders, Monopoly, Risk (for the fools)
Not the games we’re not playing here – the other game
Where the rules are not written and don’t stay the same
Where the dice have no numbers, there’s no way to score
And the people who win seem to start with much more
In the first place. Where “cheating” cannot be defined
And where every move made here can be undermined
By a counter-move, chess-like, to take out the Knight
What’s the name of the game please? If we knew it we might
Feel less vulnerable, anxious, resentful and scared
If we all had the rule book we’d be more prepared.

On exploring the “toxic” stuff in all the books,
Likened by Frost to cancer, and how climate looks
To writers like Furnham, “the weather” he says
(It is raining on this floor, but sunshine upstairs)
In defence of our reasoning, we’re making sense
Of a meaningless workplace – Argyris and Rench
And Karl Albrecht all get it, don’t know what to do
We’re avoiding all action – Block said we would, too
We’ve learned that we’re helpless, nothing we can do
To avoid the next shocks, some more pain, we are strapped
Down like dogs in our cages, we’re all of us trapped
Just as Seligman told us, we all are agreed
That to fight it is pointless, but somehow we need
To make sense of this nonsense, to find a way through
Truth to power’s not an option (it’s dangerous too)
Vital lies are the spoken words, Goleman asserts
Simple truths are too dangerous, someone gets hurt.

And which words should we use to sound rational when
All around us is nonsense, confusion, again.
Is there any way we can articulate stuff
That we don’t understand – are our feelings enough
To provide us with data, EQ and SQ?
To help us to navigate, find a way through
Zohar, Goleman and Armstrong see meaning as key
And no strategy documents do it for me.
I know about change curves from Bridges et al
I’ve studied addiction, from Schaef and Fassel
There’s mileage in group think – Janis, we agree
That it’s hopeless, we’re helpless, and that we can’t see
In the dark of the dark side, can’t find our way through
The locked doors in the corridors, words so untrue
In the shadows of power, wherever it sits
Foucault says it’s pervasive, just must have my wits
About me to wield it, to compete and win
Take out distant authority (Hirschhorn) –begin
To identify what it is driving this place
To make sense of the madness, step back from the race.

So see with new eyes, discover again
The same thing but differently, then only then
Proust suggests we will see some things for the first time
In a world where there’s absence of reason or rhyme
In a life which can feel like a runaway train
Where no changes affect it, a loss then a gain
Where the passengers change, getting off, getting on
And the train barrels on, destination unknown
(Ben Folds sings of change in the workplace) and so
As this is how it is I will give it a go.
While power corrupts, can I cleanse with my verse?
Just as Eliot says I will speak of diverse
Ways of being and seeing and feeling and quote
Robert Frost who says verse will take life by the throat
Because here we can move beyond all the confines
Of reality (Strati) and find in the lines
Something new, something real, something not wrong or right
But some truth about culture, affect and the plight
Of the worker who struggles to join up the dots
To explain the encounter (Akhtar), the subplots
The gaps in the script, the white on the page
The smiles and the nods, but the feelings of rage
As we sit in the meetings, we mark with a pen
Something meaningless, inconsequential again.

We meet targets, tick boxes, but work’s never done
Something new here to do, like at Matthew and Son
Five days of the week we make nothing much change
For forty plus hours we will rearrange
We’ll say words we must say, play the part we must play
Acquiesce, compromise, more for less, win the prize
For the service, the smiles, the superfluous lies
Emotional labour, so pretty, so nice
Aesthetically pleasing, don’t look at the eyes
At the edges you’ll see there is rage and despair
(Fraiberg) as we focus on those places where
There is life, there is love, there is pain and there’s hope
Where stuff happens that hurts and we struggle to cope
Where relationships start and relationships end
And we witness the death of a loved one or friend
Where our hearts play a part, where the truth can be told
Where we sing, where we cry, where our actions are bold
No, not here, in this meeting, where gods have all left,
(Ayot) where we doodle, and we are bereft
We are stark, we’re alone, we are trapped in this game
The socially structured game with no name.
Economic, material, to have not to be
(Erich Fromm) have no fear, we will never be free
We all know it, an ugly lifelong compromise
Where parenting us comes in heavy disguise
As appraisal (the accent on “praise” so they say)
And we smile, and we hate it, and wish it away
And we know in our souls that we could have been more
Than an attendant lord, a name on the door
To swell a progress, to be of some use
Lying and trying to dodge the abuse
(Eliot, Mitchell) our ragged claws
Scuttling up the thirty three floors
Presenting ourselves as actors might do
In our everyday lives, as they want us to
(Erving Goffman) the script has the words we should speak
But the plot is unclear and the casting is weak
And the space between lines tells us more than the words
Some Pinter-esque, Godot-like theatre absurd

And the metaphors used to make sense of the mess
Are poetic, creative, dynamic, and less
About logic and facts and the way it should be
And much more about feelings, immediacy
"It's like Alice in Wonderland playing croquet"
"I plait tape for a living, every day"
"It's a Stepford wives organisation I see"
"It is violent, abusive, it damages me"
"I am building a building but I don't know what
Kind of building they wanted, I've lost the plot"
"There's a critical mass of the status-quoers
Who ensure nothing changes and nothing occurs"
(Knight) so on and so forth using language that soars
Above logic because it unlocks the locked doors
The researcher will hear and discover, through art,
New landscapes, new meanings (Proust, Darmer) and start
To see depth, to see truth to feel mood and to see
That this everyday poetry provides the key
And the songs and the poems already out there
By the famous and talented, people who care,
Will confirm the validity of what we try
To express, when confused, hoping to simplify
But we learn quite the opposite, that we can't find
Superficial solutions, when we use our minds
(Weick) assumptions are dangerous, life is a mess
As is "organization", much of it's a guess

What the poet can do, then, is switch on the light
In the dark, to illuminate paths that we might
Take or not take, depending on what we think best
(James) No route maps or answers then, all of it guessed
By the great and the good and the lowly and bad
By the bosses, the workers, the mums and the dads
By the children whose hands are held but still they guess
Who is right, who is wrong, what is more, what is less
And the music goes back to the start of the song
(Del Amitri) and we feel we must sing along
Sing the words we don’t know to the tune no-one wrote
But we’ll find words to sing and we’ll make up the notes
In the light which shows darkness and nothing to see
Where the words we have written allow us to be
More at ease with the chaos, the nonsense, the game
With no rules that we’re playing; we all do the same
Most times we read out the instructions so well
That we’d almost believe we have something to tell  
But the poet says “no”, just switch on the light  
And you’ll see there is nothing to see, it’s alright  
Because that is the simple truth – no vital lies  
**James and Weick** said it for me; to know this is wise  
It’s only confusing if we think our song  
Is a song we don’t make up as we go along.

This workplace is beautiful, every day  
The people here do and say things in a way  
That has nothing to do with the strategic goals  
Or the statement of values or even their roles  
They are artists and poets and tellers of tales  
They make and break patterns and go off the rails  
As the train barrels on to the place with no name  
They find wonder in laughter, they play their own game  
They pretend when they have to, they do what they should  
They’re as naughty and playful as they can be good  
There’s no yellow brick road we can follow because  
There isn’t a wise one – no Wizard of Oz  
They’re only pretending as well, like we do  
All the anguish is gone when we know this is true.  
Paradox, ambiguity, chaos and change  
Unpredictable lives where we must re-arrange  
We are children in grown-ups clothes, suits and high heels  
We make up the rules randomly, see how it feels  
But we’re good at pretending – we’ve done it for years  
It’s just when we believe it it all ends in tears  
So the person you thought knew the rules of the game  
Doesn’t know any more than you. They’re just the same.

**References**


About the Author(s)

Dr Jenny Knight is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Business at the University of Brighton in the UK. Jenny has a background in writing, directing and acting for the theatre and a lifelong passion for poetry, having been writing and reading it since her childhood. Jenny incorporates her love of the arts and all things creative into her teaching and her research and has won a teaching excellence award for the use of her own verse to help students get to grips with what makes organisations “tick”. Her focus is on the “dark side” of organisational life, and her belief is that both poetic language and performance are ways of bringing the subject to life and focusing on our complex emotional relationship with our workplace. Jenny’s PhD study was entitled The Unresourceful Organisation: The Persistence of “Group Helplessness” in the Workplace.