

The Psychology of Nothingness III: From Something to Less than Nothing

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King Arthur is standing in a field that is rutted with holes made by cannon balls and is filled with the smells and sounds of battle and death. He has positioned his trumps from Camelot to attack the *Joyeuse Garde* castle of Lancelot in France. The war is being waged because Lancelot has betrayed the King and the Court of Camelot by having an affair with Guinevere, the Queen of England and the loved wife of Arthur.

All of this occurs on the stage of a Broadway theater. King Arthur is the principal protagonist in Lerner and Lowe's *Camelot*. This poignant and highly dramatic scene, appearing at the end of this long musical, portrays King Arthur's despair. His Round Table has been destroyed; many of his knights have been killed or have left England. Most importantly, the rules of chivalry that Arthur established and his vision of "might being used for the right" has been torn to shreds.

Arthur declares that the idea of a Round Table and Code of Chivalry is now lost. When there is only an idea, that is no longer enactment, then there is nothing. And with nothingness comes a sense of absolute failure and a disbelief in the capacity of humankind to ever evolve from the state of violent brutality—driven by Revenge that most useless of emotions.

Yet, the play is not over. From off stage comes a young actor. He tells Arthur that he is Tom, who comes from Warwick. Tom has stowed away on one of Arthur's ships transporting soldiers across the English Channel. Arthur asks Tom why he has traveled here to risk loss of life in battle.

Tom indicates that he is inspired by the legacy left by Arthur. He has heard all the stories about the Round Table, gallant knights defending those who are weak, and commitment to justice and equity. Arthur listens to Tom of Warwick as he recites the values inherent in the 'one brief shining moment that was Camelot'.

Arthur is once again inspired and hopeful. He realizes that his dream of Camelot is not dead as long as "it is not forgot." History preserves that which seems to be only a fragile idea. Tom and others of his generation will ensure that Camelot is not lost "evermore." Given the great value that Arthur sees in the legacy held by Tom, he commands his young colleague to escape and hide behind the battlefield.

Tom is to return home once the war has come to an end. He is to proclaim the values of Camelot and retell the stories of Camelot. Most importantly, at this moment, Tom is to "run" so that Camelot will remain something. "Run, boy, run" shouts Arthur repeatedly. The curtain falls, bringing the musical portrayal of Camelot to a close.

Nothingness and Anticipation

Much as in the case of King Arthur, we are always fighting to preserve something. We fear that something important will be lost. It will become nothing. And it is nothingness that we dread—as I have suggested in several different ways in the first two essays in this series on the psychology of nothingness. Arthur commands Tom of Warwick to retain something called the legends of Camelot. Arthur is willing to die in battle but does not want the stories of Camelot to be “forgot.”

At every moment of our life, we similarly do not want something to be “forgot”, be it a list of things to do or a memory. Certainly, one of the major cognitive functions served by our brain is retention of that which we don’t want to forget. Some of what we retain goes into short term memory and is erased during the sorting out we do at night when we are asleep (one of the important reasons for us to get a good night of sleep). Some of what we retain eventually ends up on long term memory and is stored in most instances in our hippocampus (often embedded in or associated with a memory scheme).

It is critical to note that we deal with nothingness in another important, ongoing manner. As I have noted elsewhere (Bergquist, 2026a) and in the first essay in this series (Bergquist, 2026b), there is good reason to believe that we live in the immediate future. Just as we adjust our bodily functions in anticipation of what is about to happen within and to our body—the allostatic model of Peter Sterling (2020)—so we are always anticipating what is likely to happen a moment in the future so that we might behave appropriately (adaptively) in the present moment.

This is not an easy task for us to perform, given that we don’t really know what is about to happen. It is a void into which we inject our image of what we think will occur. Just as our brain fills in the blind spot in our eyes, so it fills in the immediate future with an anticipated image. This operates in a very smooth manner. We tend to blend what is now occurring with what we anticipate is likely to occur. Furthermore, we usually have a pretty good idea about what is about to happen. However, we can’t be sure. Like Arthur, seeking to be assured that the memory of Camelot will not be forgotten, we wish to be assured that what we anticipate will actually be there in the coming moments.

While we are usually unaware of the smoothing function and are reassured that our anticipation is accurate, we become aware of this critical operation of our brain when we are surprised, and our anticipation is not confirmed. Something “pops out” in front of us. We fear that the masked man with the chain saw will leap in from of us while we are creeping through the barn. Our heart races and we may even jump backwards when he suddenly appears. A much more pleasant example of something unanticipated occurs when a gifted comedian finishes off a joke with an unanticipated punchline. There is a whole theory of humor that suggests it occurs when we are somehow caught off guard. We expect the “usual” and are provided with the “unexpected.” A classic example is the Henny Youngman joke that begins with the phrase: “Take my wife (or husband).” This is supposed to serve as a lead into a story about his spouse. Instead, the statement is to be taken literally: “Please [take my wife].”

The role played by anticipation becomes apparent whether we are confronted with a scary moment of surprise, or a moment in which we chuckle, having been served a comedic line or interpretation we didn't expect. It is at such a moment that we can appreciate how important anticipation is as we navigate through our life.

We need to be "right" about our anticipation most of the time. Life is not a joke and is not to be filled with frightening occurrences. These moments of surprise are acceptable at the movies or at a comedy club. But not in our home or at work. While King Arthur deeply needs the memory of Camelot to be remembered, we each need our anticipations to be confirmed.

Nothingness is unacceptable to King Arthur. And it is unacceptable to all of us as we seek to anticipate that which must emerge from the not yet known--the void, a state of nothingness. We might even suggest that memories are needed not only to savor the past, but also to effectively anticipate the immediate future: "Ah yes, this will be like what happened last week." "I bet this will be the same as it has been repeatedly over the past three months."

In this essay, I explore various aspects of nothingness by looking not only at conditions where a gaping void is present, but also conditions that lead up to and surround the conditions of nothingness. I approach this task by considering several different ways in which to consider (and construct) reality. I then turn to ways in which to frame reality from the perspective of triadic, dyadic, and monadic (unitary) perspectives.

My consideration of these frames leads into a consideration of perspectives regarding nothingness, and the presence of voids in our life. I push even further by considering negative realities and the presence, specifically, of negative utilities in our life. In the last essay in this series, I get "practical" and specifically consider the economics and politics of nothingness and both positive and negative utility.

Perspectives on Reality

I begin by exploring the various ways in which we perceive not just nothingness but also the world of "something" in which we live. Individually and collectively, we go through life constructing our reality (Berger and Luchmann, 1967), whether this be the reality of things and events we experience or the reality of that which we can't quite comprehend or directly experience—this being the conditions of nothingness and the many voids we encounter in life.

The way in which we construct reality depends on specific frameworks that we either inherit from the society in which we live or (rarely) we create ourselves. These frameworks can be based on ways in which we think (epistemology), ways in which we use words (semantics), and ways in which we use images to portray what we observe (iconography).

The Epistemological Template

The most notable of these frameworks are what the scientific historian, Thomas Kuhn (2012), labeled *Paradigms*. At any one point in time, most scientists (and more generally most members of a society) view the world through a specific set of lenses related to specific theories, concepts, modes of verification, education and training programs, certifications and a host of other perspectives and practices that constitute a community.

For instance, for a lengthy period, most of us living in Western societies viewed the human body as a finely tuned machine. It was to be repaired by replacing damaged or worn-out parts. This mechanistic paradigm has been replaced in many contemporary settings by a systems-based framework in which the human body is considered a complex biological entity in which its parts are all intertwined and not individually replaceable.

A colleague of mine, David Halliburton (who served for many years on the Stanford University faculty), assisted me during many days of consulting with collegiate faculty in expanding on the concept of paradigm. We spoke with faculty members about paradigms (fundamental assumptions and frames of reference), (2) models (often borrowed from other disciplines -- such as "interface," "module" "people as machines", etc.) and (3) practices (what we do repeatedly on a daily basis. Models spin off from paradigms. Practices spin off from models. There are many practices, fewer models and very few paradigms.

Paradigms: David and I have proposed that Paradigms in a particular field or discipline tend to be:

- (1) Few in number,
- (2) Quite simple in construction, and
- (3) Very powerful.

As an example, we can point to the analytic tradition that is to be found in many of the physical, biological and behavioral sciences: we break things down into their fundamental parts in order to best understand them and then we reassemble them. David always pointed to the “smashed frog” critique in biology: when we dissect a frog in the biology class, we might find out how the frog’s leg works and how the frog’s brain is connected to other parts of its body via the spinal cord.

However, we can never bring the frog back to life. The parts can never be reassembled to create a living organism. This failure to create life remains a mystery and relates to what some philosophers and scientists refer to as “emergence” (the unexpected creation of new, higher order phenomena by integrating several lower order phenomena: the whole can’t be predicted from the parts)

Models: In the case of Models, David Halliburton and I proposed that they are:

- (1) Based on paradigms (though the underlying paradigm might not be acknowledged—being part of the tacit knowledge base proposed by Michael Polanyi),
- (2) Moderately large and diverse in number,

- (3) Moderately powerful and influential, and
- (4) Often borrowed from contemporary popular technologies.

As an example of model, Sigmund Freud based his drive theory in part on the recent invention (in the late 19th Century) of the pneumatic pump. One pushes down on a piston in one part of the room and then a piston in another part of the room moves upward with great power. The power is being transferred via air (or a liquid) from one domain to another domain (this is where our psychological concept of “energy flow” comes from – not the flow of electricity, rather the flow of air or a viscous liquid). Thus, we “push down” a disturbing thought or feeling, which travels to another location and reemerges with great power (as a physical symptom or self-destructive act).

In contemporary times, we find a similar borrowing of models and technical terms from computer technologies. We use terms and models such as “interface” and “processing.” The other very special technology of our era is space travel. From this domain we have borrowed such words and related models as “module” and “launch”. The “ghosts” (assumptions, values, fears, hopes, conflicts—even paradigms) that emanate from these technologies are brought along (unconsciously) with acquisition of the new technology. The haunting of these ghosts shows up in the inappropriate assumptive worlds associated with specific models (and practices).

A *model* such as “launch” or “processing” is clearly visible and is vulnerable, therefore, to inspection and even criticism. For instance, we find that a model such as “teamwork” (borrowed by business from the domain of sports) is sometimes subject to critical review: “a group of people working on an important project are doing something much more important than scoring a touchdown.” “There are no quarterbacks on this team, only co-workers and co-learners.” While this kind of pushback is rare, it is done and is viewed as legitimate. Socially constructed models, in other words, are not “God-given.” (as are paradigmatic constructions). They are made by humankind and are contained in our everyday language. Using a term introduced by Argyris and Schön (1974), models are discussable (rather than being “self-sealing”).

Practices: David Halliburton and I have proposed that Practices are:

- (1) Based on models that are usually conscious (explicit knowledge): though the espoused practices (articulation of the model) might not align with the enacted practices
- (2) Many in number, and
- (3) Much less powerful or influential than models or paradigms

As the third element in our tri-partite categorization, Practices are explicit and readily discussed. They occupy our attention every day and often are taken for granted or serve, as Michael Polanyi (2009) suggests as tacitly held ways of operating in our world. For professionals, the practices are what Thomas Kuhn might label as “normal.” We rarely reflect on the practices we regularly engage, even though Donald Schön (1983) would suggest that this reflection is critical to effective practice. In many instances, this reflection takes us back to the models that support the practices and even to the paradigms that provide a foundation for the models.

This “deeper” level of reflection often only occurs when we have bumped up against an “anomaly” in our professional practices. An “anomaly” might be the resistant client/patient that we are unable to serve, or the intervention we have made that did not go as planned. We are “bit by our surprising failure and need to slow down our thinking (Kahneman, 2011), while also moving to a higher level of cognition (Kegan, 1982; Kegan, 1994). Ken and Mary Gergen (2004) would even suggest that we reason thought our anomaly with other people—suggesting that so level of supervision is of value for all professionals, regardless of serving for many years withing their field.

A caveat is to be offered at this time that relates directly to the matter at hand: the psychology of nothingness. While it is certainly of benefit to identify and study the paradigms and models that underly our daily practices, it is also important to remind ourselves that these paradigms and models don’t really exist. We can’t touch them or measure them. We can only infer that they exist by observing the patterns to be found in the practices we engage and the words we use to describe these practices. It is certainly “fair game” to declare that paradigms don’t really exist, but also only “figments” of Thomas Kuhn’s historical imagination. One can even declare that the notion of paradigms (and models) is itself just an arbitrary “paradigmatic” fiction that might be convenient but certainly isn’t scientifically verifiable as a “real” entity. Put simply, paradigms (along with models and perhaps even practices) are actually nothing.

Semantic Patterning

A second framework has recently been identified. This concerns the way in which words tend to cluster together. Known as semantic patterning or semantic signaling, this framework concerns the constructs formed by our often-unacknowledged interconnecting of words in our speech and writing. We identify and separate meaningful patterns and structures of words (and other forms of data), map these patterns and structures into something called semantic spaces that help us uncover latent topics and agenda. Furthermore, we find that individual people and clusters of people (for example in a family, tribe or organization) create and engage their own unique cluster of words (called semantic signatures).

I find that this second framework is of great value when reviewing the text of a meeting that has been transcribed (which is now automatic with many digital meeting devices). Powerful tools of analysis now allow us to determine not only frequency in the use of certain words, but also the relationship that exists between the use of these words. Clustering Methodologies are concerned with the identification of patterns and relationships among words and (more broadly) concepts.

These methods range from Pattern-Based Clustering which is least accurate to Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs) which are the most accurate. The simplest methods focus on shared words or text patterns, while more complex methods move beyond word-matching to the consideration of meaning and context. They group keywords based on semantic similarity rather than just shared words. Even higher order, AI/LLM-based clustering use large language models to group keywords by semantic similarity rather than search engine behavior. Tools like ChatGPT, Answer Socrates, Writersonic, and Search Atlas fall into this category.

Finally, we consider SERP-Based Clustering, which is the gold standard, in that it focuses on the point where “the rubber hits the road”. Namely, it focuses on how specific key words produce pages on Google. These tools analyze Google’s actual search results (SERP Overlap) to group keywords. If two keywords show similar top-ranking pages, they will be grouped in the same cluster. When two keywords show similar websites ranking in Google’s top 10 results, they have “SERP overlap.” High overlap (70%+ shared URLs) means keywords can likely be targeted on the same page. Low overlap means they need separate pages.

Cluster methods can also be distinguished from one another based on their primary function. For instance, some methods measure the level of connectivity between several words or concepts, while other methods determine the extent to which specific words or concepts pull other words and concepts towards them. This “pull” might be considered a form of semantic centripetal force. Methods also might be used to identify distribution of words or concepts, or the density of a pack of words and concepts.

As one example, a doctoral student of mine used a powerful digitally based analytic tool to identify themes found in a series of movies that tend to cluster together. She was able to move beyond the obvious thematic overlaps in the movies to much subtler connections found between the use of words (dialogue) found in the movie scripts. My own identification of six distinctive cultures in postsecondary education (Bergquist, 1993; Bergquist and Pawlak, 2008) is based on my analysis of word clusters to be found in the interviews I conducted over many years with members of collegiate institutions throughout North America. I engaged a similar analysis in exploring the sub-cultures of those engaged in professional coaching (Bergquist and Brock, 2008).

It is in the use of semantic patterning that something tends to emerge from nothingness. We find only randomness in the words we hear, read and use everyday. Nothingness is to be found in what we don’t say; yet, a profound something is to be found in the sequencing of silence with words we use and the words we receive from other people. There is no such thing as a “failure to communicate” (to use a phrase from the movie, *Cool Hand Luke*). We are conveying something when we choose not to speak or “sit back” and are not allowed to speak.

Furthermore, even among the words that we speak and write, there are “cracks” that appear to be “saying” nothing, but actually “say” a great deal. With a focus on semantic patterning, these “cracks” are found to reveal powerful relationships that exist between words, and between words and nonwords (gestures, tones of voice, silence, etc.). My doctoral student, for instance, found a strong gender bias underlying the way characters in her movies dealt with martial conflicts and tragedy in their lives. This bias was not found in the scripts or explicit intentions of the screen writers, directors or producers. Yet, these biases were in plain, painful sight when the cluster analysis was conducted and semantic patterning was revealed.

I reach for the caveat once again. Words exist as utterances, but do not actually exist as “things” that somehow relate to one another. One can’t “correlate” the relationship between words, unless numbers

are assigned to the words. There certainly is no way to describe or somehow graphically-portray the relationship between words and concepts. As already mentioned, the most important feature to be found in the clustering of words exists in the cracks that appears between the words—these are the differences between the words, the surprising connection between and parallels to be drawn between the words, or the closeness (density) that exists between a group of words. As in the case of paradigms and models, semantic patterning and cluster analysis might actually consist of nothing—at least nothing we can hold dear to our hearts.

A Framework of Images

Something closer to somethingness might be found in the images we create and display. Many iconographers and scholars of religion and spirituality suggest that images do a much better job than words in conveying something about the most important “things” (ideas possessions, hopes) in our life. We can often draw it better than we can say it. Such, for instance, was the case with Carl Jung when he produced many extraordinary images in his *Red Book* (Jung, 2009) while “going mad” (“creative illness”) during his years (1913-1916) living at Küstnacht (Jung, 1963).

Jung’s images portrayed something broader and deeper than the words accompanying these images in his *Red Book*. Furthermore, Jung considered the source of these images to be from a different source (unconscious) than his words (though words in Jung’s *Red Book* were written in an old Germanic form that itself conveyed something of the deeper roots even of the words in his revelatory book).

Given the potential pathway of images from the word-based foundation of nothingness to a potential of somethingness, I wish to describe an image-based process that expands on our exploration of the psychological of nothingness. For many years ago, David Halliburton, as a member of eight different departments at Stanford, provided a brilliant interdisciplinary perspective when we consulted together. One day, at the end of a session with a group of college faculty members, David and I looked at all the graphic representations we had placed on flip chart pages hanging all around the room and recognized that we had seen these representations many times before in working together on many other projects.

We recognized that there were three basic representations that could be applied to any problem being encountered. One of the representations is a “monad” (one). It is a representation that is based in one core theme/issue/goal -- everything radiates out from this monad. A variant is the journey that begins and ends at the same place, while going to many places and viewing many perspectives along the way. It would be the Mobius strip and is *Wizard of Oz* (it always is a matter of going back to Kansas) and the *Odyssey* (going back to Ithica). The core monad provides the energy, from which everything radiates outward. It is vital-centric. This representation is very Asian.

The second representation is the “dyad” (two). It is a representation that is based on the tension between two opposing forces/perspectives/worlds. It is good and bad, left and right, ying and yang. Carl Jung built his whole theory of personhood around the dyad. Four-fold representations are simply two dyads set together. The opposition provides energy and keeps the world in balance. This representation

is very European. The third representation is the "triad" (three). There is thesis, antithesis and then synthesis. It is moving forward, beyond the oppositional tension. It is the arrow with a tip coming to the focus. This representation is about progress and resolution. This representation is very American.

David and I found that we could take any issue/problem/plan, etc. and place it in any one of these three representations to produce insight. Furthermore, we found that most people and most groups begin with a fundamental assumption (paradigm) based on one of these three representations and that we could be of greatest value by helping them see their issue/problem/plan from the other two representations.

In many ways, the three representations provide a way to access higher order of thinking and planning. It is with these three representations in mind that we are encouraged to think about our thinking and envision our envisioning regarding specific aspects of the world in which we operate as teachers, planners and problem-solvers. I propose that this third perspective on reality also operates in our construction of the world (and recognize that there are many other frameworks). This third perspective concerns the images that we engage when describing reality and when anticipating or planning for movement in this reality. This framework of images also relates to the forementioned three tiers of thinking David and I taught: paradigms, models and practices.

My recognition of this framework came from the review of my own consulting and teaching over the past sixty years, as well as my forementioned work with David Halliburton. I am inclined when working with other people to make extensive use of blackboards (in the old days), whiteboards (more recently), flipcharts and power points. Using these devices, I am predisposed to draw figures, often circles, squares, and arrows.

Many of these images involved three circles or squares, or a set of two circles or squares. Other images are created consisting of a single circle, a set of radiating circles, or interlocking circles. I even point to a blank board or flipchart and speak of the absence of some specific entity. Finally, I am known for drawing some image on the backside of a flipchart page or on the backside of a blackboard (if this is a portable blackboard with two erasable sides).

Given this preliminary background behind the framework of images created by David Halliburton and myself, I want to explore each framework in greater depth: three-fold images (triad), two-fold images (dyads) and unitary images (monads). In keeping with the focus of this essay (and others in this series) I will also explore images of nothing, and even images of negativity.

And Then There Were Three: Triadic Images

In the world of *Triads*, everything begins with some fundamental tension [Thesis/Antithesis] but comes to resolution [Synthesis] only to create yet another tension. We go from nothing to Three by identifying this fundamental tension and the nature of its resolution. The Triad is all about progress. We push and pull—and then progress.

Stages of Maturation

Our stages of maturation are always filled with fundamental tensions between the individual and collective, the things we desire and the things we need, and what we fear and what we love. And then progress toward an enlightened citizenship, a responsible adulthood, and a life filled with courage and compassion.

According to Erik Erikson (1963), the Stages of Life consist of tensions between two psychological conditions (such as trust and mistrust) which eventually resolve, allowing for entrance into a more mature stage where developmental tensions are reset. As one of Erik Erikson's mentors, Henry Murray (1938/2007) framed the dynamics of human personality as the pull between human needs and the push of environment presses, creating a disequilibrium. As a psychological humanist, Murray believed that the resolution of this pull and press can lead to a life of psychogenetic growth and societally beneficial accomplishments.

Twice Born

As a predecessor to Murray and Erikson at Harvard, William James (1900/1982) applied his own triadic perspective to the matter of spiritual maturation. He wrote of the "twice born" person who is frequently (if not always) troubled with the push and pull between religious matters. The Hegelian resolution comes in the form of one or more conversion experiences that transforms the "new believer" into a different person. "New water" bathes the "new-born" person and they find salvation, redemption, enlightenment, or at the very least a comforting release from long lingering tensions. St. Paul could find relief from tensions related to his troublesome relationship with traditional Jewish faith, while Bill Wilson could be released from the bonds of alcoholism as the converted founder of Alcoholics Anonymous.

A contemporary exemplar of James "twice-born" person is to be found in the life of Brugh Joy, a successful physician who has gone through two major transformations, that led him to conduct widely attended year-round residential workshops at Moonfire Lodge, located in the high desert of Arizona and to publish several books in which he describes his transformations. In his book, *Avalanche*, Joy (1990, p. 3) notes that in his book, *Joy's Way* (1979), he writes about:

... the many experiences, thoughts, feelings and insights that moved [him] from the practice of traditional medicine, as an internist specializing in diagnostics and pulmonary diseases, into the rich and varied world of the Life Teacher. In that latter capacity, I was to work with and teach such things as awakening expanded ranges of human awareness, self-healing, the meaning and interpretation of dreams, the use of Tarot, human energy fields associated with the chakra system inner Teachers and outer Teachers, and the extraordinary power of Unconscious Love and the Heart Chakra state of consciousness.

While most of the twice-born believers featured by William James, were converted to some form of Christian faith, Brugh Joy was drawn into the multiple streams of “new age” wisdom that were dominant in the United States during the final third of the 20th Century and first years of the 21st Century. In the “Age of Aquarius,” Dr. Joy was to take a radical departure from his medical practice in Los Angeles.

As Joy (1990, p. 3) notes, the writing he did and the Arizona workshops he began holding in the 1970s were engaged so that he: “might capture the power and significance of the first major change of my professional life . . .” However, Joy felt at the time that “another major change was about to occur in me”.

He (Joy, 1990, pp. 5-6) experienced this second “birthing” in 1981:

. . . during a sunrise meditation in Egypt, atop the Great Pyramid of Cheops. . . . A few minutes before sunrise, as I watched the crystals [he placed on the pyramid] gathering the early morning light and the flow of the sun just before it appeared, I was in a wonderful state. I was approaching the mystery of the sun and the sunrise. . . I was inspired, excited, anticipatory, and expanded.

At this moment, Brugh Joy seems to be describing the Awe experience that has been documented by Dacher Keltner (2023). However, the story does not end here. This experience of Awe at the Great Pyramid would seem to be aligned with Joy’s original “twice-born” experience. Something else happened that led Joy (1990, pp. 6-7) to a second birth:

. . . without warning, I experienced the onset of a quaking within my body. It is a subjective shaking. . . . [T]he quaking was particularly powerful. And within four minutes, everything I held as sacred collapsed into one large heap! Gone was the inspiration of Christ, Gone as the sense of Compassion of the Buddha. Gone were the senses of spiritual upliftment, induction, and specialness I invariably experienced . . . The pain of the vacuum was unbearable, and I involuntarily cried out.

It is at this moment that we witness the power of nothingness and the void (vacuum). The tensions inherent in Joy’s holding of diverse spiritual beliefs broke apart and a new vision had to emerge if Brugh Joy was to overcome the pain associated with experiencing the vacuum.

Joy (1990, p. 7) continues:

My first instinct was to fill this meaningless, painful void with something . . . anything . . . even if I had to make it up. . . It was not the same as the inner voice that spoke to me in 1974 announcing the end of my career as a physician. It was a thought-impression, more like a feeling and it counseled me thus: “Don’t fill this painful place with yet another spiritual viewpoint. Let Life teach you what Spirit is!”

As in the case of most triadic rebirths, this one moved Brugh Joy (1990, p. 7) beyond profound pain to a state of ecstasy:

The experience was totally and completely renovative, birthing what for me was a creative “new” reality. I felt liberated and peculiarly unburdened. The mystery of the Mystery was again nascent. I could once again apprentice myself to Life and feel the wholeness of its manifestations.

Much as St. Paul felt following his conversion on the path to Damascus, Brugh Joy found the pathway to a new sense of self and a new set of beliefs about the world (Nock, 1933/1961). As in other triadic shifts from tension to transformation, the experiences of both Brugh Joy and St. Paul led to a profound sense of progress.

Structural and Interpersonal Stability and Instability

While the Triad, as noted in the conversion experienced of St. Paul and Brugh Joy, is directed toward progress, it is also founded on stability. Three-sided structures (such as trusses) are very stable, as are three-fold principles for governing a society. We triangulate the sources of information and methods of obtaining this information so that we might be confident of the conclusions we reach when conducting a study of human systems (Bergquist and Mura, 2014). We also triangulate support systems when faced with major challenges. This triangulation consists of expertise-based support, friendship/colleagueship-based support, and friendly-critique-based support (Bergquist and Mura, 2013). It is in the three-part perspective and three-part assistance we receive that we can best navigate a rugged and dancing terrain (Miller and Page, 2007).

However, progress only takes place between three-fold structures can also be a bit wobbly if one of the three entities feels left out or if this entity represents the future and not the present. It becomes aligned with whatever progress requires.

Three-fold interpersonal relationships, in particular, tend not to be stable. One of the three members is usually set aside, isolated or “ganged up against. A field of study called collation formation focuses on this instability. One of my students many years ago applied coalition for formation theory to a study of the relationship between Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin nearing the end of World War II. My students noted the ways in which Roosevelt and Churchill met together, without Stalin, and shared secrets (e.g. the successful testing of the atomic bomb) while leaving Stalin “outside the loop.” More generally, the instability of triads is featured in the Hegelian theory regarding the human enterprise.

Hegel and Big History

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel spoke of the tension between two poles (thesis and anti-thesis) that is resolved with synthesis. Apparently, all of human history can be distilled into this Hegelian tension and

resolution. Even more generally, we find the tension and resolution of triads in a process called *Emergence*. This phenomenon occurs when a complex entity emerges from the joining of two or more less complex entities. The new entity displays properties or behaviors that its components do not have on their own. This new entity emerges only when these other entities interact. For instance, we can bring together two basic gaseous elements, hydrogen and oxygen. Together, they form an element that is not a gas, this element being water. The chemical “tension” between hydrogen and oxygen is resolved with the emergent creation of water.

The proponents of Big History suggest that a similar progression is to be found in all of history (not just human history as the Hegelians suggest) (Christian, 2019). It is noteworthy that the emergent perspective is itself based on the interplay between several different disciplines, including British emergence theory (John Stuart Mills), process philosophy (Alfred North Whitehead), continental philosophy (Heidegger), general systems theory (von Bertalanffy), and the concept of emergent learning that was offered by Michael Polanyi. In each of these fields, something new and unexpected (like water) comes out of an emergent process (interdisciplinary integration) related to two or more entities that are old and well-known (like oxygen and hydrogen).

Triads and Change

In my own consulting and teaching, I often portray a triad, when considering the potential for change in a system (be it a marriage, organization or nation). There are two or more entities struggling for acceptance or power. The wife wishes to spend more time at work (to increase income for the family) while the husband wishes to spend more “quality time” with his wife. The Vice President for Production is primarily concerned with the quality of the table she is manufacturing, while the Vice President for Sales and Marketing is primarily concerned with the volume of tables being manufactured (to meet the growing demand for this table based on its quality). The president of a country is vitally interested in national security (pouring money into her country’s weaponry), while the citizens she is serving are crying for bread and housing.

In each of these cases, a polarity has been created. As Barry Johnson (1996) has often noted, our world is filled with these polarities. For Johnson, there must first be recognition that both sides of the polarity hold a valid position, as well as shortcomings. To avoid a nonproductive swinging back and forth between the two poles, there must be this “appreciation” of both sides. Ultimately, there must be resolution of the differences or a sequencing of attention to each polarity. Emergence might also take place: a third position is identified or created that enables all (or most) interests to be addressed in a successful manner.

For instance, the husband and wife might find a way to reduce their expenditures (reducing the wife’s work-related pressures) or consider new job opportunities (with higher pay levels) for either or both the husband and wife. The Production and Marketing Vice Presidents might discover (emergence) that their organization could produce two tables—with one being much less expensive, more rapidly produced, but still with some quality control. Emergence for the national leader might come with a new recognition

that national security requires not only protection from external enemies, but also the internal enemies that emerge when citizens feel underserved.

In each case, the refocusing of action requires slow, thoughtful thinking (Kahneman, 2011), a capacity to be reflective about current practices (Schön, 1983), and a willingness to consider the issue at hand from a new (higher order) perspective (Argyris and Schön, 1978). In my own work with clients and students, I often provide two or more circles to identify the current (usually polarized) positions and draw a line with arrows pointing to each position (signifying tension between the position). In keeping with Barry Johnson's model of polarity management, I might identify several of the strengths and weaknesses associated with each position and draw an arrow that swings between the strengths of one position to its weaknesses. The arrow moves to the strengths of the other position, then to its weaknesses, and once again to the strengths of the first position. This swinging back and forth can go on forever. Some form of emergence is required.

The third position is now identified or created. A Triad is now formed with a big arrow going from the entrenched polarity of the two original positions to the third entity. Emergence occurs in that the new, third position differs in important ways from the two original positions. Assumptions are challenged regarding the responsibility of the wife to earn sufficient money, the production of only one chair, or the inevitable trade-off between national security and citizen welfare. As I have already mentioned, higher-order conceptualization is taking place (Kegan, 1982; Kegan, 1994). This higher order often requires an openness to diverse perspectives in a collective setting (Page, 2011) and collaborative reasoning and problem solving in this collective setting (Gergen and Gergen, 2004).

Three Dimensions

There is one other feature of the Triad that is of even greater importance and is even more pervasive in our life. This Triad is the fundamental three-dimensional world which we perceive and in which we navigate. We move upward/downward, as well as left/right and forward/backward. All three dimensions provide us with clarity, direction and a deep sense of "being there" in the world we are navigating. When we are watching a two-dimensional movie, there might be a gripping moment when we feel drawn into the scene; however, it is somehow still not like "being there." 3-D movies bring us a little closer to the "real" world, and the newly invented virtual reality devices bring us even closer. Most of all these technical devices provide evidence that we greatly appreciate the Triadic benefits of three dimensions.

And Then There Were Two: Dyadic Images

In the world of the *Dyad*, everything exists within a fundamental tension that never gets fully resolved. We move from nothing to two by identifying this fundamental tension and reflecting on the nature and impact of its continuing existence. There are always two senses of self that are competing for our attention [Self Psychology]. There is an inherent tension in our society's emphasis both on individualism

and the collective. Our science-fiction volumes are filled with an eternal pull exists between the worlds of matter and anti-matter. Our books on philosophy are filled with the pull back and forth between a reality-based objectivism and a narrative-based constructivism. Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig declares that a marriage is only “vital” if it is filled with deep fundamental tensions (Guggenbühl-Craig, 2009).

It should come as no surprise that Guggenbühl-Craig is an old-fashioned Jungian. Like all his Jungian brethren, Guggenbühl-Craig is inclined to see the world as filled with dualities. Anima (feminine energy) is set against animus (masculine energy). Persona (outward projection of preferred self) is contrasted with Shadow (inward corrective on the projected self). At the most fundamental level, one’s conscious life is always in a dance with one’s unconscious life.

Sick Soul and Limbo

A dyadic perspective is directed toward the tension that exists in the life of the person who is not yet twice born—and may never be. This person might be described as someone with a “Sick Soul”. They remain in a state of limbo, having not found, as the twice born has, a resolving new direction in which to move. It is while floating on the dark but quiet sea of Limbo that we recognize neither the shore from which we embarked nor the shore to which we hope to arrive at some point in the near future.

This is the state of near nothingness that Jean Sibelius so vividly but somberly portrayed in his *Swan of Tuonela*. Everything is still and motionless. We either feel nothing or fill a diffuse anxiety regarding nothing that we can specifically identify. And then we begin to move and find that the old tensions we sought to escape are with us again—tormenting us, laughing at us, causing us to lose sleep and lose hope. We remain adrift.

This image of Limbo comes close to capturing something of the existential despair offered by Kierkegaard (1980), as well as the often stifling and confining world of Melanie Klein and other object relations theorist who write about the inner life of children and adults (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983). We are all living with many psychic “objects” inside our head and heart that represent important external people and events in distorted form, be they both the “good” and “bad” mother, the “protective” and “remote” father, the “supportive” and “teasing” older sibling, the cliff from which we will fall or the God who will always be there to protect us from the hovering demons.

We seek to resolve these psychic tensions, but to no avail. We cast off our boat to escape the tensions, but find us adrift in a void, a nothingness, a sea with unknown depth. It is the Limbo of nothingness that seems to be an inevitable outcome when facing unresolved psychic tensions. It is a Limbo in which we discover and are forced to live with a “sick soul.” Carl Jung’s (2009) *Red Book* documented in exceptional fashion, his excursion into the tension-filled domain of the unconscious. I offer excerpts from this remarkable product of Jung’s “creative madness” as he ventures onto the sea in search of the shore where he can realign with his soul:

My soul, where are you? Do you hear me? I speak, I call you—are you there? I have returned,

I am here again... Life has led me back to you. Let us thank the life I have lived for all the happy and all the sad hours... My soul, my journey should continue with you. I will wander with you and ascend to my solitude.

Every step closer to my soul excites the scornful laughter of my devils, those cowardly ear-whisperers and poison-mixers.

You open the gates of the soul to let the dark flood of chaos flow into your order and meaning. If you marry the ordered to the chaos you produce the divine child, the supreme meaning beyond meaning and meaninglessness.

The supreme meaning is not a meaning and not an absurdity, it is image and force in one, magnificence and force together.

Be silent and listen: have you recognized your madness and do you admit it? Have you noticed that all your foundations are completely mired in madness? Madness is not to be despised and not to be feared, but instead you should give it life... Be glad that you can recognize it, for you will thus avoid becoming its victim.

In this book, unlike any other book I have ever encountered, one gains a sense of what the journey through Limbo and nothingness is like and what the outcomes of this journey of “madness” can be. The outcomes concern something that Jung calls “individuation.”

Individuation

Carl Jung and his followers might have considered the “sick soul” to be not only inevitable, but also critical to the full maturation of a human being. One gains a sense of individuation by accepting and living with the many tensions inherent in the life of one’s soul. We are unlikely ever to arrive at the shore where our psychic tensions are abated. Only the twice born find this resolution.

Brugh Joy found it twice in his life. For Jung, it is not the creation of a third entity to bring about resolution of the tensions. There is no transcendent insight gained while dwelling on an Egyptian pyramid. This would be a triad solution. Rather, Jung envisions the tensions coming together in what he was labeled a *mysterium conjunctionis*, this being the remarkable (mysterium) nuptial (conjunctionis) of opposite halves (Jung, 1978, p. 64). As Guggenbühl-Craig noted about marriage, this union is not “happy ever after.” Rather it is an ongoing interplay and interdependence of opposing psychic forces—much as the two sides are represented in the Ying/Yang and (in more complex form) the Mandalas that Jung so often found in his dreams and conscious ideations.

Jung does suggest that we need not “go it alone” when embarking on this perilous journey to individuation. We might find a guide, such as Dante found when descending into the Inferno. With the support of a guide, we find no resolution; but do find an acceptance of, engagement with, and, in many cases, creativity use of our psychic tensions. This was the case with Carl Jung. He found Philemon, who served as his guide into the world of rich imagery and life-changing insights that are conveyed in the words and images of *The Red Book*.

Two Dimensions

One final point. While the Triad enables us to view the world through three-dimensions, the movie screen and television set provides us with a Dyad view of the world. We see the two dimensions of up/down and left/right, but not the third dimension of forward/backward. Everything appears as a flat plane. We must “imagine” the third dimension of depth. As I have already noted, this may be what Carl Jung discovered when going mad at Küstnacht

There is a remarkable Victorian-era book called *Flatland* that was written by Edwin Abbot (1884/1992). This satirical novel encourages us to conceive of living in a world that contains only two dimensions. In such a world, it is hard to imagine what a third dimension would be (just as it is hard for us to imagine a fourth dimension). In this land, everyone is identified as a specific geometric figure.

Perfection is represented by a circle. And social classes are identified by the number of sides to be found on a resident of this flat community. For someone living in two-dimension flatland, the matter of hierarchy is particularly important—though there is no up and down by which to discern level of social class and level of control and authority. It would appear in Abbott’s *Flatland* that there is not much room for movement in social class. One’s physical appearance (geometric shape) is permanent and can not be changed.

The inability to move in the hierarchy doesn’t appear to be much of a problem, since there is no up or down – no basis for either aspirations or fear of lost status. In a two-dimensional world, there is only good/bad, weak/strong, and active/passive--the Semantic categories introduced many years ago by Charles Osgood (1957). We might find something of this static perspective operating in the two-dimension world of modern and even postmodern social systems. There is still the matter of differing social-economic levels, discrimination based on race, gender and many other factors. And we now have the hierarchy of technical knowledge, with the technocrats “lording” it over the techno-peasants (those with limited and recently acquired technical knowledge). Artificial Intelligence might soon intensify the magnitude and importance of this emerging technical class structure.

When reading *Flatland*, one gains a sense about the many sources of information that are to be found in the third dimension—including the very nature of a social structure. People are viewed from multiple perspectives, including competence and motivation. They are more than just physical appearance. On the other hand, one discovers the benefits of two dimensions when a world of one dimension is introduced into Abbott’s satirical, yet insightful novel. It is to this one-dimensional life that I now turn.

And Then There Was One: Monadic Images

Within the realm of the *Monad*, everything radiates out from one specific focal point [Symptom Relief] or circulates back to some fundamental issue [Paradox]. We move from nothingness to one by concluding that there is one unifying entity or principle that draws everything together, produces

meaning and “makes sense” in a world that often seems fragmented and meaningless. This unifying entity or principle provides the way forward and leads us to a point of perfection or at least a place of psychological maturation.

For some people, this one unifying entity is one’s own body. This perspective represents a bio-centric view of reality. There is only the body under this condition of *Physicalism and Biological Realism*. There is no independent mind. There is only the intricate relationship between neurons and sectors of the brain. There is only one verifiable truth, which is that which one can see, hear, taste and measure. From the perspective of the behaviorist, one sees only the environment in which one behaves. Nurture rather than nature and genetics rule. Environmental determinism prevails. Personality and individual differences are only found in the Error Variance of studies done about the forces determining human behavior. The Monad is the invariant world in which we live and behavior.

A quite different perspective on the Monad is offered by those living in a humanistic camp that valued individual differences. The Monad exists within one’s unique core beliefs and experiences. For example, William James identifies the monad within the life of some people who are quite spiritual. For these people, religious and spiritual development came slowly and without major disruption. James describes these believers as Once Born. They were often born into the religion that they now profess or came to some acceptance of specific religious doctrine by studious investigation and slow, rational acceptance of specific doctrine and religious practices.

Brugh Joy (1990, p. 160), who is on a twice-born journey, writes this about the “once-born”:

As I have lived more and more of my life, I have begun to realize that some individuals are destined to live out., almost exclusively, the good and “acceptable” side for the collective”

Under the conditions of being on a single spiritual plane, there is an abiding sense that this plane is where we find all guidance. The dominant Monad of religious and spiritual belief provides the pathway. A noted psychologist, O Hobart Mowrer (1961) noted many years ago that feelings of Anxiety might indicate that we have somehow strayed from this religious pathway. Blending his religious beliefs with his behavioral psychology perspectives, Mowrer would identify anxiety with a personal sense of sinfulness. While this sense of being an anxious sinner might drive the twice-born to a conversion experience, it would drive the once-born to an “adjustment” in their life choices.

There is also the Jungian sense of the guiding pathway. While Carl Jung and his followers portray the journey forward as somehow “nudged” by the Dyadic tension between two completing forces or entities, he also often portrays a strong Monad in his *Red Book* and counsels a focused movement toward what he calls “individuation.” The Monad is often represented by the Mandala, while individuation is often coupled with a dyadic portrayal of late life development as an integrating of conscious and unconscious parts of the psyche. According to Jung, this final integration is preceded by a transformation process (a bit like a conversion) in which one’s sense of Self takes on a new set of characteristics that leave one looking quite different from the Self of an earlier time in life.

The Monad not only provides simplicity and offers guidance. It also in many ways, yields a profound sense of *Innocence*. The simplicity and guidance lend themselves to an image of someone being eternally childlike (*Jung's puer eternus*). We see this image conveyed in the story of an innocent Prince (de Saint-Exupery, 2000) and even in the frolicking tales of Peter Pan. The images of innocent, childlike beings flourish. There is nothing so subject to pure projection (ink blots) as the blank slate (ink blots) of innocence. There is also the counter force: a violent reaction to innocence.

We see this disturbingly portrayed in Herman Melville's novella about Billy Budd (Melville, 1924/2017). Melville tells the tragic story of Billy Budd, a handsome and innocent sailor aboard a British warship. The narrative explores themes of innocence, moral ambiguity, and the conflict between individual morality and institutional authority. When Billy is falsely accused of mutiny by the malevolent Master-at-arms John Claggart, he inadvertently kills Claggart in a moment of rage. Despite Captain Edward Vere recognizing Billy's lack of intent, he feels compelled to follow the law, leading to Billy's execution. The story ultimately reflects on the nature of good and evil and the harsh realities of justice. Monads are powerful, but fragile. We live "on the edge of our beliefs" and form protective bubbles around these beliefs (Weitz and Bergquist, 2024). We join with other people in creating collective bubbles of belief. Yet, we remain vulnerable to disconfirming evidence, the creation of cognitive dissonance involving our beliefs and "the real world," and the dismantling of "alternative realities."

In gaining another perspective on the power (and limitations) of the Monad, we can return once more to Edwin Abbott's *Flatland*. Abbott not only explores a two-dimensional world but a world that would contain only one dimension. In such a world, there would only be points. Abbott focuses in particular on the arrogance found among those living in pointland. If there is only one perspective, then it is easy to believe that this perspective is correct – perhaps even God-given. The inhabitant of pointland to which Abbott directed his attention, was not only unwilling to entertain the possibility that there was a second dimension; this point-character was also quite angry that someone from flatland (two-dimensions) would dare to upset the tranquility of life on a point.

If we expand a bit on Abbott's pointland, we might conceive of one-dimensional life as being led in a thin tube, with only forward and backward. One would be traveling through this tube, meeting other people (represented as points) within this confined space. The meeting would be interpreted as nothing but an intrusion on the journey through the tube. There is no getting around the other point. They serve simply (and annoyingly) as a barrier to further progress through the tube. No wonder that it would be particularly upsetting for the point-person to meet someone in the tube who is not only blocking progress but also suggesting that there is something more than the tube. As someone living in one-dimension, we would wish the disruptive point-person to somehow leave the tube or disappear. Such is the way of people living in the three-dimensional world of 21st Century life, who choose to live in one dimension.

I am reminded of the journey one can take on a Labyrinth. This is a single-dimension pathway on which one walks with the purpose of reaching an endpoint. Along the way, one moves inward toward this

endpoint, but then away from the end point to the outer edges of the labyrinth. While traversing the labyrinth one gains insights into the way life events move us toward and away from envisioned life purposes.

It is worth noting that the original labyrinth, by some accounts, existed on the island of Crete. It was a tunnel that led those traversing its one-dimensional space on a long journey. Somewhere residing in the labyrinth, was a monstrous Minotaur. One could hear the roar of the Minotaur while trudging through the labyrinth. Yet, the journey continued, despite the threat of confronting this beast. This myth of a long labyrinth and fearful Minotaur seems to represent not just a life journey that is filled with ups and downs, movements towards and away from a life purpose, but also a life journey filled with the perils of attacking monsters (what Robert Sapolsky would identify as our imagined attacking lions).

I am also reminded of Bong Joon-ho's movie called *Snowpiercer*, in which people are living full-time on a train that is traveling through a world that has been destroyed by climate change. Much as in the case of Abbott's Flatland, Bong's society on the train is highly stratified, with the "upper-class" living at the front of the train, and the "lower-class" living at the back of the train. A class-revolt is represented in this movie. It occurs where the upper-class and lower-class meet at a midpoint on the train.

One wonders if those walking the Labyrinth of Crete or traveling on the Snowpiercer train are in some ways like those living in Abbott's one-dimensional space. They all tend to see their world only through the one-dimensional lenses of forward and backward. There is no left or right. And for those on the train, there is no looking out the window at a frozen world. One has contact only directly with the person (or small group of people) residing in front and behind them on the train. This contact would be beneficial; however, imagine what is lost when the second dimension is missing. Does the anxiety become more intense if one is living in limiting space while hearing the roar of the minotaur or anticipating the battle at the train's midpoint?

And what would a third dimension look like for those living on the train? Would the third dimension be represented by stories about life once lived in an unfrozen world? Could those who are born on the train even imagine a different world when looking out the window? Would this third dimensional world in some way resemble the unconscious world (with "fabulous" images) that Carl Jung envisioned while "going mad" on the edge of a lake in Switzerland?

And Then there Was Nothing

What does it mean to live in a world of no dimensions. This is the great void. This is the awe-fullness that is portrayed by Rudolph Otto (1923) and Carl Jung (1938). We look at the void. We recognize it's infinite vastness. We recoil at the prospect of falling into it, forever tumbling downward. Yet, we step to the very edge of the void. We are enthralled by its depth and wonder what it would be like to step off the edge into the void.

Ultimately, it is a matter of engaging three processes when there is nothing. We must apprehend what we are seeing in the void and how we are feeling while standing on the edge of the void. We must also comprehend what we are seeing and feeling. Somehow, we must understand what the void and nothingness are all about—or not about. Finally, we must come to appreciate what we are seeing and feeling. It is in the void where we might find our capacity to be creative and perhaps even our capacity to be free.

Apprehension

In a state of nothingness there are none of the three dimensions. Abbott's flatland would seem like a heavenly place when one is living with no sight, no hearing, no touch, and no smell. It is as if we are living in the nightmare of being dead yet somehow knowing that we are alive and conscious, yet with no access to the outside world. We might envision a state of solipsism in which there is only our personal "reality"—yet this reality contains nothing. We win the solipsistic "prize" of ultimate control over our reality, yet there is nothing there to control.

Robert Lanza (Lanza and Berman, 2010) takes this matter of solipsism to its extreme. Adopting a model of bio-centrism, Lanza proposes that each of us individually creates the universe in which we are "living." From moment to moment this personal universe will change, based on our personal perceptions and feelings. Building on quantum physics and the Heisenberg Principle, Lanza describes the condition of personal creation, suggesting that we are producing something out of ultimate nothingness. A reality shared by all of us is not to be found.

When apprehending a world in which we are the only reality, there is also the possibility that we suddenly relate this state to one of loneliness, isolation and, ultimately, alienation. There is the matter of nothingness that is experienced when one feels ignored. We sit with a group of people that we don't really know and are assigned the role of observer or quiet listener. This role is particularly prevalent among people at the two ends of the age spectrum.

As a young person, we are told to sit quietly, listen to and learn from our elders. When we "behave ourselves" and agree to be invisible, then we are assigned the title of "very polite young man" or "sweet young woman." In our senior years, we are similarly expected to just sit there and observe the energy and quick minds of those who are younger. If we are "well-behaved" by-standing elders, then we are assigned the role of "kindly old man" or "delightful but quaint old lady."

We feel much like Amos, the husband of a major protagonist in the musical, *Chicago*. The husband is invisible, indistinguishable, and ignored. Amos feels like he is being unheard and underestimated. He even assigns himself the name, "Mr. Cellophane," that comes from a product of the past. The painful experience of being "nothing," however, is not of the past. It is regrettably present today and in all societies.

This is a form of nothingness that is truly intimate. Its intensity overwhelms any feelings associated with seeking to comprehend and appreciate the unknown and unknowable in our cosmos. We take it personally when sitting there wrapped in cellophane, wishing to be acknowledged in a crowded room of indifferent strangers. Thoughtfulness (Kahneman, 2011) and reflective practice (Schön, 1983) are the last things on our mind when the status of “nothingness” beats in our heart.

Comprehension

Is there a way in which we can move beyond the nothingness that is beating in our heart? Can we come to some understanding of the way in which we find ourselves not being alone in nothingness, but rather facing the nothingness of that which we don’t yet comprehend? With this comprehension, we find that we are not alone but are sharing an epistemology challenge which we all share as sentient beings.

Specifically, as Donald Rumsfeld suggested many years ago, there are four states of knowledge regarding the world. There is that which is known, and we know it is known. There is that which is known, yet we don’t know it is known. Third, there is the unknown and we know it is unknown. It is the fourth state that created all the news regarding Rumsfeld’s pronouncement. He speaks of the unknown that we don’t know is unknown. We might ask Rumsfeld why we don’t know that the unknown exists. Is it because this fourth state is often too scary or awe-filled for us to contemplate.

Is this fourth state aligned with Rudolph Otto’s (1923) numinous or with Carl Jung’s cavernous domain of the unconscious? Perhaps we don’t want to admit that some things escape not only our comprehension but also our capacity to even acknowledge that they exist. We assign the content of this fourth state to the condition of nothingness—and we wonder how big this fourth state might be. It is like living in Flatland and wondering what it would be like to live with (or perhaps even within) a third dimension—and then we scurry away from any vision of a world with something unimaginable and profound, namely, depth.

Appreciation

The ultimate challenge might be to not just acknowledge and seek somehow to comprehend that which exists in the fourth state of the unknown—that which we have cast into the abyss of nothingness. We might, somehow, come to appreciate that which is unknown to us. We appreciate the nothingness of the abyss we experience when standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon. Like Brugh Joy, we gain a sense of ecstasy when viewing sunrise while standing on the Great Pyramid. We feel a sense of great warmth and even relief when we anticipate a state of true freedom in our society (Bergquist, Weitz and Pomerantz, 2026).

Is it possible to simply sit back so that we might appreciate and even honor an amazing world that we do not yet comprehend. This would be the Hebrew Yahweh that offers us abundant surprises, gifts and challenges which come “from out of the blue.” This also is the Christian God who provides us with

Grace, when we don't deserve it. And this is the Mandala of Ancient Asian origins that provides us with a balance and integration that resides beyond our consciousness.

Perhaps we can find a guide who can help us fully appreciate the void. Like Dante found in Virgil and Carl Jung found in Philemon, our guide can lead us to large spaces of emptiness, be it the Grand Canyon or open vistas around the Great Pyramid that are being illuminated by a rising sun. These expansive vistas can be sources not just of ecstasy and inspiration; they can also, somehow, provide access to a unifying, even if invisible, sense of a spiritual being. From nonbeing to being . . . Nothingness is truly amazing!

We may find an indication of this realm of nothingness in the description offered by Brugh Joy. Amidst his second re-birth, Joy discovered something about a world that is swirling with contradictions. While Joy was inspired in viewing the intense light of the sun emerging from the horizon in Egypt, his subsequent imagery was of darkness and death. Brugh Joy suggests that we dwell in world of light and darkness. We also dwell in a world of nothingness in that light and dark cancel each other out (forming a blank slate). We are left with the gray tones of Limbo or the loss of all visual displays. In this world of gray there is only ambiguity. In this world of blank slate, nothing that makes sense.

There is the void of an initially unacknowledged unconscious world filled with both positive and negative images. There is not the resolution found in the triadic representation of reality, nor the integrative force found in the dyadic individuation of Carl Jung. There is only a newly realized appreciation of all the diverse forces operating in the conscious and unconscious life. In the Epilogue of his book, Brugh Joy offers important insights into the emergence of something from nothing in the Epilogue of *Avalanche* (Joy, 1990, pp. 331-332):

Much to my surprise, I feel more wholesome and real, more grounded and inspired than when my psychospiritual Unfoldment was directed primarily toward perceiving and celebrating only the positive and the Light. I have realized that the richness and vulnerability of inclusively embracing life, the soul, and the spirit can heal distortions that are created when parts of the Self imagine themselves to be separate from and superior to the profound mysteries of Life and Death.

Life Itself teaches dramatically and powerfully through events centered around crisis, loss, and death. When such events are not embraced--when the dark, the demonic, and the destructive are not integrated--the conscious mind partitions itself from total consciousness and creates a reality reflecting only that which is acceptable to one's conscious awareness. That which is unacceptable simply disappears from awareness, though it certainly does not go away. What is created is a remarkable situation in which the right hand (consciousness) does not know what the left hand (unconsciousness) is doing. The left hand may know what the right hand is doing, but such a circumstance does not serve our conscious awareness ... our ordinary sense of reality.

Applying some of the concepts offered in this essay and my previous essays, Brugh Joy seems to be suggesting that partitioning the conscious from the unconscious mind creates a void or nothingness which limits one's awareness of a full, richly textured life that is filled with both angels and demons, both life-giving and life-taking sources of energy and motivation, and both that which is to be cherished and that which is to be endured. There is no miraculous redemption or path forward, as in the triadic perspective, nor is there an integration of the polar opposites and psychic tensions. There is instead, as Brugh Joy found in the top of Egypt's Great Pyramid, an incarnation of one's full inner strength and a powerful engagement in the mystery of Life. As Joy (1990, p. 333) indicates:

not all individuals will survive and initiate through the horrific challenges to human life. But those who do are immensely capable of contributing to the overall well-being of our planet and its people.

Perhaps. Joy is offering us insights about the way(s) in which nothingness can be apprehended, comprehended, appreciated and transformed into something that does have these amazing outcomes.

And Then There Was Less Than Nothing: Negative Utility

Is there something other than the "twice born, "the once born" and those who simply view our wonderful world with appreciation and sometime a sense of Awe. Is there a "negative birth"? Is there the "dark and disowned side" that Brugh Joy (1990, p. 160) identifies as the other side of the "good and acceptable". At times, do we not just view the void with fear and awe, but actually drop into the void. Is this what it feels like or even means to be "depressed." Is drug-abuse and other forms of self-destruction the frequent response to this "negative birth."

While it is tempting to dwell on this dismal, hell-like condition of "negative-birth," it is also important that we consider a less existential side of the negative that is found in all aspects of our life. Specially, I am referring to something called "negative utility." This term is used to identify something that is less than nothing. We find negative utility in particular where something is not only of no value but also costs us something. For instance, we pay more for asparagus when the ends have been cut off than when purchasing asparagus with the full stalk intact. In essence, we are paying extra for removal of the asparagus ends. These ends have "negative utility.' We have to pay to get them removed.

One can find "negative utility" in many other domains of our life. Our grass has negative utility in that, like the asparagus, we pay to have the grass removed (cut). Similarly, we discover that we often pay to be quiet (meditation) and shell out many dollars to remove the fat that has accumulated on our body. The fat has negative utility for many of us, even though it was initially intended for storage of energy when we confronted lean nutritional times while living in an unstable environment. And the grass has negative utility for us in contemporary times even though grass was meant to grow tall so that it could provide nutrition and hold water to benefit the interdependent natural environment in which it exists.

Psychological Loss and Promises Not Fulfilled

While Negative Utility is usually applied to economic matters of financial cost, I propose that this important concept can also be viewed and applied from a psychological rather than economic perspective. We find psychological loss in many sectors of our society that are intended to provide us with gains. We expect to learn in the educational sector but find ourselves learning little—while paying quite a bit to support the educational enterprise. Similarly, we expect to receive services that foster health and wellness in our healthcare system and pay an abundant amount to receive these services; yet the outcome is often one of illness produced within the context of dysfunctional healthcare services.

In both instances, we find ourselves paying for an outcome that doesn't exist. We are paying for asparagus stems that we don't want – and educational services, along with healthcare services that waste our time and fail to deliver what they promise. The postsecondary education and healthcare we receive is very costly, yet it does little to alleviate the problems of ignorance and illness that pervade American society.

More generally, there is the creation of negative utility in any sector where a promise can't be delivered. We regret engaging in something that doesn't work. We vividly are aware of the losses and costs associated with some service that ends up being “worthless.” When I was consulting with many kinds of organizations during the 1980s and 1990s, I found that many were “bullet proof” regarding the introduction of new ideas and innovative projects. They had “tried something new” during the “innovative 1970s” and it had failed. So, “there is no need to make the same mistake again. We'll stay with what we know has worked.” The recalcitrant in our society are in charge (Rogers, 1962).

Negative Utility in American Postsecondary Education

I am about to make a radical proposal. I propose that postsecondary education in the United States can currently be assigned to the Negative Utility category. It is the broccoli stem for which we pay yet find little value. At the present time, we are paying more for an education that produces less value than an education for which we are paying less. Specifically, we can determine the real benefit of receiving a postsecondary education in terms of increased prospects of a good job and higher income after graduation when compared to the prospects prior to entering college. We can also determine if there is a better chance than before entering college of being accepted into and completing a graduation degree program.

This type of analysis is called Value-Added. When an assessment of the value added by attending college is engaged, then the “best” colleges and universities are often not those which are most prestigious and most expensive (Rosenberg, 2026). Many years ago, Alexander Astin (1987), a prominent postsecondary education researcher, determined that a value-added mode of assessment was preferable to either an assessment of a postsecondary education's resources (number of buildings, size of endowment, number

of books in the library, etc.) or outcomes (income after graduation, admission to graduate school, etc.). It seems that those admitted to a highly prestigious college or university (with a large endowment, etc.) are likely also to get a good job after graduation or admission to graduate school—and they would have succeeded after graduation even if they went to a less prestigious school.

It is the student who is not expected to do well after college, but actually succeeds after graduation, who is “value-added.” And these are often the students who attend a community college or lower-status four-year college or university who is value-added; whereas the student attending Harvard, Yale or Stanford does not improve their post-graduate chances just because they attended one of these high prestige schools. They would have done well regardless of the postsecondary education institution they attended. In fact, value-added assessments show that those attending prestigious schools are actually going to be less successful than they were predicted to be upon graduating from high school.

The high price they are paying for attending a prestigious postsecondary institution produces no increased value and may actually produce a relatively lower level of postgraduation success. Broad, diverse access to postsecondary education (as found in community colleges and many low prestige colleges and universities) tends to increase the quality of education one receives (Bergquist, 1995). There is substantial evidence that suggests we tend to learn more in diversified settings, just as we find creativity in these settings (Page, 2011). Many of us (with some money in our pocket) have chosen to purchase the broccoli stems . . . high cost/low value education.

Historical Nothingness/Part One: I would suggest that the landscape of American postsecondary education is littered with the skeletons and debris of exceptional experimental colleges and exciting educational programs that were initiated during the innovative years of the 1970s (following the Vietnam War) when major funding of innovative educational programs was provided by the federal government and private foundations. By late in the 20th Century every one of the experimental colleges had closed.

It is remarkable to review what occurred with programs that had offered fresh new ideas in the 1970s. They yielded value-added education. Furthermore, these colleges would be quite appropriate if reintroduced in the 2020s. For instance, experimental college programs blended liberal arts with career preparation or focused on the culture and history of marginalized groups. Even at the level of the collegiate classroom, many instructional innovations were engaged during the 1970s and 1980s that were value-added (Quehl, Bergquist, and Subbiando, 1999). Few of these successful instructional tools and strategies have been embraced by faculty members during more recent years.

Within the higher education community, there is a high level of resistance to any change (Rosenberg, 2023). New ideas are often dismissed as “fads” (Birnbaum, 2000) Arrogance and ignorance have reigned supreme in postsecondary education since this time—and is now experiencing much of the backlash against high tuition and low levels of effective learning (producing the capacity to get a job and be agile in adapting to the rapidly changing work setting). While COVID can provide some of the excuses for the current dysfunction in postsecondary education and the widespread dissatisfaction with the educational

experiences at all levels, there was a failure to embrace new ideas that began long before the virus closed down the in-person classroom.

For instance, Models of accessible postsecondary education that are also of high quality have been widely disseminated and proven to be viable (e.g. Bergquist, 1995); yet most of these models have been ignored by the leaders of higher education institutions. Yet, the Pell Institute (2026) recently reported that:

. . . higher education opportunity remains heavily shaped by family income, parental education, race, and geography. For example, only 17% of low-income students attain a bachelor's degree within six years, compared to 47% of higher-income students. Similarly, first-generation students attain bachelor's degrees at substantially lower rates than students whose parents hold bachelor's degrees.

In addition to this matter of faltering access and equity, there are also major problems associated with cost and financial aid limitations, outdated curricula, credentialism and job market mismatch, institutional and governance fragmentation and, most importantly, the loss of public trust and accountability.

Arrogance: I would suggest that Arrogance is partially responsible for the failure to learn from the past. This arrogance is particularly found in the rigid, judgmental posture of the accrediting agencies. Often retaining old principles of effective education, the review panels are typically composed primarily of representatives of small prestigious colleges and major universities. Members of the panel, as a result, are inclined toward reinforcing old models of education. I remember meeting with one member of a review panel who declared that he “loved the smell of books” and believed that a collegiate institution should always have a large physical library. While I personally also love “the smell of books,” there is no reason that all collegiate institutions must have large, expensive libraries.

Ignorance: Ignorance to be found in postsecondary education is also a notable culprit. This ignorance relates to the absence of knowledge about educational research results by administrators or faculty members. Very few members of the postsecondary community during the late 20th Century read the works of Alexander Astin and other notable researchers. Few ever heard of “value-added.” Faculty members are expected to be knowledgeable about their discipline; however, they are unlikely to read much about postsecondary education. Administrators rarely have received any advanced training or education in postsecondary management or leadership (the exception being Catholic nuns). The dysfunction grew even worse with the invasion of COVID-19 and the inability of collegiate institutions to rely on traditional in-person education.

Even at the institutional level, there is often a remarkable ignorance of faculty members and administrators about educational innovations that were engaged during the past in their own institution. For instance, I was consulting at the University of the Pacific about twenty years ago and found that members of this university knew nothing about one of the major educational innovations

that occurred on their own campus during the 1970s. This innovation was the Cluster Colleges which were led by faculty members who often became major figures in American postsecondary education, after learning a great deal from their work in these cluster colleges (Gaff and Associates, 1970). Jerry Gaff, Gene Rice, and Dick Martin went on to play a major role in American higher education during the last years of the 20th Century and first decades of the 21st Century yet were not remembered at their own university. I would suggest that where there is no memory in any system, there is an abundance of nothingness.

Arrogance and Ignorance in American Healthcare

As In the case of American postsecondary education, American healthcare yields a negative utility, when compared to healthcare being offered in many other countries. We are paying more for healthcare than citizens of virtually all other countries. Yet we Americans are receiving poorer quality of health, as determined by many experts in the field. Evidence of the dysfunction in contemporary American health care is abundant. For instance, Ezekiel Emanuel (2020, p. 50) rates the United States as quite low on many dimensions:

The US health care system underperforms in many ways. It is very complex, more so than that of any other country in the world. And it has a strange combination of being lean—with fewer physicians, hospital admissions and other services than almost any country—while having bloated costs.

As those who are purchasing healthcare services (or paying for the insurance that covers the healthcare costs), we are willing (or required) to pay more and receive less. We Americans are choosing to pay for the broccoli stem (high cost/poor quality healthcare services).

As in the case of postsecondary education, I propose that a major share of the blame for relatively poor healthcare services can be assigned to *Arrogance* and *Ignorance* in American health care. As Marty Makary (2019, p. 4) has noted, the crises in American health care (and public health in particular): “can be divided into two types: naturally occurring and man-made. Many of the crises we face in medicine today are not naturally occurring viruses or other hazards from nature. They are manufactured, like the crisis of smoking, or opioid addiction, or antibiotic resistance”.

There certainly have been many technological innovations in healthcare that have benefited Americans; however, innovations in the operation of healthcare systems, which require what Makary might label “man-made” acceptance and sustained engagement have often been set aside in favor of outmoded operations that are encrusted in the minds and hearts of those leading the healthcare systems and those providing legislative support for these systems.

Historical Nothingness/Part Two: Ranging from innovative funding and costing plans to the creation of interdisciplinary treatment teams, many of the good ideas of the late 20th Century and early 21st

Century are no longer to be found on the American healthcare landscape. As in the case of postsecondary education, we find an absence of memory which leads to profound vacuums in the mentality of healthcare leaders and organizations. At the national level we find the arrogance and ignorance of regressive public health policies. While early in the 21st Century the United Kingdom and many other countries were exploring and introducing models of affordable health care for all citizens, the United States was struggling with increasing healthcare costs for all citizens. Even in America, innovative ventures associated with the “War on Poverty” and “Head Start” programs that dealt with preventive programs for low-income citizens and nutrition for all children tended to “run out of steam” or remained in operation only in “watered down” form. And the potential of a National Health Program remains only a remote possibility.

As in the case of postsecondary education, the COVID-19 invasion made matters worse. However, exceptional medical technologies came to the rescue and soon produced ameliorative injections. As Markey (2019, p. 145) noted, “medicine has a tremendous heritage of solving problems.” However, as Markey (2019, p. 145) also notes, medical science and clinical wisdom have not been as successful at finding ways to reduce costs. “Less is more” is now a common refrain at medical conferences and in medical journals. A void emerges in systems where there is no history (of past successes in reducing costs) and no curiosity (regarding low-cost health care offered elsewhere in the world). The ‘polymath’ in healthcare leadership is all too rare. And if this person does exist, they are likely to be despised (as is Anthony Fauci) by those who favor the “good old ways” or “odd new ways.”

A void also exists when a system is filled with silos. If no one is talking to folks in the adjacent silos then cracks will inevitably widen regarding the overall knowledge contained in the system. It is in these cracks that we find nothingness. While, as Ralph Stacey suggests, we might find creativity operating in the nothingness of cracks, we are also likely to find that information doesn’t pass through these cracks, leaving the system fragmented and dysfunctional. Such would seem to be the case in American health care, at least according to Elisabeth Rosenthal (2017/2018, p. 238). She observes that:

This U.S. HEALTHCARE SYSTEM gradually evolved sector by sector, hospital by hospital, doctor by doctor. What the players are doing is, technically speaking, perfectly legal. Participants in the marketplace respond to the incentives and opportunities a market allows. That's what they're supposed to do. Each component of the system is genuinely convinced that it's not so bad, not responsible for our \$3 trillion medical bill. Someone else is more to blame. Drug spending is only 10 percent of the national health budget! Nursing homes are only responsible for 5 percent of health costs! Payments to doctors only 20 percent! Dermatology accounts for only 4 percent of Medicare expenditures! Each segment of our medical system is convinced that its charges are reasonable. But put all the little excesses together and you get healthcare that is much worse and much costlier than the sum of its parts. We, the patients, are stuck in the middle, and it seems we've reached critical condition.

As in many other systems, such as American postsecondary education, the “critical condition” in American health care seems, as Makary suggests, to be “man made.” It is a product of neglected history,

inactive curiosity, and the isolation of various sectors within the system. We might come to a similar conclusion when considering other sectors of American society – such as our legislative sector and the sector that provides us with many social services.

Do It Right the First Time or Learn from the Mistakes

All of this leads to two major lessons to be learned regarding Negative Utility. The first lesson is: Do it right the first time or don't do it at all. A failed attempt at the introduction of an innovation into an organization not only results in the absence (nothingness) of a good idea being accepted; it also results in the increased resistance to new ideas in the future. Organizations become "bullet proof" and recalcitrant win the day. If new ideas and innovation projects are to be introduced, they should first be pilot tested or considered, enacted and reviewed in a temporary setting – perhaps in a collateral organization. With plans in place for the appropriate, thoughtful and gradual introduction eventually of this idea or innovation, if successful in pilot form, into the organization.

The second lesson is: If the new idea or innovation isn't working as originally planned, then use the "failure" as a source of increased insight regarding the system in which it is being initiated. If members of a system simply leave the new idea or innovation behind and place a "self-sealing" shield around it ("we don't talk about what happened"), then a void is created which hinders any new learning or improvement in the system. As Chris Argyris and Don Schön (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Argyris, 2001) have noted, there is nothing wrong in making mistakes in an organization; it is only "wrong" if nothing is learned from this mistake. The "stupid" organization is one that keeps making the same mistake. Sadly, this has often been the case in American postsecondary education and American health care.

Conclusions

Milan Kundera (1979/1999), the noted Eastern European Novelist, wrote a novel about laughter and forgetting. On behalf of the processes of forgetting, Kundera begins this seven-part novel with the story of a hat that is floating out alone in the picture of dignitaries in a Soviet Country who are reviewing the troops. It seems that one of the dignitaries was found to be "out-of-favor" with those in power. All public records of this man were expunged, including any photographic records. In essence, this man no longer ever existed. However, in the photo of the reviewing dignitaries, the man's face and body were erased, but not his hat.

Those of us who have read Kundera's novel are deeply troubled by the willingness of any society to eliminate the history of someone living in this society. However, there is a dim ray of hope to be found in the existence of the hat. Much like King Arthur found a ray of hope in the memories that Young Tom will bring back to Camelot, perhaps the history of this man can be found in the existence of the hat. It might be hard to create a complete nothingness about anything that has ever existed in life. Given Kundera's attention in his novel to both forgetting and laughter, perhaps we can at least gain a gentle appreciation for the Grace that exists in the lingering appearance of the hat. Perhaps there is a young

person—a Tom of Warwick—in some Eastern European country who notices the hat. They inquire about the person who might have been wearing the hat. And with skill and determination they resurrect the history of this man.

Where there is no memory, there is nothingness. A vacuum is created where there is no curiosity. A void exists where there is no history.

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