

The Psychology of Nothingness IV: Before, During and After Existence

William Bergquist, Ph.D.

Recently, (Bergquist, 2026a) I wrote about dancing between the raindrops (referring to the ways in which we anticipate and adjust to the world as we engage it from moment to moment). In this essay, I wish to consider the ways in which we dance in conditions where there are no raindrops. There is only a void.

Specifically, in this essay, I return to the profound and inescapable question of why there is something rather than nothing in our universe. And if there is something, how do we discern its meaning and purpose. Don Howard (2025, p. 128) put it this way:

If there is a source--of being, of time, of consciousness-it has not announced itself. It has not left instructions. It has given no clear sign that it wishes to be found. What we have is a world. Coherent. Incomplete. Capable of meaning, but unwilling to impose it.

There is a related existential question that is more personal. It concerns why we, as human beings, exist and what, if anything, is our purpose in being part of the complex and challenging environment in which we live (and which we may be destroying).

I begin by considering several of the answers that have been given to the matter of metaphysical existence.

The Matter of Existence

The most common explanation given for the existence of our universe (or many universes) is founded in a belief that there is some superior being that has created everything we see around us (the profane world)—and even that which we can't see but believe is there (the sacred world) (Eliade, 1959). All the other explanations are harder to explain or grasp. They deal somehow with a disruption in a uniform and therefore non-discernable (nothingness) field.

The Big Bang

The Big Bang results in some way from this disruption. The “secular” explanations often lead to some form of accidentalism or intrusiveness. As Gregory Bateson (1979) has noted regarding the formation of the human embryo, there must be some intrusion (pinprick) in the embryo for it to organize and orient into a viable fetus. Of course, there is the explanation that resides in the head and heart of most of us who are neither theologians nor scientists. This is the explanation that resides in the conclusion that there is no explanation: “We should just leave things alone and go on with the business of living a life in this universe however it was formed.”

As Don Howard (2025, p. 129) concludes, “[This] leaves the question not only unanswered, but entrusted to us.” Furthermore, Howard (2025, pp. 128) notes that:

. . . nearly all of [the explanations] reduce, in the end, to some version of the same two paths: either being emerged on its own, or it was given. Either it arose from nothing without cause, or it

was willed by something not subject to the conditions it created. All other answers tend to defer the question, redefine it, or dissolve it into formalisms. But the question remains. And when pressed to its foundation, it seems to leave us with just these two possibilities: that we are here because nothing could not hold. Or that we are here because something wanted us to be.

If, as Howard concludes, there are ultimately only two options, then I would suggest that the real option is between our head and our heart. Our head tells us that the only “real” answer involves some astrophysical assumption of randomness (“nothing not holding”). This option leaves us with a wounded heart.

We are left as orphans, without some devoted parent that has created the universe for our benefit. The heart-felt story of a creator leaves us with a head that is filled with doubt. As knowledgeable and thoughtful creature of the 21st Century, we are inclined to toss in the creator-story with the faulty assumption that the world was created in seven days and that human frailties are somehow assigned to the eating of a forbidden apple.

Head vs. Heart

Howard (2025, p. 128) reenters the conversation at this point, considering the implications inherent in a heart-chosen explanation for the existence of something:

Of the two possibilities . . . , one may begin to feel more coherent with the shape of the world we inhabit. Not by proof, but by resonance. A universe in which freedom exists, in which meaning must be chosen, in which love is possible but never guaranteed--such a world feels less like an accident and more like a gift. If being was given, then silence itself may be a form of trust. And the absence of command may be what allows the presence of compassion, belief, and responsibility to emerge.

It is almost as if the matter of heart producing an explanation is reversed. It is when we embrace a creator-made reality that our heart comes alive. It is when we believe that the universe is created for a purpose that our individual heart itself finds a purpose. Freedom, love, compassion, belief and responsibility would seem to be the product of our belief in a purposeful creation.

Without this belief, we are truly in a state of existential despair. Much as the existential perspective of meaningless existence emerged following World War II, with survivors of this war wondering what the purpose of life really is and if human beings are really anything other than vicious thugs, an existential perspective regarding the absence of any reason for the existence of our universe.

Howard (2025, p. 128) does make the case for non-purposeful creation as a viable explanation that need not leave us in a state of despair. However, it still leaves us without a clear sense of moral standards:

The first possibility—emergence without intention—can account for complexity, consciousness, even ethical behavior. But it cannot explain why good and evil should matter beyond function or feeling. It leaves moral experience untethered: real to us, but contingent, evolving, ungrounded. In contrast, if the world was willed into being--not by force, but by a source that gives without commanding--then goodness is not a convention, and evil is not a failure of empathy. They become features of the structure itself. Not imposed, but made possible. In such a world, freedom is not an accident of evolution. It is a condition of the gift.

Yet, with all the heart-felt reassurance and moral guidance that comes with a belief in a purposefully created universe, there is a sense of absence. That which has created our universe isn't easily seen. It is an "other" that is not easy to grasp, nor a source with which one can easily converse (other than through something such as prayer or meditation). Howard (2025, p. 128) puts it this way:

[If the purposeful and gifted creation of our universe] was given, then the source of that gift cannot be part of the world it gave. It cannot arise from being, or from potential, or from any law it makes possible. It must stand not earlier, not elsewhere--but radically other. Beyond structure, beyond logic, beyond even the possibility of contrast. If intention exists, it must come not from within the system, but from what precedes the very conditions that make a system possible.

So, we are left, ultimately, with two options. There is the heart-felt option that leaves us with a sense that we have the freedom (and responsibility) to create ourselves because the universe was created for us. Yet this option leaves us with an ultimate creator who necessarily exists beyond us and in a realm that often seems inaccessible. It is also a sacred realm governed by some omniscient and omnipotent entity that is subject to both good intentions and outcomes, as well as intentions and outcomes that at times seem to be ghastly (illness, hatred, violence and ultimately death).

There is instead the head-felt option that leaves us with a sense that everything is ultimately a crap-shot, given that our universe is no more than a glitch in an otherwise perfect state of nothingness. With the randomness and accidentalism inherent in this option, we are left on our own to find purpose and moral guidance. On the one hand, this leaves us with ultimate freedom (as opposed to the freedom that comes with belief in a freely created universe). However, this is freedom without foundation. And as shown to be the case many times in human history, we human beings, without some foundation, often exert our freedom by taking advantage of our people. We readily flip the golden rule ("those with the gold are those who rule").

Nature of Nothingness (Non-Being)

Given that neither of these options seem to be without major flaws, perhaps it is better to simply move through life without giving much thought to matters of ultimate purpose, carefully crafted Big Bangs, and glitches in the fabric of nothingness. We can also reframe the matter of purposeful being versus purposeless nothingness by giving deeper consideration to the nature of nothingness as I have done in this series of essays. We can also consider the interplay between these two options as residing at the core of our existence, as did Nicholas Berdyaev (1965, p. 27), a major representative of post-World War II existentialism.

This remarkable Russian theologian framed the matter of a created world (being) versus non-created world (non-being) as the in the following manner:

Everything compels us to admit the existence not only of being, but of non-being, of the dark abyss preceding the very beginning of the knowledge of being and the distinction between good and evil. This non-being is both lower and higher than being. It would be more exact to say that non-being does not exist, but has existential significance. Dualism, polarization, the conflict of opposing elements, is an Existential fact. We should not say that evil is non-being, but rather that the appearance of evil in the world presupposes the existence of non-being, and is inexplicably by a self-contained system of being.

For Berdyaev, the void inherent in accepting the universe as accidental is interwoven with the acceptance of the universe as created by some external "other." Both the accidental universe and the creator

represent non-being. And, as Berdyaev indicates, that which is non-being, by its very nature, does not exist. Yet, the interweaving of being and nonbeing plays out in our everyday life, as I have proposed in previous essays.

The Big Silence

We must also pause for a moment and consider another dimension of nothingness and non-being. This is inevitable end of our universe. Beginning with formulation of the second law of thermal dynamics, we have become fully aware that the universe will eventually “run out of steam.” The energy that was rapidly dispersed with the Big Bang will eventually dissipate through a process called entropy. Unlike many other processes in nature, energy (and heat in particular) only moves in one direction. There is no recovery of energy once it is engaged. In essence, our universe is slowly cooling down.

More recently, there is another reason to believe that nothingness will become more prevalent over many centuries. A major force in our universe, called dark energy, is pushing all celestial bodies outward. Our universe is expanding, resulting in greater distances between the stars. With this expansion outward, there is a growing amount of “nothingness” between the constellation of “somethings” in our universe. Residents of Mother Earth in the very distant future will be gazing out at a nighttime sky that will contain few if any visible stars.

We might speak of this ultimate state as the *Big Silence*, to bookend it with the Big Bang. At a more personal and relatively short-term level, we must also face our own non-being. We will die and our presence will be replaced not by nothingness, but rather by a distribution (dissipation) of the molecules that constitute our body. While some of us believe that there is an afterlife, we would all agree that our physical body will cease to be a viable entity.

With the capacity of transcendence, we are aware of this shift from something to nothing regarding our own physical existence; however, in this transcendence, we are capable of awareness regarding the remarkable gift of life that has been bestowed on us. With such a great amount of nothingness (vacuum) in the universe, it is something of a “miracle” to find the something that is each of us as living beings. As the astrophysicists remind us, our hand is constituted of matter that was once part of a star located somewhere in our vast galaxy. Our head and heart are composed of stardust. For this we should be eternally grateful.

The Personal Challenges

When put side by side, the curiosity about being, the fear of nonbeing, and the gratitude regarding being alive right now inevitably lead to a state of personal bewilderment—perhaps a human form of chaos. So, for a moment, it might be advisable for us to set aside our search for an external source or eternal reason that brings about something out of nothingness or that brings about nothingness out of something. We can, instead, look at the ways in which we “mere” humans do our own creative work by bringing something out of nothingness, and the ways in which we confront the prospect of nothingness replacing something.

In this essay, I specifically intend to do just that: reviewing the ways we live with and address nothingness and create something out of nothingness. I build on the analysis offered in the previous essays by focusing on our personal experiences in addressing the challenge of nothingness. I offer a six-step model, moving from a state of waiting, to the states of imagining, anticipating, creating and achieving. I then consider some of the important human outcomes that come with the movement from nothingness to something—

especially in a challenging world we confront in the mid-21st Century that is filled with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, turbulence and contradiction (VUCA-Plus) (Bergquist 2026a).

Waiting

An initial step that we often take when confronting the state of nothingness is to wait for something to emerge. As children, we wait patiently for Christmas day to arrive. Or we wait for our birthday and the accompanying celebration and gifts. As adults, we wait for the coming day when we will be wed, or we wait for the promotion or salary increase that has been promised. Waiting is a big part of our ongoing engagement of both head and heart. A strong argument is to be made that a major sign of maturity is our capacity to forgo immediate pleasure while we wait for a longer-term, bigger benefit. Don Howard (2025, p. 9) even suggests that the process of waiting resides at the head and heart of our contemplation of what we have just been addressing – the nature of existence:

In many traditions, the universe is said to have been created *ex nihilo*--"from nothing." But again, if you look closely, you find a presence lurking: a creator, a will, a mind--something prior. The "nothing" is not really nothing. It may be the absence of material, but it is not the absence of purpose. The divine remains, fully formed, ready to act. There is no true void--only a waiting. -

Yes, Howard seems to be saying that even the Supreme Creator had to wait, for some reason, before beginning the process of creating the universe. We might even suggest that this waiting continues, as so much of our universe is still being formed. The Big Bang was only a start. We (and our creator) are in the midst of an ongoing, very long-term, waiting for the universe to fully evolve. If nothing else, we certainly can declare that our universe was not created in seven days. How about a billion years of evolution, or an eternally developing evolution. This requires a vast amount of waiting. And a waiting that is likely to continue long after the human species no longer dwells on Planet Earth.

Most importantly, it is worth noting that waiting – especially long-term waiting—tends to hold religious implications. I have mentioned several instances of waiting, and many of them have to do with impending celebrations. There are the secular instances of waiting that have to do with our work in the world; however, we often must wait for the big, long-term benefits by framing them as sacred rather than secular. For those ascribing to most of the Western religions there is the long-term wait for salvation and some heavenly afterlife.

While many Eastern religions are aligned with a cyclical perspective regarding life and afterlife (there being only a return to life in some new form), the Western religions, as I mentioned in a previous essay in this series, are aligned with a linear perspective. A linear perspective leads to the conclusion that there is an end to time regarding our own life on earth and the existence of the universe or at least humankind (the *eschaton*). With the linear conclusion comes two options (much like the options we face regarding the matter of universal existence). One option is that this is the end for us, in terms of any afterlife or any form of consciousness. The second option is that there is some life after our current life, whether this be a heaven or hell, or some other form of continuing consciousness.

During the years prior to the emergence of the Christian religion, we find many communities in the Mid-east waiting for the eminent coming of the Messiah. The Essene community located in Qumran at the edge of the Dead Sea are notable in this regard (Cross, 1961). The Dead Sea Scrolls, probably prepared by the Essenes, bears direct evidence of this culture of waiting. Among those Jewish people who did not believe that the Messiah had arrived, in the presence of Jesus Christ, there remains a profound culture of waiting. The rituals and theology of the Jewish faith are filled with images of a sacred figure to come who

will liberate the Jewish people from bondage (and modern-day discrimination and threat of total annihilation). As vividly described in the scrolls, the forces of good will defeat those of evil.

For many of us, who are only partially aware of the waiting culture, there has been the insightful experience of attending a theatrical performance of *The Fiddler on the Roof* or watching the motion picture based on this Broadway musical. The waiting for a messiah by members of a Jewish community living in a Russian *shtetel* (Anatevka) is embedded in the strong traditions of this community. There is a song cut from *Fiddler on the Roof* that was sung just as Tevye, and other members of his Jewish community who were forced by the Russian government to leave their homes.

The song concerns the waiting on the part of the citizens of Anatevka for the messiah. It specifically concerns the anticipation of some future reward and a better world that the Messiah will bring to the grieving Jews who have always been living in a precarious position (like the fiddler playing a tune on the steep roof of a home in the Jewish *shtetel*):

Rabbi, we've been waiting our whole lives for the Messiah. Wouldn't this be a good time for him to come?"

When Messiah comes he will say to us, / "I apologize that I took so long, / But I had a little trouble finding you, / Over here a few and over there a few, / You were hard to reunite, but, / Everything is going to be alright/Up in heaven there, how I wrung my hands / When they exiled you from the Promised Land, / And to Babylon you went like castaways, / On the first of many many moving days, / What a day and what a blow, / How terrible I felt you'll never know/Since that day, many men, / Said to us, "Get thee out!" / Kings they were, gone they are,/ We're still here.

When Messiah comes he will say to us, / "Don't you think I know what a time you've had? / Now I'm here you'll see how quickly things improve, / You won't have to move unless you want to move, / You shall never more take flight, / Yes, everything is going to be alright."

When Messiah comes he will say to us, / "I was worried sick if you'd last or not, / And I spoke to G-d and said 'Would that be fair, / If Messiah came and there was no-one there?' / And the Lord replied to me, / 'Wait, everything will be alright you'll see.' / Many times, many men, / Took our homes, took our lives, / Kings they were, gone they are, / We're still here./When Messiah comes and his reign begins, / Truth and justice then shall appear on earth./But if this reward we would be worthy of, / We must keep our covenant with G-d above, / So be patient and devout, / And gather up your things and get thee out.

This powerful statement may have been a bit too theological for the Broadway musical audience; however, it speaks to the deeply held belief that a messiah will come, that the Jewish people need to be patient in waiting for the messiah, and that members of the Anatevka community will have to continue bearing the burden of a chosen people. There will be "truth and justice" (not just the personal happiness of the Christian heaven)—"just be patient and devout."

A secular (or slightly veiled sacred) portrayal of the waiting process is to be found in Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot* (Becket, 2011). In this famous and controversial existential play, two main characters, Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo), spend their days waiting for someone named Godot. Much as in the case of Jewish and Christian believers, these two protagonists believe Godot will provide them with salvation. They pass the time in the play with conversations, physical routines, and philosophical musings—often leaving the audience bored or impatient. While the audience is losing hope in the play, Didi and Gogo are losing faith that Godot will ever arrive.

Along the way, Didi and Gogo meet with three other people, leading to the cyclical repetition of actions and dialogue. Godot is repeatedly promised for "tomorrow." He never appears in the play, leaving the characters in a state of existential uncertainty. One of the play's recurring themes is sleep. There are two instances when Gogo falls asleep in the play and has nightmares. He wants to tell Didi about them when he wakes up. Gogo doesn't want to hear the dreams, for they convey a state of entrapment.

It is almost as if the characters in this Becket play are lingering in a state of Limbo—somewhere between life and death. As I noted in the third essay in this series (Bergquist, 2026c), this state is closely aligned with the experience of nothingness, for one is neither "here nor there." In this essay, I noted the gray tones represented in Sibelius' *Swan of Tuonela* and the existential despair attending Kierkegaard's description in *Sickness unto Death* of a boat adrift on the deep and troubled sea. Both portrayals represent something of the emotions associated with Limbo (and Becket's tormented play).

The state of Limbo is also aligned with William Bridges's "neutral zone" while one is embarking on a major life transition (Bridges, 1980). In a video recording available in the Library of Professional Coach Agnes Mura and I (Mura and Bergquist, 2020) offered a metaphor of pushing away from shore in a fragile boat and finding oneself in the midst of a foggy sea without a clear vision of the shore to which one wishes to travel nor a clear view back to the shore from which one embarked. This is Bridge's "neutral zone," which commonly experienced whenever we are embarking on a major new project or addressing a significant challenge (such as COVID-19). It is while waiting in the boat for the fog to clear or for our boat to be somehow pulled to the desired shore (God's or Fate's intervention) that nothingness is present and deeply experienced.

It is in this state that we must initiate the second step. We must imagine the nature of the shore to which we wish to travel and the purpose of journeying from the previous, safe shore to the new shore. It is in the engagement of imagination that we create something out of nothing.

Imagining

We wait because we can imagine. A member of the Qumran community could imagine the waters pouring down from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea, and the Sea, in turn, coming to life with an abundance of fish. And in this imagining, I can create a complementary vision of a world of mercy and justice flowing down from Jerusalem, leading to a new life for all members of our community—and perhaps all members of the broader human community. And, as a member of the Anatevka community, I can similarly imagine a world in which all humans (including Jews) are treated with justice and mercy. I am willing to wait, given this vivid image. And perhaps there is no option other than to wait, because justice and mercy are not to be found in the world where I now dwell.

Intuition

Let's move back for a moment from the desert of the Mideast and the bleak winters of Russia. I turn to the wisdom of Carl Jung (1971), who distinguishes between two important psychic functions. One function is what he calls *Sensation (Sensing)*. This is our capacity to view the outside world. Via sight, sound, touch and feel, we can take in and process stimuli from the external environment. The second function is one that Jung calls *Intuition (Intuiting)*. This distinct contribution by Jung concerns our capacity to generate internal images that operate independent of the external world.

A poignant example of this internalizing Intuition function is reported in Oliver Sacks' (2008) book about music and the mind. He reports an incident recounted by Jerome Bruner, a noted psychologist. Bruner apparently loved classical music and plays a recording of a piece of music one day that he particularly enjoyed. Bruner went to replace the recording and discovered that he had never played this work in the first place. He had imagined this work of art in full detail in his own mind. I had the fortune to take a course from Jerome Bruner at Harvard University. He requires heavy glasses and I suspect doesn't see well even wearing the glasses. As a result, he might be creating many aspects of his world in his mind rather than relying on stimuli from the outside world. As he noted in one of his more influential books, Jerome Bruner (1973) is going "beyond the information given."

It is important to note that when we are faced with nothingness, as in contemplating the Great Silence, the sensing function fails to operate. A Mideastern Desert and a nearby Dead Sea offer very little, as does the struggling community of Anatevka. There is little, if nothing to see, hear, taste or feel. There isn't much for Dr. Bruner to hear when he fails to activate his recording. We are confronted with a blank screen and must turn to the Intuitive function for any guidance or sense of meaning – much as we must "makeup" stories when viewing an Ink Blot or ambiguous picture.

This capacity to envision something that doesn't exist in the external world provides us with many benefits including creating something new, anticipating something that could happen, and replay (actually re-create) past experiences. Unicorns live in our Intuitive realm, along with that meeting that will be held tomorrow, and that splendid birthday party held for us last week. Each of these items in our Intuitive realm exists independent of the external world. They may or may not be accurate portrayals of an upcoming event or past event. They are often just variants on Unicorns and other mythic figures and events.

All these benefits relate to the adaptive functions that enable us to survive in a sometimes hostile or at least challenging environment. It should also be noted, however, that the Intuitive function can also get us in trouble. As Robert Sapolsky (2004) has noted we can envision something that is threatening but doesn't actually exist (imagined lions). More generally, we can adopt a strong internal schema (Piaget, 1923/2001; Bartlett, 1995) that does a very effective job of creating images, expectations and memories that bear little resemblance to what has occurred or will occur in the external environment.

Transcendence

Among the benefits of imagination that may be of great benefit, but also may create major troubles and misery, is the capacity of transcendence. We can imagine what is not there, because what we are envisioning is too large (such as the history of humankind), too far into the future (future of humankind), or too complex (nature and purpose of existence). Perhaps unlike other species, humans are fully aware that they will die someday, and that the world will "live on" past their mortal existence.

As the existential philosophers (such as Sartre), psychologists (such as Rollo May), and theologians (such as Paul Tillich) repeatedly emphasize, we are profoundly anxious and wandering aimlessly on our planet precisely because we have this capacity to transcend—imagining that which is very large, existing in the future and elusively complex. We can imagine not just Sapolsky's attacking lions, but also our own death and the seemingly indifference of the universe to our death. We become religious, existential poets, or the users of mind and emotion altering drugs (Gerald May) precisely because of this capacity to imagine.

Given these general, often disturbing, capacities of human imagination, I turn to some of the more positive and constructive uses of imagination by we humans.

Unity of Opposites

Our capacity to transcend allows us to not just step outside ourselves, lift ourselves to a higher plane and look down upon the history, future and scope of our universe, but also to step “inside” ourselves, so that we might view the ongoing dialogue (and warfare) among the diverse forces and entities operating in our psyche. And in this viewing of our internal life, we can also imagine the unity of opposite and often opposing psychic forces and entities. I invite the Jungians at this point to describe what occurs when imagination is engaged to bring about unification.

Van Eenwyk (1997, Pp. 37-38) specifically writes about the engagement of imagination to produce “unifying symbols”:

Images that “help us over” are known as “uniting symbols” in light of their ability to combine opposites into a symbolic unity. They are the platypuses in the world of symbols, resolving tensions by combining seemingly contradictory elements into a unique whole. As such, they are extraordinarily powerful symbols that transcend and transform the perspective of the ego, leading to new directions and patterns for growth. By creating transitions, such symbols “give rise to becoming, to individuation, to the metamorphosis of personality. [Peter Homans, “Psychology and Hermeneutics: Jung’s Contributions”, p. 353]

Jung viewed these symbols as “highways” that are traveled by the psyche through an internal environment that is filled with oppositional forces. These are forces that can block this travel if the symbol is not present. The Mandala is a common unified system. It was frequently used by Carl Jung, and displayed in his *Red Book* (Jung, 2009), during his personal journal at Küsnacht. The Ying/Yang is another unifying symbol, as is the Phoenix rising from the ashes.

An important unifying symbol for me is the Banyan Tree. Its spreading branches take root at a distance from the main trunk; furthermore, merchants, traders and would-be philosophers, called the Banians, traded information and insights while sitting under the Banyan Tree. This unifying symbol was particularly important for me when I was presiding over a graduate school that recruited students from throughout the world, who would share perspectives and practices while residing under my school’s “Banyan Tree.”

We can also turn to a more “practical” version of the unification process, found in the writing of Barry Johnson about polarity management. As I noted in the third essay in this series, polarities, according to Johnson (1996/2020) polarities “live in us and we live in them” Specifically, Johnson identifies polarities as “interdependent pairs that need each other over time.” Much as the Ying needs the Yang, and the Jungian Shadow needs the Persona, all polarities exist precisely because its opposite also exists. According to Johnson, polarities are pervasive. “They exist in every level of system from the inside of our brains to global issues.” Their soul-wrenching impact is based on their “unavoidable, unsolvable (in that you can’t choose one pole as a sustainable solution), indestructible, and unstoppable” presence.

As Johnson notes, we tend to linger briefly on the advantages inherent in one option when confronted with two viable polarizing options. Then we begin to recognize some of the disadvantages associated with this option. We are pulled to the second option. Yet, as we linger on this second option, we discover that

this perspective or practice has flaws and disadvantages. We are led back to the first policy—and must again face the disadvantages inherent in this first option. The swing has begun from option one advantage to option one disadvantage to option two advantage to option two disadvantage back to option one advantage. We are whipped back and forth. Anxiety increases regarding the swing and failure to find the “right” answer. The vacillation also increases in both intensity and rapidity. This is what the dynamics of polarization are all about. Inadequate time and attention are devoted to each option.

Polarity management begins with reframing our focus from Either/Or to Both/And—thus bringing in the Right-Column focus on Integration. We imagine the integration, much as Jungians imagine a unifying symbol to bring about an integration of opposing psychic forces and entities. The next step is to recognize the value inherent in each perspective or practice—thus bringing an Appreciative focus to the Left-Column. Rather than immediately jumping to the problems and barriers associated with each option (which drives us to the second option), we spend time in the appreciative column seeking a better understanding of the merits associated with each option. Only then do we consider the “downside” of this option—and only then do we turn to the other option (once again noting its strengths and then its downside). Each reframing and appreciative process requires imagination in Johnson’s management of polarity.

The Jungians also have something to say about the unification of polarities. I turn once again to Van Eenwyk (1997, P. 39), “. . . the psyche is polaristic, . . . energy is generated by tensions of opposites, and . . . there is an ongoing oscillation, or jumping back and forth”, much as Barry Johnson suggests. Van Eenwyk suggests that this intra-psychic polarity exists between actuality and potential. Furthermore, in the world of Jungian psychology (Van Eenwyk, 1997, p. 39):

Synchronic dynamics are essentially oscillatory dynamics. Furthermore, . . . psychological development is a function primarily of the resolution of tensions (emphasizing the ego’s awareness), corresponds with one of the more intriguing hypotheses about chaotic dynamics, that of symmetry-building bifurcations, whereby chaotic dynamics actually generate a higher order result coming out than existed going in.

Following this rather abstract statement about Jungian synchronicity, Van Eenwyk (1997, p. 39) offers a very tangible example of polarity unification:

. . . [L]ittle stuffed animals [as transitional objects] . . . play an even more important role than we thought. For they not only help children to connect with others, they also give them a feeling for what those connections are like. Eventually, children relinquish their little companions for their flesh and blood friends. They learn to let go of the more familiar and to reach out to the less familiar. Nothing is more critical to the development of their egos.

While transitional objects, such as the stuffed animal, lessen the chaos of transitions, they do not eradicate it. They just make the transition a little more manageable. In essence, the transitional object is a personal and quite tangible unifying symbol. Applying Barry Johnson’s perspective, we might suggest that the stuffed animal helps to bring about the child’s management of a polarity between deep, nostalgic yearning for the past and genuine, excitement about the emerging future. The stuffed animal reminds the child of their past and reassures them that the past will always remain with them. However, the stuffed animal is being brought with the child into their future, suggesting that the future need not be too scary.

To put things together, we can consider the gap that forms between two external (environmental) polarities to be representative of a state of nothingness. It is when the polarities are brought together and integrated in our imagination and then managed in real life that nothingness becomes something. Similarly, nothingness is found within the gap that is formed when two internal (psychic) forces or entities are opposed to one another. The imagined unifying symbol helps to fill the gap and creates something out of nothing.

We also find gaps to exist between what we introduced in the third essay as Henry Murray's intrapsychic needs and environmental presses (Murray, 1938/2001). The need for achievement, for instance, might be challenged by an environmental press that calls for stability, just as the need for continuity might be challenged by an environmental press that calls for innovation. Integration is required between these needs and presses for us to remain successful in adapting to the shifting challenges during our lifetime. A unified symbol of thoughtful yet opportunistic entrepreneurship might bring together achievement (n) and stability (p), as well as continuity (n) and innovation (p).

Assimilation and Accommodation

Imagination also plays a major role in the dual processes of learning—accommodation and assimilation—that were identified many years ago by Jean Piaget, and that I offered in the first essay in this series (Bergquist, 2026b).

Adaptation: We find that imagination accompanies assimilation, in particular, as the external information is being altered or perhaps fully transformed in accordance with an existing schema. We interpret new experiences by first imagining how they fit into an existing schema or might even test out several schemata to see which is most appropriate. For instance, when we are confronted with an unknown animal while hiking on a mountain trail, we might initially imagine that this animal is “like” the bears featured in movies who are dangerous and attacking. Or perhaps this animal is more like the teddy bear that was loved and cuddled when we were children. After this initial, quite imaginative appraisal, we recognize that this animal is too small to be a bear and is certainly not an animal to be hugged! Perhaps it is a badger? We have heard of badgers, but don't know much about them. So, we shift to accommodation, recognizing that we need to apply a new category to this animal. We must be observant regarding this animal's behavior to see if it could harm us.

Essentially, the process of assimilation allows the mind to maintain cognitive stability and consonance (avoiding cognitive dissonance). Our mind uses imagination to interpret and reinterpret unfamiliar information. The new information is imagined as fitting with familiar patterns (growling bear or teddy bear), making learning efficient and minimally demanding. That is until none of the familiar patterns work (this is not a bear of any kind); at this point, something “new” is required to accommodate what has been received.

Imagination also plays a prominent role in the process of anticipation that I have featured in a presentation on the Polystatic process in my recent book (Bergquist, 2026a). In essence, I have proposed that we are always anticipating what is about to happen in our immediate environment either because of something we have just done in this environment or because of the shifting conditions of this environment that have other sources. With this anticipation, we adjust our desired baseline and our intended actions. We are constantly changing this baseline (Polystasis) rather than returning to some pre-

existing baseline (Homeostasis). For a brief moment, we imagine how our modified actions would impact the environment we now face. We may adjust these actions based on the imagined impact. All of this happens very quickly and is accompanied by ongoing adjustments in our physiological state (Sterling, 2020).

Given the central role played by anticipation in the process of navigating our changing environment, it is worth noting that anticipation is dominant with assimilation. When there is a good match with an existing schema, while preparing for the immediate future, then little adjustment is needed in either the baseline or actions to be taken. We “relax” with our “beliefs” regarding the environment we must encounter and will often engage habitual behavior and rely on simple heuristics associated with the schema we have applied to the current situation.

For instance, if we enter a meeting room and find that a good friend is present, then we embrace our “good friend” schemata and imagine appropriate action to be taken based on this schema. We immediately imagine how we have always greeted this person, or how we are accustomed to greeting good friends. We imagine smiling, briskly walking over to this person and either shaking their hand or giving them a hug. We imagine offering some well-rehearsed words of greeting (e.g. “Great to see you today” or “Wow, what a joy to see that you are here at the meeting.”).

All this takes place in a very brief period of time and is rarely a process of which we are aware. We consider (anticipate) how our friend is likely to react to the actions we anticipate taking. Our assumption is that they will like what we are doing and saying. Given this assumption, we enact what we have imagined. Typically, all of this processing is guided by habit (the way we “always” greet a friend), and involves what Daniel Kahneman (2011) labeled “fast-thinking.”

What happens if we mistake the person we see in the meeting room? What if this person looks like a friend but is actually someone we have never met. We quickly adjust our imagined actions and even our baseline (what will make us comfortable in this relationship). Alternatively, this person is a friend but is also someone from a quite different culture. Our habitual greeting might be inappropriate. We sort through our “catalogue” of behavior patterns.

We select one that would seem to be more appropriate for this person and their culture. We quickly imagine what we will do in meeting this person, imagine what their reactions are likely to be, and then engage what we have imagined will be appropriate. While this readjusted set of greeting behaviors is quickly processed, it requires a bit more of Kahneman’s “slow thinking.” Regular habitual behavior must be set aside. Non-habitual behavior must be retrieved from our memory of past encounters with this person or with other people from their culture. We imagine a quite different scenario in greeting this person.

All this anticipation and adjustment is engaged in the midst of a broader process of assimilation and accommodation. With assimilation, anticipation is quick. It requires very little adjustment. By contrast, as evident in meeting a person who looks like but is not a friend, or a person who comes from a different culture, accommodation will replace the accustomed (habitual) assimilation. As a sidenote, some of us are inclined to apply assimilation all or most of the time. We live with strong schemata that dominate our actions and are often self-fulfilling.

By contrast, some of us are perpetual “learners” who find or create many situations in which we must engage the accommodation process. We either seek out new experiences or find a “good” reason to consider what is new and different in even the settings where we often dwell. As someone who is a strong “accommodator” we are always “taking notes” about what is to be learned. David Kolb (1983) has written extensively about these two different approaches to learning, as well as identifying process related to divergence (focusing on differences) and convergence (focusing on similarities).

Creativity: Most of the time there are shifts between the processes of assimilation and accommodation as a function of adaptation to environmental changes or changes in our perception of the environment. As Piaget suggests, they are two sides of the same coin. And we often flip the coin in order to be adaptive. On occasion, there is a different reason to engage both assimilation and accommodation.

These two processes can be intertwined to serve a creative purpose. I recently experienced this intertwining when listening to Gabriela Ortiz’s Violin Concerto (*Altar de Cuerda*). First, there are themes that we know well and can easily assimilate; these are followed by themes that are new to us and require that we adjust that to which we are accustomed. Ortiz’s concerto is at the same time radically different and aligned with traditional musical forms.

On the one hand, I found when listening to this piece of music by Ortiz that it is unique and at times even disturbing. Yet, on the other hand, I felt perfectly comfortable listening to the elaborate, often rhythmic, and frequently soaring tones of this remarkable musical composition. There are gaps at times in this concerto as it makes some remarkable transitions. These musical moments of “nothingness” are some filled with the interplay between assimilating musical familiarity and accommodating musical departure. I suspect that many moments of creativity and innovation involve not so much a blending of accommodation and assimilation, as a novel juxtaposition of these two states—much as Gabriela Ortiz accomplishes.

Thrills

Many sources of thrill are available to us in the mid-21st Century, ranging from riding on a deep-drop roller coaster to watching a scary movie. As noted many years ago, an arousal jag can come from a ride on the Magnum XL or watching the man in the hockey mask rev up his chain saw. We somehow find it motivating to experience a temporary increase in our level of neural activation (arousal) (Berlyne, 1960).

Of even greater interest in studying the psychology of nothingness is to acknowledge that we can get this arousal jag when just imagining a ride on the roller coaster or sitting there affixed to our theater seat when the chain saw is started. Apparently, we can arouse ourselves when moving from a blank screen in our mind (nothingness) to imagining a scary ride or scary moment (something thrilling).

Later, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) proposed that arousal may occur when we engage in an activity that is something we can accomplish, even though it is anxiety-producing. This experience of what Csikszentmihalyi calls Flow might be scaling a cliff or taking on a skilled rival in a game of chess. This highly motivating state of Flow is thrilling. Like the roller coaster or slasher movie, this thrill is produced in a transition from nothingness to something that is challenging yet realizable. Unlike the roller coaster or slasher movie, Flow is a form of thrill that is produced by something we do rather than just something we

experience. However, as in the case of the coaster or slashing, we can experience a “vicarious” flow when simply imagining our rock climbing or chess match.

More generally, we are thrilled when we encounter something that is pleasant, but unexpected. Our anticipation must shift from the expected to the unexpected. For instance, we are thrilled when encountering another person or experiencing an event, not just because that person or event is notable, “shiny” or beautiful. There must also be something unique about this person or event but also eerily familiar. And there must be a setting in which this person appears, or an event occurs which enhances the notability, shone or beauty.

The “shiny” familiarity, yet uniqueness, related to what psychoanalysts identify as “transference.” We find something familiar in that which is thrilling because it “reminds” us of something old that is stored in our memory. Usually this something old is hooked to some emotionally-laden relationship (psychic object) of the past—such as a parent figure, dominating uncle or grandmother, or even hero or heroine in a story, comic strip, movie or TV show from our childhood. The thrilling encounter is “shiny” because the transference typically comes with a strong dose of *Id* energy (a primitive source of primitive emotions related to the transferred object).

For instance, many years ago, I encountered the actor, Gregory Peck, emerging for the La Jolla Playhouse in Southern California. I was thrilled to see this actor, not only because he is notable, quite handsome and immediately gracious when meeting me and other “fans”. I was also thrilled because I was “surprised” to see this notable figure in person, given that my image of him was as he was featured in movies I saw as a young person.

I was thrilled with my transference of the Gregory Peck I was on the “silver screen”. Furthermore, Gregory Peck was “shiny” not only in his gracious greeting of me, but also in the emotional charge he brought with him from the movies in which he starred as a heroic figure. The thrill was further enhanced by his emergence from an exceptional theater (that he helped to form). It became immediately apparent to me that his “luster” extended beyond the motion picture to the “legitimate” stage.

I would have enjoyed going to an event that featured Gregory Peck talking about his career; however, it was much more “thrilling” to see him unexpectedly leaving this theater and shaking hands and greetings with me and a few other people who happened to be walking by the theater as he emerged. The human capacity to be *Thrilled* requires that we can imagine what is not there. In the midst of being thrilled about meeting Gregory Peck and in moments that linger after meeting him, I thought about and felt thrilled that a moment of nothingness (just walking by the theater) was replaced by something great and extraordinary.

I had to imagine not meeting Peck, as a complement to actually meeting him. The thrill involves the imagining of both nothing and something. Added to this would be the imagining of walking by the La Jolla Playhouse just prior to Peck’s entrance from the theater. This further imagination would elicit yet another emotion, this being the potential for regret. I was “lucky” to meet Gregory Peck and thereby avoid the punishing emotion of regret if I was to later find that Peck had left the theater just moment before or after I walked by.

Thrills are indeed complex emotions that are highly motivating. They require the capacity to imagine, which is complemented by some knowledge about the person or event being encountered and the setting in which the encounter takes place (be it a meeting room, rock cliff or chess tournament). In the case of thrills associated with an interpersonal encounter, there might also be a dose of transference and related Id-induced emotions. In the case of a roller coaster, slasher movie, rock cliff or chess tournament, there might be a dose of adrenaline, whether this event is engaged or just imagined.

Adaptive Defenses

While thrills often involve a bit of anxiety whether the event is enacted or imagined (or a whole lot of anxiety when actually riding on the Maximum XL coaster), there are times when the anxiety is neither wanted nor a source of positive motivation. It is in our defense against anxiety that we make some of our most important uses of imagination. The frightening genie has slipped out of the box, and we must use our imagination to return it to the box. We are about to take a test for a new job and are reminded of our failure to complete a test as teenagers. Our son is two hours late returning home on a Saturday evening. It is snowing outside and he has been driving for only one year. We must imagine away our anxiety in each of these cases.

Many years ago, Anna Freud (1992/2018), the daughter of Sigmund Freud and co-founder of a school of psychoanalysis called ego-psychology, provided a description of several different ways in which we defend against anxiety (putting the genie back in the box). These defensive strategies range from a very primitive denial and repression to a more sophisticated process called sublimation.

When dealing with test-anxiety, we might be inclined to initiate one of the primitive defenses. We can repress our teenage experience by focusing on other times when we were a successful test-taker. Our evening waiting for the arrival of our son might involve redirecting (sublimate) the energy associated with our anxiety to some diverting activity, such as working on a crossword puzzle or preparing a new batch of cookies.

Each of these defensive strategies involves imagination and the creation of something out of nothing. We imagine a test-taking success that we haven't recalled for many years. We suddenly choose to work on the puzzle or heat up the oven to cook the cookies. At other times, we use our imagination to defensively distort reality, lie to ourselves, or simply ignore what is occurring out in the world. Applying an ego-psychology perspective, we are using ego-functions (perception, cognition, memory) to construct a barrier against intrusive psychic events that are saturated with anxiety. We then find a way to either put the event and anxiety back in the box (repression, denial) or convert the anxiety into something more productive (and leave the event lingering with only minimal attendant anxiety).

Adaptive Adjustments

In this section, I have considered how imagination can help to produce a pleasant effect (thrill), as well as a defense against anxiety. I have also considered how imagination can serve a basic adaptive function in helping us adjust to what we think will occur in the near future; especially what will probably occur that relates to our own immediate actions. As the ego-psychologists would propose, our Ego serves as a critical intermediary between our inner life and the environment (reality) in which we operate. We imagine what will occur out in the "real" world and use this imagined (anticipated) occurrence to adjust our subsequent

actions, and our baseline (desired state). Emotions are aroused in association with the perceived reality, the process of adjustment, and the shifting baseline.

I turn now to a more detailed description of this anticipatory process.

Anticipating

We wait, we imagine, and we anticipate. We wait and imagine not only long-term, but also very short term. Our waiting and imagining are taking place every moment of our life. They take place while we anticipate what is about to happen and adjust our mind, body and actions to this anticipation. As I have already noted, I have proposed that there is a dominant process related to anticipation that I have labeled Polystasis.

We adjust our expectations (baseline) when assessing changes in the environment where we are operating. We also change our planned behavior based on shifts not only in our baseline, but also in what we imagine will be the impact of our behavior in the changed environment. While the anticipation and subsequent adjustments are often quite minor in a highly stable environment, they can be frequent and dramatic in an environment that “doesn’t behave itself” (VUCA-Plus).

Bubbles and Patterns

Often what we anticipate relates to deeply embedded assumptions, biases, hopes, fears and beliefs. We keep expecting something to occur, or we anticipate that the world will react in a certain way to our pattern of behavior. While this anticipation might be proven wrong on many occasions, we are likely to retain the assumptions, biases, hopes, fears and beliefs in a bubble that allows in no disconfirmations, (Weitz and Bergquist, 2024).

At a more fundamental level, our anticipations are based on the human capacity to discern patterns in the environment we inhabit. The discernment of patterns enables we humans to act quickly and to find meaning in our life. Many people in history have ascribed the existence of patterns to some divine presence, whether this pattern be the yearly flooding of the Fertile Crescent in the Mideast (leading to the narrative of Noah and the Ark), or the presence of disease when water in a community is contaminated (leading to public health reforms).

Applying his Jungian perspective, Van Eenwyk (1997, p. 66) suggests that consciousness might be closely associated with this pattern-recognition function (relating consciousness to the recently discovered presence of fractals, as natural patterns to be found in many domains of life):

Is consciousness tantamount to the overlapping of fractal attractors? Freeman thinks it is. Based on his research, he feels that the subjective experience of adjusting to new experiences is what builds consciousness. Certainly symmetry building seems consistent with the building up of patterns over time. For not only are the patterns in fractal attractors self-similar across scale, so too are the attractors themselves. If that were not so, we couldn't lump them together under a definition. Consequently, fractal attractors are themselves informed by patterns of organization.

Using some different terms to appreciate what Van Eenwyk is proposing, the fundamental makeup of human consciousness might be based in or at least supported by our capacity to find patterns (fractals).

We are conscious because we are aware, and we are aware because we can discern consistency in our environment. Our world is not the “one great blooming, buzzing confusion” that William James (1890) believed exists in the new-born child’s mind; rather, it is a world in which we can anticipate repeated environmental occurrence and can reasonably expect our behavior to have a certain effect. We can also anticipate the behavior of other people, even though we recognize that their consciousness is different from our own (Theory of mind). We also can anticipate that we can create a specific shared set of beliefs, hopes, fears, etc. with other people.

Van Eenwyck seems to be suggesting that consciousness only exists or is viable in a world “that behaves itself” by offering continuing, consistency, patterns and many fractals. This suggests that successful anticipation typically assumes a close system with locked in variables. However, anticipation can be an open system in which new variables enter the picture and change their value and relationship with other variables. The world is filled with variable, uncertain, complex, ambiguous, turbulent and contradictor conditions (VUCA-Plus) (Bergquist, 2026a). At every turn there is a surprise. It may be thrilling, but it also requires accommodation. Furthermore, it requires a full incorporation of Polystasis. Things don’t just return to their previous form and stasis (homeostasis).

To return to the perspective of the Ego psychologists, we might consider the Id to be operating in the primordial condition of “blooming, buzzing confusion,” while the Super-Ego, as a counter to the Id, is operating in a similar state of highly emotional (blooming and buzzing) non-reasoning. It is the Ego that not only tempers and directs the emotionally laded impulses of the Id and Super-ego but also provides adaptive guidance through the detection of patterns and discovery (or invention) of meaning. The challenge to the Ego is great in mid-21st Century life, given the VUCA-Plus conditions.

While the Id knows nothing about good and evil, and the Super-ego firmly differentiates between good and evil, the Ego can bring the two together, in large part because it identifies important cause-and-effect patterns. We anticipate good coupled with bad: “It will be hard, but good for me.” We can also identify the good that is hidden behind the bad: “what she did seems to be bad; however, there was a good reason for her to do what she did.” It is with anticipation of patterned cause-and-effects that we are able not only make sense of the world, but also act in a reasonable, ethical manner.

In our Ego-based making sense of our world, we encounter a variety of circumstances that require flexible, adaptive anticipation. For instance, sometimes, we will anticipate nothingness. This can be a “bad” thing if we were hoping that something would occur. “Nothing has occurred and I am discouraged.” At other times, “nothing” is a good thing, such as when a wound has healed and is no longer “there”. We take medication to reduce fear, eliminate pain, or reduce swelling. The medication has been successful. There is now “nothing” in terms of an unhealthy bodily condition.

At other times, anticipation brings something to consciousness that had been neglected or denied. We might have declared that there is “nothing” there with regard to fear, hope, or bias. However, we soon find that our anticipations are no longer accurate. We make the wrong move. The reaction of other people to our behavior is surprising. Our expectations (baseline) end up being way out of line. We suddenly must look deeper into our intra-psychic operations. We discover that we have been “covering over” an important feature of our environment because we are afraid of this feature or don’t understand how it operates. We are making assumptions about the other person’s thoughts and feelings that are false. Our

“theory of mind” about this person is laced with images of our father’s unforgiving attitudes about potential failures. While we might benefit from a few sessions on the psychoanalyst’s couch, we can also gain important insights into our inner life by reflecting on the accuracy of our anticipations.

One final point about the operation of anticipations. To make this point, I bring in the analyses to be conducted by those offering a system dynamics perspective. There are important dynamics operating in the polystatic processes of anticipation that concern valence and delay. First, we must acknowledge that our anticipations are often not quite timely, even though they are quickly made. There are often at least short delays in our recognition of a shift in the environment. This is where the matter of Valence comes in.

As I have already mentioned, there may be frequent shifts in a VUCA-Plus saturated environment. However, it is even more important to consider the magnitude and duration of the shifts that are made. Magnitude is based on strength and level of activity. We anticipate the magnitude, as well as the duration of a change. We dramatically adjust baselines and actions if the change is great. We are likely also to make major changes if we anticipate that the change will last a long time. If the anticipated environmental change is of small magnitude and duration, then we are less like to make major adjustments in either baseline or action.

This all well-and-good, as long as the delay in recognizing the change is not great. However, if there is any significant delay then “all hell is likely to break loose!” We are too late adjusting our baseline and modifying our actions. As result, we are likely to be wrong, given how things have changed during the delay. Our inappropriate baseline and actions now create new problems in the environment, bringing about further changes in this environment. And then we are delayed in acknowledging and adjusting to these further environmental changes, leading to further misjudgments, additional environmental changes, further disruption, etc. We find in all systems that delays can profoundly impact the operations of this system, especially if the delays occur when seeking to alter fundamental parameters of this system (Meadows, 2008).

As Jay Forrester, the founder of System Dynamics, always declared, it is better to do nothing, than to do something, if you don’t understand what is occurring right now regarding the system in which you are now operating. This certainly applies when we are attempting to anticipate the state of an environment that is making a high magnitude and long duration change. It is better to do nothing until the dynamics operating in this environment are appreciated to at least some extent.

Daniel Kahneman (2011) suggests that this is a time to do some slow thinking, and as Don Schön suggests, this is also a time for reflecting on one’s practice. I have already mentioned that this critical reflection can not only assist us in making better decisions based on more valid anticipation; this reflection can also help us access some of the deeper, often unconscious assumptions biases, hopes and fears that can distort not just anticipations regarding the current environment, but also environments which we engage in the near future.

Creating

We move from waiting, to imagining, to anticipating, and to creating based on the anticipation. As the name implies, creation is an act of actually making something out of nothing. It is sculpting a magnificent statue of David out of the nothingness of a block of marble (and it was declared to be an unfit block of

marble by other Florentian sculptures). It is the invention of a storage device using a tiny amount of sand (formed into silicon) that has no business storing a vast quantity of memory. It is a nascent idea that gets forged into a new low-cost electric tool by a group of employees at a hardware manufacturing company. It is what emerges from the cracks in an organization (Stacey, 1996).

While waiting, imagining and anticipating all take place in a single or collective brain, creating involves the actual translation of nothing into something. We can actually witness the invention, the verbal articulation and enactment of the creative idea, or the work of the artist.

Backburners and Pop Outs

A description of the creative process often involves a creative idea first residing on “the back burner” of our mind (Ghiselin, 1961/1985). This back burner state is frequently referred to as *Incubation*. We work on the idea via incubation after initially identifying our interest in considering a new project, concept or desire to solve an impending problem. We might initially try to do this work on a front burner (consciousness) but soon run into roadblocks. A block will often our own rationality, preconceived notions of what the result should be, and/or anxiety that accompanies a strong desire to be creative. We know that anxiety produces rigid thinking (*einstellung*). This creates the ironic condition of trying too hard to be creative.

We give up our conscious work and assign the work to our back burner (unconsciousness)—usually without realizing that we have made this assignment. Sometime later, the creative idea or product will suddenly come to the surface, being fully formed or at least much further along that it was when we were directly and consciously confronting the task. It is interesting to note, that the finished or almost finished idea or product often “pops out” when we are dreaming, taking a shower, driving our car, playing with our children, dining out at a restaurant, or doing something else that is not easily set aside to record the idea. We race out of the shower, leap out of bed, or pull over the car to find a piece of paper. We disrupt playing with our child to record our idea. We find a paper napkin on which to write our idea at the restaurant.

We might consider this pop-up to be engaged when we are relaxed or distracted. When we are first working consciously on the idea or project it is something. We might be able to see it fully realized, but we know it is “there” somewhere for us to somehow reach or grasp. We are frustrated because it is not immediately available. Our frustration and accompanying self-anger produce anxiety, which as I have noted serves as a powerful roadblock to creativity. It is often necessary that the idea or product emerge from nothingness. We are attending to something else, or we are asleep or relaxed and not attending to anything in particular. And then our creative work appears—with or without the assistance of our Shadow!

In Between and Interacting

While the outcomes of creativity can be observed, the processes associated with creativity are not visible. We can’t view our work occurring in the state of Incubation. Like the processes of waiting, imagining and anticipating, the initial steps in the life of creativity are played out inside our head and heart. From the outside, during these early moments of creativity, we see nothing. Yet, creativity is typically a response to something outside ourselves. There is a block of marble, the demand for a highly condensed storage

device, the wish for a less expensive electric saw, an opportunity in the niche of an organization to do something different. Creativity is to be found in between our psyche and the external world.

Furthermore, there is always direct or indirect involvement of other people in the intersect between our inner and outer life. Everything I have suggested about the processes of waiting, imagining, anticipating, and now creativity speaks to a radical, interactive and constructed version of reality. Each of these processes involves an interaction between our inner world and our outer world as mediated through our interactions with other people. Atwood and Stolorow (1979/1993) use the term, inter-subjectivity, when describing the nature of this interplay between the inner world, outer world and interpersonal relationships. For Atwood and Stolorow (1979/1993. p. 189) “human experience is always embedded in an irreducible engagement with others.” We create reality out of nothingness through our interpersonal interactions.

In alignment with Atwood and Stolorow, I would propose that the multi-step movement from nothingness to something ultimately involves this human interaction. We find human interaction in the invention of inexpensive tools, creation of the silicon chip, and innovation in the organizational crevice. Even the sculpture is considering the image of David in the marble as this biblical figure would be seen by the viewing public. Atwood and Stolorow suggest that this interaction with other people is central to all constructions of reality. In that sense, all human views of reality are creative. And all products of creativity are fashioned directly or indirectly through interactions with other people.

Persona and Shadow

The Jungians have something similar to say about the nature of creativity as based in the interplay between our inner world, our outer world, and our relationship with other people. Applying this Jungian perspective, Van Eenwyk (1997, Pg. 33) sets the stage for considering the creative act. He frames this act as based on a tension existing between two oppositional intrapsychic entities. There is the *Persona*, which is directed outward toward one’s relationship with other people and the *Shadow*, which attends to matters internal to the psyche:

A tension arises between who we are and who the environment wants us to be. The *persona* is a structure of the psyche based on the latter. . . . The persona consists of:

a complicated system of relations between the individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual. [Jung, Two Essays, CW 7, par 305]

The feeling-tones of the persona revolve around acceptance and rejection. In putting together a persona we learn to sift out of our personalities those characteristics to which the environment reacts negatively, and to emphasize those to which it responds positively. Consequently, personas vary according to the environments they are meant to serve.

All that which by nature we might be but aren't due to the demands of our surroundings, comprises the shadow. By this Jung meant:

the "negative" side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and contents of the personal unconscious. [Jung, Two Essays, CW 7, par 103, note 5]

Like the persona, the shadow is a complex, whose feeling-tones also revolve around acceptance and rejection. Because the shadow is built up from personality traits that are not acceptable to those around us, it may contain many of the essentials of our individuality.

It is in this tension between what we are and what the world wants us to be that Van Eenwyck and other Jungians that the creative act emerges. The Shadow helps to drive our willingness to see things in a different way, while the Persona directs us to remain within the confines of accepted perspectives and practices when diverging in some way from these perspectives and practices.

Much as we must place a new experience within an existing framework (assimilation) while engaging in some new learning (accommodation), we must work within an existing framework (Persona) while creating something new (Shadow). David must look like the biblical figure being portrayed, a new, inexpensive electric tool must be something that people will use, there must be the need for better storage devices, and the innovative idea will remain in the organizational crevice if it doesn't address an immediate organizational concern.

While we may operate in solitude when waiting, imagining or anticipating, we must always bounce against external reality as defined and defended in large part by other people, when we begin to move from nothingness to something. We face the reality of a block of marble that is to be fashioned into an appealing image, the presentation of a new idea about storage or tools, or the positioning of an organizational innovation. We best face this reality with a little help from other people.

In sum, we can view the Persona as a source of creative restraint, while the Shadow is a source of creative unrestraint. It is also interesting to refer back to the matter of creative ideas popping out at inconvenient times and in inconvenient places. The Shadow component in our unconscious is not only the potential source of our outlandish and creative ideas, This Jungian component is also assigned the role of "jokester." The Shadow delights in providing us with a creative idea when we are challenged to record it. The Shadow is fully energized when we are groggy or dripping wet and searching for a piece of dry paper, or when we disrupt our dining to search for the paper napkin or decide to break all social norms and write something on the restaurant menu. We can then try to return to sleep, stand there naked in the shower with our damp piece of paper, or apologize to our waiter and perhaps others at our table. . .

Regardless of the reason why we often find it inconvenient to record our creative idea after it emerges from the Incubation stage, it is worth noting that the idea will appear out of nothingness.

Regression in Service of the Ego

Ego Psychologists also have something to say about creativity. Rather than fashioning it as a tension between the Persona and Shadow, they introduce a psychic entity they call the Ego and propose that creativity often occurs when the Ego chooses to free some of its usual ties with reality in order to open the opportunity for "non-reality" to hold sway for a short period of time. Basically, regression in the service of the ego (RITSE) has to do with the human capacity to revert to more primitive forms of ego processing when seeking to be creative. Regression of Ego functions takes place on behalf of a desire of the psyche to

be creative, and ultimately for this creativity to enhance one's adaptive capacities in an ever-changing environment.

Specifically, RITSE is a concept engaged by ego psychologists to describe a controlled, temporary, and partial relaxation of the mature ego's critical and realistic functions. This ego-based process allows for access to primitive, unstructured, and often highly symbolic unconscious material. RITSE is adaptive, unlike pathological regression, where an individual reverts to immature coping mechanisms under stress. RITSE provides "play space" and sanctuaries. The mature ego deliberately deploys this mechanism to retrieve preconscious or unconscious content, typically for constructive purposes such as problem-solving, insight generation, or creative expression. The "service" aspect means the ego initiates the process not as a defense against anxiety, but as an active strategy to overcome intellectual or emotional impasses.

During the 1940s, Ernst Kris (1953) formalized the concept of RITSE, describing it as the means by which preconscious and unconscious material appears in the creator's consciousness. Kris' formulation helped shift ego psychology toward a more positive view of regression, linking it to creativity and innovation. In art and music, RITSE can manifest as a return to a childlike perspective. It is simple, fresh, and unencumbered by adult logic yet skillfully integrated into the final product.

To gain a full appreciation of RITSE's scope, it is important to note that regression occurs in at least three ways. We regress in time, revisiting our childhood and the collective history of our society and culture, possibly through our social unconscious (Hopper and Weinberg, 2019) or our collective unconscious (Jung, 1978). We also regress in our use of form and structure. This is where Ernst Kris's perspective on RITSE in art comes into play.

Third, there is regression in defensive structure. We deploy increasingly primitive defenses, such as repression and displacement (A. Freud, 1992/2018), once again, not on behalf of coping with stress, but rather on behalf of some adaptive purpose. The regression can occur individually—the work of an artist. Or the regression can occur collectively—the drama of a crowd. Individual regression can lead to creativity. The collective regression usually reinforces the existing reality or turns the "crowd" back to a more primitive (and often violence-based) reality (Aronson, 2018).

Achieving

It is wonderful to imagine a fulfilling life and to anticipate that good things await us. There is something very appealing about "wishing on a star" for the creation or gifting of what we desire from nothingness. However, there is a lingering need among most of us to work hard and achieve that for which we dream (McClelland and Others, 1953). There is a strong push to move from nothing to something. The gap between nothing and something must be closed.

Will Power

We must take action as a way to address the emotions associated with a gap between the current state and a desired state. We are anxious about the gap. We are frustrated that barriers exist that prevent us

from easily eliminating the gap. We envy other people for whom this gap doesn't exist. The need to achieve is complemented by this powerful need to eliminate pain associated with the gap.

Mind and body intertwine to produce a strong desire (even need) to move from the internal states of imaging, anticipating and creating to the state of activation and potential achievement. As my colleague, John Preston, has noted, the capacity to move from thought and desire to action requires the engagement of many functions in the human head and heart. What used to be called "will power" is a very real thing, describing the major effort needed to from both the inside and the outside.

Given the need for mind and body to operate together in our efforts to mobilize and ultimately achieve something (from out of nothingness), I wish to close this discussion of the six steps needed to address the challenge of nothingness by turning to a deeper probe into the interplay of mind and body

Mind and Body

The interplay of intrapsychic (Shadow) and environmental factors (Persona), and of accommodation and assimilation as contributors to the creative process is complemented by another interplay when it comes to achievement of some goal or the full realization of some idea. This is the interplay between mind and body. Just as Polystasis produces an alteration in not only baselines and anticipations but also biological states (Polystasis complementing Allostasis), so a new reality and the creation of something out of nothing requires the coordinated efforts of mind and body. Activation leading to achievement always requires physical as well as psychological engagement.

Mind and body must follow one another. Our body lights up but is not followed by the lighting up of our mind. We are challenged by the gap between these divergent reactions. Our body wants us to carve the stone. Our mind soon must follow. Our body is frightened by something, but we don't know what it is, so we compose a scary short story to fill in the nothingness gap. Our new plans for the project just don't "feel right," so we review these plans and generate a creative alternative that feels better. Alternatively, our mind generates an exciting idea, but our body doesn't seem to "warm up" to the idea. We find that this idea generates very little energy and is not something "for which we will get out of bed!" So, we start over again and pay more attention to our physical reaction to the ideas being generated by ourselves—and perhaps other people.

A very powerful example of the body pushing the mind into a new space is offered in the Epilogue to a book that Brugh Joy (1990) wrote about a radical change in his own beliefs. His well-documented conceptions of reality (Joy, 1979) were suddenly thrown out the window, on behalf of a new set of beliefs that his body embraces. In addressing the nature of the major transformation that has occurred, Joy (1990 pp. 332-333) offers a set of insights concerning the mind/body split.

Joy (1990, p. 332) believes that this split can lead to compartmentalization of consciousness.

The ego, using a defense to resolve the conflict created by its awareness of mortality, imagines itself to be immortal. In doing so, however, it sacrifices wholeness, the body, and the earth. An unconscious ego-rage against the vulnerability of the body and its mortality follows. This, I believe, is the basis of self-destructive attitudes that reflect both personally as un-healthy life-styles and

ecologically as disregard for the physical environment. Certainly the Christian projection of Armageddon reflects this rage against the body. Morality is, though, a fact of our existence and, in my opinion, until the conflict over this primary issue is re-solved--through integration rather than denial--no effort to salvage the body or the planet is possible.

Joy's (1990, p. 332) body reacted to a sunrise that he witnessed over the desert while standing on the peak of the Great Pyramid in Egypt. Being pushed by his body, Brugh Joy (1990, p. 332) came to the following realization:

In my experience, an appreciation of physical mortality can immensely illumine the wonder and sacredness of the body. There is a natural appreciation of and urge to care for the sacred matter that has spawned our bodies ... sacred matter that is, in fact, the planet. The body and the planet are inextricably and forever linked in our deep psyches, though a shadow aspect of consciousness itself has obscured this fact and alienated us from our roots.

Joy (1990, pp. 332-333) has more to say about the painful experiences of one's body—specifically as it relates to the very nature of existence (the topic I am addressing in this essay):

I do not subscribe to an infantile idealization of existence and of the planet. Life is a teacher of great intensity and integrity. Its rewards are mostly beyond the ability of ordinary awareness to appreciate. Its lessons are often painful and final. The Awakening individual does not define mature livingness through children's values—those of personal love, nourishment, protection, immediate gratification, pleasure, sensuality, and unconscious sexuality. The Awakening individual is capable of undertaking a painful, dangerous, and arduous task for the experience of expanded development... just as Life does when chaotic circumstances serve to churn or even to mutate its vast pool of precious genes, generating unexpected and more resourceful options for existence.

According to Joy (1990, p. 333), we mature amid awareness regarding earthly calamities as they occur within the vast nothingness of existence:

Most of life's dramatic moments cannot be handled with the resources of the Child, and adults who do revert to their Child under stress are a profound liability to themselves and to society. The re-actions of people to calamitous events such as the San Francisco earthquake of 1989, the Bhopal gas disaster in India, the Valdez oil spill in Alaska, the Chernobyl nuclear rupture in the U.S.S.R., and hurricane Hugo, to mention only some of the most recent catastrophes, present numerous examples of the differences between adult individuals who approach disaster with the resources of their frightened Child (and who, in our society, often require social workers and therapists to help them handle the anxiety and fear) and those who approach disaster with the resources of a Mature Adult. Persons in that latter category are most likely those who have been initiated into Life and who feel awe and respect for nature, inspiration in regard to the capacity of human beings to help one another physically survive crisis, greater appreciation for their own lives, and a heightened understanding of their personal capacity to engage life and death and the responsibilities of existence.

As an Adult, I do not believe in sacrificing maturity to maintain the Child or to maintain the family context in which the Child aspects of the Adult attempt to survive. I need my full resources to

enjoy and to appreciate Life--with its unknown destiny and its unknown purposes. And my soul yearns to discover individuals who can join me in exploring the Mystery of Life, who can do so without defense, and with strength, vulnerability, and a sense of inspiration.

It is in these final words that we find the essence of the guidance that Brugh Joy has to offer us when faced with achieving something of importance amid nothingness and the void caused by the loss of childhood confidence in the goodness of nature and existence. We become adults when we recognize that challenges are inevitable in our ongoing life and that perhaps these challenges are best met in community with other brave souls.

Conclusions

The matter of nothingness, as it interplays with something, aligns with the journey through Tuonela, and the musical journey through the discordant and concordant passages of a violin concerto, I have suggested in offering these musical comments, that our frequent journeys from nothingness to something be engaged with other people. There is room for our thoughtful and creative colleagues on the boat in Tuonela and at the concert where the concerto is played. We can certainly benefit from the diverse perspectives and practices of our colleagues.

References

- Aronson, Elliot (2018). *The Social Animal*. New York: Worth Press.
- Atwood, George and Robert Stolorow (1979/1993) *Faces in A Cloud: Intersubjectivity in Personality Theory*, Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc.
- Bartlett, Frederic (1995) *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (2nd Ed), Cambridge, U. K.: Cambridge U. Press.
- Bateson, Gregory (1979) *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. New York: Dutton.
- Becket, Samuel (2011). *Waiting for Godot: A Play in Two Acts*, New York: Grove Press.
- Berdyaev, Nikolai (1965) *Christian Existentialism: A Berdyaev Anthology*, New York: Harper and Row.
- Bergquist, William (2026a) *Dancing Between the Raindrops*, Harpswell, ME: Atlantic Soundings Press.
- Bergquist, William (2026b) *The Psychology of Nothingness I: Exploring the Void*, Library of Professional Psychology, Link: [The Psychology of Nothingness I: Exploring the Void | Library of Professional Psychology](#)
- Bergquist, William (2026b) *The Psychology of Nothingness III: From Something to Less than Nothing*, Library of Professional Psychology, Link: [The Psychology of Nothingness III: From Something to Less than Nothing | Library of Professional Psychology](#)
- Berlyne, Daniel (1960). *Conflict, arousal, and curiosity*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Bridges, William (1980) *Transitions*, Cambridge, MA.: Perseus.
- Bruner, Jerome (1973) *Beyond the Information Given*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Cross, Frank Jr., (1961) *The Ancient Library of Qumran*, New York: Anchor.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihalyi (1990), *Flow*. New York: HarperCollins.

Eliade, Mircea (1959) *The Sacred and Profane*. New York: Harper.

Freud, Anna (1992/2018) *The Ego and Mechanisms of Defense*. London: Routledge.

Ghiselin, Brewster (1961/1985) *The Creative Process*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Hopper, Earl and Haim Weinberg (Ed.) (2019) *The Social Unconscious in Persons, Groups and Societies*. New York: Routledge.

Howard, Don (2025) *Before Being*, Mercer Island, Washington: Vibrant Ages Publishing.

Johnson, Barry (1996) *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*. HRD Press.

Johnson, Barry (2020) *And: Making a Difference by Leveraging Polarity, Paradox and Dilemma. Volume One: Foundations*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press.

James, William (1890) *The Principles of Psychology*, New York: Henry Holt and Co.

Joy, Brugh (1979) *Joy's Way*, New York: Tarcher/Putnam.

Joy, Brugh (1990) *Avalanche*, Ballantine Books.

Jung, Carl (1971) *Personality Types*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jung, Carl (1978) *The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious. Collected Works: Volume 9 (Part 1)* Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jung, Carl (2009) *The Red Book*, New York: Norton.

Kahneman, Daniel (2011) *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Kolb, David (1983) *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Kris, Ernst (1953) *Psychoanalytic Explorations of Art*. London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd.

McClelland, David and Others (1953). *The achievement motive*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Meadows, Donella (2008) *Thinking in Systems*. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing.

Mura, Agnes and William Bergquist (2020) *From the End to the Beginning: Managing Transition in Covid-19 Times*, Library of Professional Coaching, Link: [From the End to the Beginning: Managing Transition in Covid-19 Time | Library of Professional Coaching](#)

Murray, Henry (1938/2007) *Explorations in Personality (70th Anniversary Ed.)* New York: Oxford University Press.

Piaget, Jean (1923/2001) *The Psychology of Intelligence*. London: Routledge.

Sacks, Oliver (2008) *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain, Revised and Expanded Edition*. New York: Vintage Press.

Sapolsky, Robert (2004) *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers (3rd Ed.)*. New York: Holt Paperbacks.

Stacey, Ralph (1996) *Complexity and Creativity in Organizations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Sterling, Peter (2020) *What Is Health? Allostasis and the Evolution of Human Design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Van Eenwyck, John (1997) *Archetypes and Strange Attractors*, Scarborough, Ontario Canada: Inner City Books.

Weitz, Kevin and William Bergquist (2024) *The Crises of Expertise and Belief*. Harpswell, ME: Professional Psychology Press.