

Perspective

A newsletter for widening your point of view

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Issue 20



Richard Bach, in his book *Illusions*, states a handy aphorism: **Perspective – use it or lose it.** This periodical – distributed by Rob Greenaway & Associates – shares amongst recreation and tourism management professionals, and others, several tools and concepts which will help exercise your perspective.

This edition looks into nothing in particular – just things that arise over the dinner table, if you happen to be talking about viruses. And it's issue 20! That's 20 years of RG&A. Crikey.

Don't beam me up, Scotty

According to Charles Seife, in his very interesting book *Decoding the Universe*, everything is just data.¹ Our genes are a very good example. They are just instructions based on a simple code. Viruses too are just code. In fact, as Seife points out, there are many sequences of code in our DNA that are ancient viral hitchhikers – called human endogenous retroviruses or HERVs. Over the millennia, viruses have snipped their way into our DNA database and there they remain.

Two issues arise. The first is the reminder that 'data' is a plural. You would say that the data are indicative, while one datum might be incorrect. But that's not very interesting. The really interesting thing is how much data is in us, and if you had to move it across the universe in Star Trek fashion, how would that work? Seife indicates that you'd just move information, and not matter as such (although matter is data, of course).

You might have read the relevant assessment of teleportation requirements for a human body in a 2012 edition of the *Journal of Physics Special Topics*.² According to Roberts *et al*, the total amount of data in a human body that a matter transfer device would need to shift is 4.55×10^{42} bits. That's a lot. With hefty bandwidth, moving that data would take 4.85×10^{15} years. The universe hasn't been around that long.

So, it's not looking good for large-scale matter transfer using existing technology. But even if it took only a matter of seconds, would you do it? My daughter and I were debating this over dinner the other day, and realised that teleporting a person requires their death, whatever method is applied. Say you were teleported into the next room. Your family would rush into the lounge and there you'd be. But not so fast. The lounge-you is merely a person who believes 100% that they are you; and, in fact, they would be exactly the same as the person who was last seen in the kitchen (where teleportation devices are traditionally kept). However, the kitchen-you was disassembled. Your electro-chemical processes ceased. Maybe your data were stored for a few hours (or not). The kitchen-you was killed and turned into bits and bytes: pure unthinking data. The lounge-you is merely a perfect replica – although, perhaps, if you asked, without HERVs. Lounge-you is an unaware duplicate, happy to continue as would the dead kitchen-you.

I'd rather walk. ❖

Bless me

It's interesting how much of what we hold to be true is culturally defined. Perhaps Nelson Mandela exemplified it best when he said – as Barack Obama recently reminded us – “No one is born hating

another person because of the colour of his skin or his background or his religion.”

And no one is born with a particular ingrained response to someone sneezing. In most cultures it appears that making a statement about good health is a polite response to a sneeze, although in Germany and Romania the habit is to say, when a child sneezes, “You shall grow tall!” Most East Asian countries have no standard response.³

There are various theories as to where, in English-speaking countries, the 'bless you' or 'God bless you' originates, including helping prevent one's soul from being sternutated.

My reaction to an uncovered sneeze these days is less beneficent, especially when on public transport or in crowded public areas. I'm with the Amhara of Ethiopia who respond to a sneezer with, “May God forgive you!” and expect a, “May you live for long” in reply.

But here and now, we don't seem to say anything. 'Bless you' has gone out of fashion.

I'm proposing that we bring it back; on the proviso that the sneezer has covered the expulsion of their bronchial load of viruses and bacteria. We all have elbows with crooks. I think a 'bless you' is a fine response to someone who has made the effort to save you and others a week or more of mucus-loaded misery. And I don't expect the customary 'thank you' in reply. 'Sorry' will do. Keep your free-ranging HERVs, if there are such things, to yourself. ❖

When your car is not a giraffe

I hate wasting money, and I bought an expensive book on phenomenology, so you'll know how I now feel. Philosophy is often great – especially from the likes of AC Grayling, where relevance abounds. Phenomenology, on the other hand, “contains rich but also quite diverse and even occasionally competing accounts of intersubjectivity.” Or as Gallagher and Zahavi say in their introduction to *The Phenomenological Mind*:⁴

“If I say ‘The table in the kitchen is red’ I am making a statement which does not permit of an alternative, unless I have misread Wittgenstein. But if I say ‘The table in the kitchen is red and is also a giraffe’ then either I have, in the kitchen, discovered the world's first tabular giraffe or I am the victim of a perceptual disorder, to put it mildly.”

Or was that something written in 1971 by the satirist AK Grant?⁵ Perhaps what Gallagher and Zahavi penned was:

“When I look out of the window and see my car parked in the street, I am having a visual perception.... To see my car as my car already suggests that perception is informed by previous experience.... It's not that I perceive *x* and then add something quite different and novel,

¹ Seife, C. 2006. *Decoding the Universe*. Penguin

² Roberts, D. Nelms, J. Starkey, D. Thomas S. 2012. Travelling by Teleportation. *Journal of Physics Special Topics*, University of Leicester

³ Wikipedia, of course

⁴ Gallagher, S & Zahavi. 2012. *The Phenomenological Mind*, 2nd ed. Routledge

⁵ Grant, A.K. & Gabara, K.P. 1971. *Land Uprooted High*. Reed

namely the thought that this is my car. One way to put this is to say that perception is 'smart'.... I see the car already as my car."

I'm with Japhy in Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* when Jack wanted to tell him, "all the things I'd discovered that winter meditating in the woods."

"Ah, it's just a lot of words," [Japhy] said, sadly, surprising me. "I don't want to hear all your word descriptions of words words words you made up all winter, man I want to be enlightened by actions." ❖

Safe to go back in the water?

I recently discovered the Oxford University Press' series of *Very Short Introductions*.⁶ These are pocket-sized, 200 page reviews of specialised topics – more than 600 so far – written by technical experts, but aimed at the general reader (I'm over science reviews written by journalists). The *Introductions* are particularly useful for topics that you need to know a little about so you can get on with your life, but aren't so important that you'd want to invest more than an hour or so – like gravity, art theory and sport. Some are completely esoteric, and I need to mail my *Introduction* to infinity to Martin Unwin. He understands Euler's equation (see my 2015 newsletter), so will be happy with this impenetrable booklet.

The *Introduction* on viruses is absolutely fascinating.⁷ I've always wondered why we have them? According to Professor Dorothy Crawford (Emeritus Professor of Medical Microbiology at the University of Edinburgh) they outnumber bacteria by a factor of 10. There are more viruses on earth than all other forms of life added together, and an estimated 100 million different types. But it gets worse. In one litre of seawater there is an estimated average of 10 billion viruses – and more than 4×10^{30} in all the oceans. Lay them all side-by-side and they'd span 10 million light years, apparently. Marine viruses play a vital role in controlling algal blooms. They replicate as quickly as phytoplankton, so can subdue mass growths. Maybe there's something we could work with there?

I once badly burned my leg on a motorbike exhaust while working in a remote location. I suggested to a nurse over the radio that I just stand in the sea for a while. She recommended I didn't. ❖

Getting on

Having recently passed my half-century, I've become a little more interested in the aging process. Not that it has amounted to anything more – so far and regardless of what my kids say – than buying a pile of +1 reading glasses from the local pharmacy and progressively

losing them. I've run out of parents and am getting low on aunts and uncles.

But I've no interest in taking Dunbar's advice from Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*. Dunbar believed that tedium was the key to a long life:

"Dunbar was lying motionless on his back again with his eyes staring up at the ceiling like a doll's. He was working hard at increasing his life span. He did it by cultivating boredom. Dunbar was working so hard at increasing his lifespan that Yossarian thought he was dead....

"Do you know how long a year takes when it's going away?" Dunbar repeated to Clevinger, "This long." He snapped his fingers. "A second ago you were stepping into college with your lungs full of fresh air. Today you're on old man."

"Old?" asked Clevinger with surprise. "What are you talking about?"

"Old."

"I'm not old."

"You're inches away from death every time you go on a mission.

How much older can you be at your age?"

It's a great question; but we all know that aging is all about perception, health and behaviour. Psychology professor Michael Corballis of Auckland University gives an ideal example of this reality in his delightfully rambling book *The Wandering Mind*.⁸ In one chapter he considers different forms of memory, and in an interesting diversion recounts a colleague's interview with a chap who suffered from profound long-term amnesia. Henry functioned well and had a high IQ, but had no ability to recall events. The interview is delightful:

Jenni: How old do you think you are now?

Henry: Round about 34. I think of that right off.

Jenni: How old do you think I am?

Henry: Well, I'm thinking of 27 right off.

Jenni: (*laughing*) Aren't you kind! I'm really 37.

Henry: 37? So I must be more than that.

Jenni: Why? Do you think you're older than me?

Henry: Yeah.

Jenni: How old do you think you are?

Henry: Well, I always think too far ahead in a way. Well, nearer, well 38.

Jenni: 38? You act 38! You know, you are really 60. You had your 60th birthday the other day.

I'd go for 38 too, if I didn't look in the mirror. Gosh, but maybe even then.

One of my father's favourite lines, when he was in his 90s, was, "Oh, what I'd give to be 85 again." ❖

For Your Interest

Maybe Dunbar was right. The past 24 months have gone far too quickly (hence no newsletter in 2017). We've been working on: several roading tasks for the NZ Transport Agency (Additional Waitemata Harbour Crossing (with AECOM), Mt Messenger in Taranaki, Northern Corridor Improvement (near Albany, with Aurecon) and the Petone interchange (with Incite)); Lyttelton Port on dredge and cruise berth proposals; Queenstown Park for their proposed gondola to the Remarkables skifield; a survey of marina users for Nelson City Council and an audit of the marina management contract (and I've been appointed to the NCC Marina Advisory Committee); a review of recreation activity potentially affected by the Seaview and Porirua treated waste water outfalls for Wellington Water (with Stantec), and similar projects in Nelson and Canterbury; two mussel farm consents in the Sounds (for and against the same applicant – showing expert witnesses truly are independent); a development and recreation proposal in Wanaka (Sticky Forest) for a trust representing more than 1000 beneficiaries under the South Island Landless Natives Act 1906 (with Planz Consultants), and a plan change for a neighbouring development; a management plan for a small proposed whitewater park near

Ashburton for RDR Ltd, and a parallel assessment for a water storage proposal (with Ryders); a review of esplanade reserve requirements in Nelson to support Council's resource management plan review (with RMA Ecology); modelling inputs to the Tasman District Council's growth strategy for community facilities; a feasibility study for a clubroom in Motueka; evidence for the Mt Maunganui Underwater Club for the Rena appeal (and a nice dive on the wreck); a subdivision in Tasman (with Landmark Lile); the Orewa seawall consent for Auckland Council (with Tonkin + Taylor); Refining NZ's harbour-deepening proposal in Whangarei; the Wellington runway extension; a shared path in the Hutt; social values assessments for several rivers for the Otago and Canterbury Regional Councils; a tourism management review for kauri dieback for DOC (with Boffa Miskell); and a few other bits and pieces, such as making several storage boxes for the old Cawthron (Atkinson) telescope.

The boat is looking good. I've spent many months completing a major overhaul – timberwork, wiring, motor, electronics, plumbing, steering and so on. Which means the time-ratio of sailing to maintenance for the past 24 months is about 1:100. I'm hoping that the new head will get the family more interested in sailing.

⁶ See <https://global.oup.com/academic/content/series/v/very-short-introductions-vsi>

⁷ Crawford, D.H. 2011. *Viruses – A Very Sort Introduction*. Oxford University Press

⁸ Corballis, M.C. 2015. *The Wandering Mind*. Chicago University Press