

SECOND EDITION, REVISED AND EXPANDED

Barry Oshry

Seeing Systems

Unlocking the Mysteries
of Organizational Life



an excerpt from

***Seeing Systems:
Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life***

by Barry Oshry

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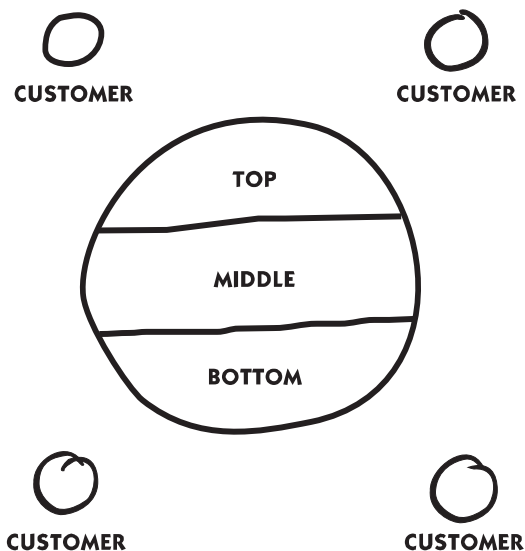
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Prologue: Overcoming System Blindness

Top, Middle, Bottom, and Customer:

Positions and Conditions



Throughout this book, we will be talking about Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers. Given the complexity of organizations, this may appear to be a gross simplification of organizational life as the reader has experienced it. At times, as in “A Familiar Story” (which follows), we will treat these as *positions*: you are either a Top or a Middle or a Bottom or a Customer. At other times we will treat these as *conditions* all of us face in whatever position we occupy. In certain interactions we are Top, having overall responsibility for some piece of the action; in other interactions we are Bottom, on the receiving end of initiatives over which we have no control. In other interactions we are Middle, caught between conflicting demands and priorities. And in still other interactions, we are Customer, looking to some other person or group for a product or service we need. So, even in the most complex, multi-level, multifunctional organizations, we are all constantly moving in and out of Top/Middle/Bottom/Customer conditions.

A Familiar Story of Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers

There is a pattern that develops with great regularity in the widest variety of organizations and institutions. The pattern goes something like this:

Tops are burdened by what feels like unmanageable complexity;

Bottoms are oppressed by what they see as distant and uncaring Tops;

Middles are torn and confused between the conflicting demands and priorities coming at them from Tops and Bottoms;

Customers feel done-to by nonresponsive delivery systems.

Top “teams” are caught up in destructive turf warfare;

Middle peers are alienated from one another, noncooperative and competitive;

Bottom group members are trapped in stifling pressures to conform.

Tops are fighting fires when they should be shaping the system’s future;

Middles are isolated from one another when they should be working together to coordinate system processes;

Bottoms’ negative feelings toward Tops and Middles distracts them from putting their creative energies into the delivery of products and services;

Customers’ disgruntlement with the system keeps them from being active partners in helping the system produce the products and services they need.

Throughout the system there is personal stress, relationship breakdowns,

and severe limitations in the system's capacity to do what it intends to do.

When this pattern develops, our tendency is to explain it in terms of the character, motivation, and abilities of the individuals involved—*that's just the way they are*—or in terms of the specific nature of one's organization—*that's just the way we are*. If our explanations are personal, then our solutions are also personal: fix the players, fire them, rotate them, divorce them. If our explanations are specific to our organization, then we fix the organization: reorganize, reengineer, restructure.

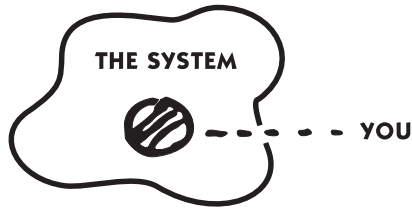
What I intend to demonstrate in this book is that this pattern is neither personal nor specific to any given organization. It is systemic. And because *systemic* is such a pervasive, multiple-meaning term, let me clarify its use here.

We humans are systems creatures. Our consciousness—how we experience ourselves, others, our systems, and other systems—is shaped by the structure and processes of the systems we are in. As a single example, when Tops are involved in turf warfare, this is less likely to be a personal issue—much as it may seem like that to the participants—than a systemic one, a vulnerability that develops with remarkable regularity in the Top world; therefore, to deal with turf issues as a personal issue is to miss the point entirely. This is true of many of the other “personal” issues in organizational life as well.

There is a tendency to resist this notion; we prefer seeing ourselves as captains of our own ships; we prefer the notion that we believe what we believe and think what we think because of *who* we are, not *where* we are. I will demonstrate how such thinking is the costly illusion of system blindness—an illusion that results in needless stress, destructive conflicts, broken relationships, missed opportunities, and diminished system effectiveness. And this blindness has its costs in all the systems of our lives—in our families, organizations, nations, and ethnic groups.

My purpose in this book is to transform system blindness into system sight. The paradox is this: With system sight we *can* become captains of our own ships as we understand the nature of the waters in which we sail.

We Are Social Systems Creatures



We humans spend our lives in systems:

in the family,
the classroom,
the friendship group,
the team,
the organization,
the task force,
the faith group,
the community,
the bowling league,
the nation,
the ethnic group.

We find joy
and sadness,
exhilaration
and despair,
good relationships
and bad ones,
opportunities
and frustrations.

So much happens to us in system life,
yet system life remains a mystery.

When We Don't See Systems

When we don't see systems,
we fall out of the possibility of partnership with one another;
we misunderstand one another;
we make up stories about one another;
we have our myths and prejudices about one another;
we hurt and destroy one another;
we become antagonists when we could be collaborators;
we separate when we could remain together happily;
we become strangers when we could be friends;
we oppress one another when we could live in peace;
and our systems—organizations, families, task forces, faith
groups—squander much of their potential.
All of this happens without awareness or choice—
dances of blind reflex.

Five Types of System Blindness:

Spatial, Temporal, Relational, Process, and Uncertainty

We suffer from Spatial Blindness.
We see our part of the system
but not the whole;
we see what is happening with us
but not what is happening elsewhere;
we don't see what others' worlds are like,
the issues they are dealing with,
the stresses they are experiencing;
we don't see how our world impacts theirs
and how theirs impacts ours;

we don't see how all the parts influence one another.
In our spatial blindness,
we fail to understand one another,
we develop stereotypes of one another,
we take personally much that is not personal,
and, as a consequence, many potentially productive
contributions are lost to the system.

We suffer from Temporal Blindness.
We see the present
but not the past;
we know what we are experiencing now
but not what has led to these experiences;
we know our satisfactions and frustrations,
our feelings of closeness and distance,
the issues and choices and challenges we are currently facing.
All of this we experience in the present
but we don't see the history of the present,
the story of our system that has brought us to this point in
time.

In our temporal blindness,
we misdiagnose the current situation,
and in our efforts to solve system problems
we fix what doesn't need to be fixed
and fail to fix what does.

We suffer from Relational Blindness.
In systems, we exist only in *systemic* relationship to one
another:

We are in Top/Bottom relationships,
sometimes as Top and sometimes as Bottom;



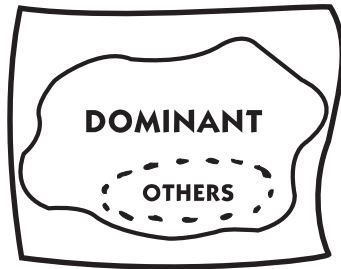
we are in End/Middle/End relationships;
sometimes as Middle torn between two or more Ends,
and sometimes as one of several Ends tearing at a common
Middle;



we are in Provider/Customer relationships,
sometimes as Provider and sometimes as Customer;



we are sometimes a member of the Dominant culture in which there are the Others, and sometimes we are the Other within the Dominant culture.



We tend not to see ourselves in these systemic relationships, nor do we see the dances we fall into in these relationships: Becoming Burdened Tops and Oppressed Bottoms, Disappointed Ends and Torn Middles, Judged Providers and Done-to Customers, the Righteous Dominants and the Righteous Others. In our relational blindness, we experience much personal stress and pain, potential partnerships fail to develop, and system contributions are lost.

We suffer from Process Blindness. We don't see our systems as wholes, as entities in their environment. We don't see the processes of the whole as the whole struggles to survive.

We don't see how "It" differentiates
in an environment of shared responsibility and complexity
and how we fall into Turf Warfare with one another.

We don't see how "It" individuates
in a diffusing environment
and how we become alienated from one another.

We don't see how "It" coalesces
in an environment of shared vulnerability
and how we become enmeshed in GroupThink with one
another.

In our process blindness,
our relationships with our peers deteriorate,
productive partnerships fail to develop,
and our contributions to the system suffer.

When we suffer from Uncertainty Blindness,
we see fixed positions battling fixed positions,
but we don't see the uncertainty underlying these positions,
the conditions for which there are no obviously correct
answers;

in our positional blindness,
we escape from uncertainty into certainty,
from mystery into fixed unassailable positions about
how to manage our responsibility in the Top world,
our vulnerability in our Bottom world,
our tearing in our Middle world,
our coming together in a world of Dominants and Others.

In our uncertainty blindness,
our righteous battles with one another keep us from
realizing our full potential as Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and
Dominants and Others.

Seeing Systems

This book is about seeing systems.

It is about overcoming system blindness.

It is about seeing our part in the context of the whole in ways that enable us to avoid misunderstandings and to interact more productively across organizational lines (Act One).

It is about seeing the present in the context of the past, such that we can get a more accurate picture of our current condition (Act One).

It is about seeing ourselves in relationship with others and creating satisfying and productive partnerships in these relationships (Act Two).

It is about seeing our systems' processes in ways that enable us to create systems with extraordinary capacities for surviving and developing (Act Three).

It is about seeing the uncertainties in our system conditions in ways that enable us to move past the destructive battles of righteous position versus righteous position (Act IV).

My Windows into Systems: The Power Lab and The Organization Workshop

■

THE POWER LAB

The Elite (Tops)

Managers (Middles)

and Immigrants (Bottoms)

Living Together in the Community of New Hope

My understanding of systems is a fortuitous outcome of work that had another goal. Over thirty-five years ago, I set out to create a learning environment in which people could deepen their understanding of power and powerlessness in social systems. The result was the Power Lab.¹

The basic idea was to create a societal setting in which people could experience issues of power and powerlessness directly and dramatically. And so we created a world with clear-cut differences in power and resource control—a world somewhat ironically called the Community of New Hope.

There are three social classes in New Hope—the Elite (or Tops), who control the society’s wealth and institutions; the Managers (or Middles), who manage the society’s institutions for the Elite; and the Immigrants (or Bottoms), who enter the society with no funds, few resources, and no control over the society’s institutions. This new world is compelling in that it encompasses all aspects of participants’ lives—the quality of their housing and meals, the job opportunities available to them, the amount of money they have, their access to resources, and more.

A good play needs an appropriate theater, and we were fortunate early on to discover the Craigville Conference Center on Cape Cod.² Craigville offered an isolated setting with a variety of housing possibilities for the various social classes and a huge tabernacle that could house the society’s institutions—its court, newspaper, company store, employment center, pub, and theater. And most important, the Craigville staff have over the years functioned as patient, understanding, cooperative, and sometimes bemused partners in this venture.

The staff members create the “world” into which participants are “born”—as either Elite, Managers, or Immigrants—and then step back and allow the community to unfold. There are no scenarios to follow, no further directions from staff. What becomes of the society depends on whatever the collection of players makes of it.

The Power Lab was created to support participants in their learning about systems and power, but I have undoubtedly been its major beneficiary. Over the past thirty-five years, I have played a variety of roles in these Communities of New Hope, sometimes as an active player—Elite, Manager, or Immigrant—but more often as an Anthropologist standing outside the system, collecting its history as it unfolds, observing and interviewing societal members. It was not until several years had passed that I realized what a remarkable situation I had fallen into. How often does one have the opportunity to stand outside a social system and observe its total life—to be privy to the separate deliberations of each class as well as to their interactions with one another?

Several of the scenes to follow come directly from the Power Labs (**14**, Bart and Barb; **15**, “‘Anthropology’ or Mick Gets Wiped Out”; **26**, “Daniel: Mutant in the Middle Space”; **45**, “Alienation Among the Middles”; **50**, “Immigrant Martha Has a Breakdown”; and **66**, “A Mutant Moment in the Middle”), and these scenes are but the tip of

the iceberg. Everything in this book is infused with learning drawn from the Power Labs.

The reader may be taken aback by two stories of personal breakdown at the Power Lab. The Power Lab *is* a challenging experience, and participants are cautioned to that effect prior to enrolling. On the other hand, the Power Lab is probably a more supportive environment than most of our other organizational and institutional environments: All participants have their own personal coach who works with them before, during, and after the program; additionally, there are periodic Times Out of Time (TOOT) sessions in which participants can pull back from the experience and gain perspective on it. Still, there were these two breakdowns. Both were “cured” before the lab ended, in ways that enlightened all of us, and in both cases the “breakdown” and its “cure” were clearly systemic, although on the surface the breakdowns appeared to be personal. These two stories offer important lessons about the systemic nature of apparently personal breakdowns in the wider world.

■
THE ORGANIZATION WORKSHOP

Tops (Executives)

Middles (Managers)

Bottoms (Workers)

Customers

Working Together in Creative Consultants, Inc. (CCI)

The Organization Workshop is an offshoot of the Power Lab. People who participated in the Power Labs began to request that we bring our work into their organizations. Apart from a few truly adventurous souls, most organizations were reluctant to do a full-scale Power Lab in-house. However, there was considerable interest in helping executives, managers, and workers deepen their understanding of systems and their ability to work cooperatively with one another. This interest set the stage for the development of the Organization Workshop.

Again, the educational strategy is to create a learning environment

or stage on which participants can directly experience key processes and dilemmas of organizational life. In this workshop, participants are “born” into an organization that exists for between a few hours and a day. The organization—CCI—is composed of Executives (Tops), who have overall responsibility for the system, and a group of Managers (Middles) responsible for Worker groups (Bottoms) whose members work on various projects assigned by Tops or Middles; outside the organization are potential Customers who have projects they need help on and money to pay for services. Staff simply set the stage; we put people into position, present the traditions of the organization, then step back and turn the organization loose.

In each workshop, there are Times Out of Time (TOOTs; see 10 and 11), in which we stop the organization, bring everyone together, and have them describe their experiences as Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers. What are their worlds like? What pressures are they experiencing? How does each part of the system experience the other parts? These TOOTs tend to be incredibly illuminating experiences for participants. But consider for a moment what a remarkable learning opportunity the TOOTs have been for me—listening to many hundreds of people over the years as they describe their experiences as Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers. For me, what a light this has shed on the nature of systems! And my intention in this book is to share that light with you.

Swimmers, Slugs, and Ballet Notes: A Word About Style

As you may have already noticed, this book is written in a nontraditional form. There are acts and scenes, pinballs and talking body parts and mysterious “swimmers”; there are poems and dialogues along with conceptual material and cases; there are amebocytes and slugs and earthworms, a variety of dances, and even one set of ballet notes. The imagery of dance is used regularly because so many system processes seem balletic in nature: One party pulls up responsibility to himself or herself while the other passes it up; Bottom groups neatly and regularly split into the “reasonables” versus the “hardliners”; Middles fly apart from one another while Bottoms coalesce. There is form and coherence and predictability to all of these movements. None of which is to imply a lightness to these dances because the dances I describe alienate us

from one another, knock us out of the possibility of partnership, and sometimes lead to wholesale death and destruction.³

Theater, too, in its various forms, has played an important part in my work. Theater enables us to bring into play a variety of senses: We can see the action, hear it, feel it, dance to it, and join in with it. The Power Lab and the Organization Workshop are forms of organizational improvisation theater: beginning conditions are created, participant-actors enter the stage, and, without further instruction, they improvise. *The Terrible Dance of Power* has had several staged performances, as has *The Dance of Disempowerment*.⁴ *The Dance of the Robust System* (62) still awaits its first performance. More recently, staged performance and interactive theater have been added to our Seeing Systems repertoire.

It is my fondest wish that you are enriched by the diversity of formats provided in this book and that the various pieces come together to help you see more clearly the many systems of which you are a part. My wish is that through your seeing systems in more depth, system life will become richer and more meaningful for you; you will have a deeper understanding of your experiences in systems; you will see new strategies for making happen what you want to have happen and what your systems need to have happen; and you will discover ways to create systems that contribute to the world and are deeply satisfying to you and other system members.

Acknowledgments

I offer my thanks to some very special people who, over the years, through their encouragement, confrontation, support, and challenge, have contributed to this volume. To Steven Piersanti, for his continuing support and encouragement while gently yet unrelentingly urging me toward deeper levels of exploration. I am grateful to the Brookline Group—Lee Bolman, Dave Brown, Tim Hall, Todd Jick, Adam Kahane, Bill Kahn, and Phil Mirvis—some of whom (I for one) have been meeting monthly for over twenty-five years to nourish, comfort, and prod one another toward greater self-awareness and personal and professional growth. The Power + Systems E-Team and Power Lab staffs, past and present, have been an inspiration, demonstrating the possibilities of high-commitment learning and performance teams. I am buoyed by the hundreds of Organization Workshop trainers who are

carrying this work to organizations and institutions around the globe. Warner Burke and Vlad Dupre offered unwavering support for my early, formative, and not always elegant work during their tenures at the National Training Laboratories. Mike McNair, Perviz Randeria, Leigh Wilkinson, and Barry Johansen provided critical readings of early drafts of this book. I thank Edwin Mayhew for a delightful collaborative relationship as we developed workshop designs that led to the Organization Workshop, Fritz Steele and Joe Meier for our partnership during the early days of the Power Lab, and Bob DuBrul for his pioneering work in putting Middle Integration theory into practice. The entire staff of the Craigville Conference Center—housekeeping, kitchen, grounds, directors, and front office—has worked diligently with us since 1972 to create the environment in which Power Labs have flourished. I have been blessed by unstinting love from my daughters, Leslie Perreault and Karen Kennedy, whose estimates of my abilities have far exceeded my own and have therefore given me high standards to aim for. A deep bow of admiration, gratitude, and love to Karen Ellis Oshry, my partner in all aspects of life, who has labored mightily by my side, tolerating my moods and reading and critiquing more variations of this work than any human being should ever be made to endure. And finally, I am indebted to the many thousands of people who have participated in our Power Labs and Organization Workshops and who have allowed me to be with them, observe them, and interview them as they wrestled with the challenges of system life. They came to me as students, but so much of the contents of this book I have learned from them.

As the Talmud says: From all my teachers I have learned. I thank you all for your contributions yet hold none of you responsible for the contents of this work.

Barry Oshry
Boston, Massachusetts
February 2007

SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

Act I

Seeing the Part Without the Whole

Generally, if we are paying attention, we know what life is like for us in our part of the system. Other parts of the system are, for the most part, invisible to us. We do not know what others are experiencing, what their worlds are like, what issues they are dealing with, what dilemmas they are facing, what stresses they are undergoing. To make matters worse, sometimes we *think* we know when in fact we do not. We have our beliefs, myths, and prejudices, which we accept as the truth and which become the bases of our actions. This blindness to other parts of the system—which we call *spatial blindness*—is a source of considerable misunderstanding, conflict, and diminished system contribution.

Seeing the Present Without Seeing the Past

Temporal blindness refers to the fact that all current events in system life have a history; there is a coherent tale that has led to this particular point in time. Generally that history is invisible to us. We experience the present but are blind to the complex set of events that have brought us to the present. And again, it is this blindness to the history of the moment that is a source of considerable misunderstanding and conflict.

Scene 1 describes the consequences of spatial and temporal blindness.

Scene 2 and 3 deal with the transformation of spatial blindness into spatial sight and temporal blindness into temporal sight.

Scene 1

When We Don't See the Big Picture

1 Pinball

Sometimes life in the organization feels like a game of pinball,
and we're the little metal ball.

We start each day launched into a mysterious world of

bumpers

lights

bells

and whistles.

Lights flash on

and off.

Buzzers sound.

Gates open

and close,

sometimes propelling us at high speed to some other center

of the action,

and sometimes letting us drop quietly

into a hole.

All of this is a mystery to us.

Is this just a set of random events?

Or is there some grand scheme
known to others, but not to us?
One day we hit a bumper.
Lights flash.
Bells ring.
Big numbers go up on the scoreboard.
The next day we keep an eye out for that bumper.
We hit it.
Nothing. A dull thud.
And we continue, puzzled, along our way.

Some days there's lots of action
and big scores.
Other days there's lots of action
but not much of a score to show for it.
And other days there's very little of either.
At the end of the day—
lots of action
or little,
high scores
or low—
we drop through the final gate, heading home.
Sometimes we're impressed with our accomplishments,
sometimes depressed by our failures,
sometimes we're dreading the next launch,
sometimes we're champing at the bit for the next game.
And most times,
as we slide past the gate heading home,
we pause momentarily to reflect:

NOW WHAT WAS THAT ALL ABOUT?

The Manager of the Heart

Suggestion: *You might enjoy reading this piece to a group of supervisors or middle managers; see if they know what it is like to be “The Manager of the Heart.”*

Life in the organization may feel like a game of pinball, but the organization itself works more like the human body, everything neatly connected to everything else.

However, when we don’t see the whole, it can all feel like one chaotic mess.

Take the Manager of the Heart.

At times it’s a peaceful job.

A nice even supply of fresh blood comes in from the lungs.

All engines pump smoothly: Lub . . . dub . . . lub . . . dub.

Oh-oh! EMERGENCY! EMERGENCY!

Bells ring.

Buzzers sound.

Messengers come bursting into your office:
chemical messengers from the bloodstream,
electrical messengers from nerve endings.

Who are these guys? Where do they get their information?

Who gives them the authority to tell you what to do?

“What emergency?” you ask. “Where?”

“THERE’S NO TIME TO EXPLAIN!” say the Big Shot Messengers.

“JUST START SOME HEAVY PUMPING!”

So you tell your people: “FULL AHEAD ON THE PUMPS!”

You've got a good crew;
in no time they've got those pumps working away at full
capacity:

LUB . . . DUB . . . LUB . . . DUB.

You're proud of your crew. You turn to those Messengers and
say:

"OK. Bring on that emergency. We can handle anything!"

But the Messengers aren't looking at you;
they're checking their pagers.

"Forget it," says the electrical messenger.

"Cut back," says the chemical messenger.

"Emergency's canceled," they say.

Emergency's canceled? We're just getting up a head of steam.

"CUT BACK! CUT BACK!" They're desperate now.

"YOU'LL BURST SOME PIPES!"

"What'll I tell my crew?"

"CUT BACK!!!!"

So you tell your crew.

"It's for the good of the system," you tell them.

"What do you want from me?" you ask them.

"I don't make the rules around here."

And then it's calm again.

A nice even flow of blood.

Pumps humming along: Lub . . . dub . . . lub . . . dub.

And you start thinking.

You start worrying about your crew.

How many changes of direction can these folks take?

Will I be able to count on them in a real emergency?

You start thinking about those Messengers,
those Specialists,
acting like big shots,
giving out orders,
all that technical mumbo jumbo.
When was the last time any of them bloodied their hands
opening and closing a stuck valve?

You start thinking about the Bigwigs.
Whoever they are,
wherever they are,
are they just playing games with us or what?
Maybe they know what they're doing,
maybe they don't.
What do they do up there all day anyhow?
Maybe they've got the big picture,
but what if they don't?
What if they're just . . . crazy?

And then you start thinking about yourself:
All this stress,
the way you blew up at those Messengers.
They're just doing their jobs after all.
Maybe you're losing your cool.
Maybe you can't cut it anymore.
Maybe you're not half the heart you used to be.

Oh-oh! What's that sound?
Who's that racing along the bloodstream?
I know, I know.

EMERGENCY! EMERGENCY!

3 The Mystery of the Swim

We may not see the big picture, but that doesn't stop us from creating our own version of it.

In John Barth's "Night-Sea Journey," a "swimmer" tells us of his journey.¹ He is the sole survivor of what began as a horde of eager, strong, and dedicated swimmers—thousands of them, millions, maybe billions! (He's not sure how many there were.) Only he remains—exhausted and confused. The others are gone, drowned in what now seems like an endless and pointless misadventure. Some, disillusioned and hopeless, have taken their own lives.

Along the way, there were many debates among the swimmers. What was this journey about? When did it begin? Where would it end? What purpose, if any, did it serve?

Different camps with competing philosophies developed regarding the meaning of the night-sea journey. Some argued that there was no meaning to it, that it was a pointless venture, that the struggles and deaths of the swimmers were all in vain. Many from this school took their own lives out of despair.

Others believed that the meaning of the venture lay in the swim itself, that the point of the swim was to swim as best as one could for as long as one could.

Still others believed that the swim was part of some grand design that they, the swimmers, could only speculate about but never fully comprehend.

Within the grand design school, there were varying viewpoints: Some believed that the grand design was inherently good, others believed it was evil, and others believed it was neither good nor evil but that it merely existed.

But now all the others are gone; the debates, the discussions, the schools of philosophy have all drowned in the night sea. Only the narrator remains. We listen to him tell of his journey; he shares his thoughts and feelings. He is tired and confused. Should he continue the struggle or, like the others, allow himself to drown?

And as we read on, we too are confused and discomfited. The swimmer's story is an unsatisfactory one for us. The questions that plague him plague us too. What *is* this night-sea journey? Where did it begin? Where will it end? What purpose, if any, does it serve? The swimmer tells us in great detail about *his* journey, yet that is not enough for us. We need to comprehend the journey itself, the whole of which he is but a component part.

Barth never gives us the answer we seek, and without that answer, the journey remains for us an unsettling mystery.

However, if, during our reading—the first, second, or third time through—it comes to us what this night-sea journey is, we are struck with great illumination. Now, having grasped the whole, we read the story through again. What once was confusing is now crystal clear; what once seemed complex and mysterious is now simple and straightforward. The squabbles, debates, and philosophical discussions all make sense to us. *And they all seem like so much silly superstition.*²



Barth's tale is both a sly joke and a challenging message. He is less concerned with those night-sea swimmers than with us and—given our remarkable brains—our apparently unlimited capacity to create stories that explain what we really don't know. We are story-making machines; we have stories explaining everything from the mystery of life to why the boss never responded to our memo. If we realized that we were making up stories, there'd be some fun to the process and little damage. The problem comes when we believe that our stories are the truth, and we then act on the basis of that "truth."

The challenge is to be able to move past our local picture and the imperfect "truths" it generates to seeing the larger picture and the truths it reveals. First, let's look at how it usually goes—*not always, not with everyone, but with great regularity*—when, in our spatial blindness, we see the part but not the whole.

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