



MEET THE PERSON

Learning From an Artist About Organizations

The Poetry and Prose of David Whyte at Work

ELIZABETH M. ESSEX

Case Western Reserve University

CHARALAMPOS MAINEMELIS

London Business School

INTRODUCTION

As the fire of our creativity burns its way into our interior life as much as it transforms the world at large, we experience what the medieval philosophers called the alchemical wedding, the meeting of the interior world of a single human being with the great soul of the world. This betwixt-and-between world is the very touchstone of creativity. It exists as much in a development plan as it does in a great canvas.

—Whyte (1994, p. 113)

In recent years, organizational science has shown an increasing interest in how organizations can learn from art. This movement toward learning from art can be witnessed in the incorporation of poetry and art in the three most recent meetings of the Academy of Management (Chicago 1999, Toronto 2000, and Washington D. C., 2001) and several articles that use images and metaphors from art to develop new insights about organizational life (e.g., Barrett, 1998; Hatch, 1999; Sandelands & Buckner, 1989). Our goal in this article is

to contribute to this growing literature, without, however, offering our own interpretations and analysis of how art can be useful to organizations. Instead, we pose this question directly to an artist who has worked for many years in organizations and let him explain how he views organizational life and the role of art in it.

David Whyte, who lives and works as a full-time poet in Washington State, believes that there is much for organizations and their employees to learn from art and, specifically, from poetry. Born in Yorkshire, England, and trained as a marine zoologist, Whyte worked as a naturalist guide in the Galapagos Islands prior to his decision to write and work with poetry full-time. Although a poet, Whyte is also a consultant who spends time in organizations conducting seminars, management retreats of several hours or several days, and keynote lectures at large conferences. His goal is to bring poetry to organizations to stimulate creativity and initiate discussion and exploration on issues of identity and change in the workplace. Orga-

AUTHORS' NOTE: We thank Richard Boyatzis, Hilary Bradbury, Bruce Spatz, *JMI* editor Gretchen Spreitzer, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT INQUIRY, Vol. 11 No. 2, June 2002 148-159
© 2002 Sage Publications

nizational scholars and practitioners became familiar with his work through his 1994 best-selling book *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*, in which Whyte (1994) suggested that poetry can bring about change by seeding conversations that may be difficult for many organizations to face yet are the ones that managers and employees long for.

In this article, we integrate materials from two interviews conducted with David Whyte on February 1 and August 25, 2000. In these interviews, we asked David Whyte what contributions poetry can make to organizational life, how he uses poetry to increase an organization's creative potential, and what changes he observes in the individuals and organizations he works with. We wanted to find out how he views organizational life and how, specifically, he uses poetry in his consulting work. In the interviews, Whyte portrays poetry as a conduit for "real" conversations, conversations that facilitate creativity by involving the deepest desires and passions of organizational members. As the interview unfolds, Whyte explains the practical benefits of bringing poetry into an organization and illustrates the way poets and poems are being received by corporate audiences.

THE INTERVIEW

The Poet

moves forward
to that edge
but lives sensibly,

through the senses
not because of them

Above all he watches
where he steps.
As if it matters
where he leaves his prints . . .

The poet's

task is simple.
He looks for quiet,
and speaks to what
he finds there. . . (Whyte, 1992, p. 42)

Mainemelis: What is a poet's task in corporate America, and more specifically, what do you see as your task in the organizations you work with?

Whyte: I have two agendas when I go into an organization. One is to be useful to the organization in question. The other is simply to get poetry to as many individuals as possible because I feel that poetry grants you amazing participative powers with the world. It brings you into conversation with forces for which, hitherto, you had no language. And therefore, it is immensely useful and it is immensely neglected. I do look for the silence amidst all the noise of corporations and corporate communications and try to bring out the timeless motifs that are present there, and which people are quite amazed to see elucidated through the poetry. Increasingly people realize that if you want to have a creative organization you have to have people who are aware of themselves, what they want in the world, and where they are going.

It is quite astonishing that we have no language around most of the dynamics of identity in the workplace. We spend most of our time there, or society spends most of its energies and news emphasis on work, and there's almost nothing on the identities that we form around our work. Poetry is the language of that identity quite often, because it is the conversation between you and the sacred otherness of the world—what is other than you in an eternal creative sense, in natural wilderness, or in those moments when you are talking about customers and people who are literally "other than you" and who you are serving in some way.

My work in organizations is to make the conversation more real. Almost everyone gets very enthusiastic about that because they immediately make the connection between how expensive it is, in resources and money, and on the human spirit too, to be engaged in conversations that are not real. It is astonishing how many of our conversations in the world of work are simply unreal with regard to the motivational wellsprings of each person involved there. People are constantly trying to inspire others with goals that are less than inspirational, because they do not actually involve the deeper longings of the person who is actually working at the company.

Essex: When you go in an organization, do you actually use the phrase "making the conversation more real"?

Whyte: I do, yes.

Essex: Do people understand what you mean by that?

Whyte: They do, yes. Because they are in unreal conversations every day. Organizations are like families that way. There are lots of conversations that never touch the underlying dynamic. And there is nothing wrong with that because people have to live with one another from day to day. But when the underlying dynamic is actually strangling whatever creativity or individuality is there, then you must, as in a family, confront it.

Essex: So having a more real conversation is about bringing out the individuality of the person?

Whyte: Yes, but it can also be in very practical terms—there can be certain things about a project that are not being spoken about because to speak about them you would have to change the way you were working together. And no one wants to do that. So it is not only individuality but the way that those individuals are actually forming a corporate identity. Sometimes there are hierarchies in place that are so immovable that they actually get in the way of

the work itself, so that is where you have to make the conversation real too. Sometimes it can just be being honest about it and saying, "Look, unless we change certain structures about the way we are, we should not waste our breath talking about these changes because they will not happen." And that is an honest conversation: "Let's not pretend that we can do the changes." So that can be a radical conversation.

Essex: Do you think it is possible for an organization to change enough so that all of the conversations are real?

Whyte: Well, as I say, corporations are like families and villages—you have to live with these people for years and you should be very careful about transgressing any boundaries. The best thing is to create a collective will to meet at those boundaries and engage in conversation. It is the conversations at those boundaries that are the real conversations. I should at least be willing to bring myself to the frontier of the place where I have drawn a line in the sand around my own identity and engage in the conversation. And the conversation will, just by its own dynamic, enlarge my personal territory in a way.

Essex: What changes do you hope for when you consult in an organization, and what changes does poetry bring?

Whyte: Poetry builds a link between people's abilities to admit that other people are alive—whether that is a colleague or a coworker, whether it is your boss, whether it is someone working for you, whether it is your customer, or whether it is society in general. You must see that they are alive and have lives of their own. They are not there simply to be your customer; they are not there as a market. They have much bigger fish to fry. And your colleagues are not simply highly paid extras who have been shipped in so that you can fulfill all your career goals. I think it is one of the first great steps of spiritual maturity to be able to admit that other people are actually alive. You would think that this would be a given, but when you look at the way people actually treat one another, most people actually act as if other people are not alive, as if they do not have lives of their own.

One of the great things that the poetry does is grant people a sense that they do have a possible life which is uniquely their own, which no one else can live out in their stead. Once poetry opens up that possibility for you, then you start to admit that other people also have this possibility, and then you are ready for the real conversation. Most of the way we have looked at conversation here in the workplace until now is me having a big pile of verbal ammunition and firing it off at you whenever there is a gap in the verbal production line. And this is not a conversation. Everything that is real, that is timeless, that is praiseworthy, comes from the frontier, where both of you cease to exist as discrete entities in a way, and you have joined some kind of third experience, which is more celebrative of each of those persons' uniqueness than anything any of the individuals could have come up for themselves. That is true whether it is an invisible conversation between a person and their work, whether it is Blake with his poetry or engravings, or a person speaking to a colleague in a very creative way, or whether it is someone leaning over a counter, actually meeting a customer. The best of those relationships is always something that enters a new territory, which is greater than either of the people had explored before the conversation began.

Essex: When you talk about invisible conversation, how do you teach people to learn to pick up on that invisible conversation?

Whyte: By paying attention. You actually have to apprentice yourself to self-knowledge. You have to look at yourself and take an inventory of your virtues and your personal fears, and learn something about the way you react in the world. And when you are able to learn something about yourself, then you can also pay attention to others. For instance, if you have done no exploration of your own failures and your own fear of failure, when someone comes into your office with a proposal for a new venture, you cannot tell, when you smell failure, whether it is your own fear of failure or their actual possibility of failure, because you have done no exploration. So if someone comes into the room, presents something to me, and I immediately feel reactive toward it, the invisible conversation has to do with me asking, "Oh, I am really afraid of this. What is this? What am I afraid of? Am I afraid they will take my job? Am I afraid that I should have come up with this idea first and not them? Am I afraid that it is a foolish direction to go in?" But if I have done no exploration of that I cannot tell the difference, and I am powerless to know.

Essex: So would you say that you help people with their own exploration so that they can have that invisible conversation?

Whyte: Yes, I do. I say, "Stop trying to be perfect, you know, no one has ever done it in the whole history of mankind. You are not going to be the first." The way you ameliorate your own difficulties is by putting yourself in conversation with other people. A marriage of course is a perfect example of that, whereby you learn about yourself through being vulnerable, because what we love and respect about someone else is not their all-knowing powerfulness. We are attracted to that at the beginning of a relationship, but very soon that is exactly the thing that can kill the marriage itself. It is exactly the same thing I think in power relationships in the workplace. We are under this delusion that we are loved for our all-knowing competence, and actually we are loved for our honest failings and our honest foibles. All inheritance in the workplace comes from a very masculine approach to the world, which is power over objects. So I talk about the way the world is changing with the movement of women into the workplace, that women in a way are preadapted to this postmodern world. And I talk in generalities, because some people find themselves, no matter what their sex, at different places on the spectrum. But it is a useful way of looking at the way we have come to this inheritance. Men historically have been fearful of conversation. Until they get to a level of maturity in their 40s and 50s and they start to understand that conversation is the relationship, it is not about the relationship. So this is a very interesting dynamic to talk about. The vulnerability of real conversation, of power through relationship, not over people, is the direction we are going in and that is immensely frightening to some people.

Mainemelis: What could managers learn from poets with regard to real conversations?

Whyte: The word *manager* comes from the medieval Italian *maneggiare*, which actually meant the care, feeding, and training of a horse. So the whole linguistic inheritance behind the word *manager* has to do with getting on the back of a beast and digging your knees and pulling on the

reins and heading it in a certain direction. I think the word *manager* is going to disappear in the next 50 years. It is just not large enough for what people in positions of responsibility in organizations have to do right now. I believe that what they have to do is to be artistic experts in conversation. And they have to apprentice themselves to the artistry of conversation, and the way that conversation is not something to be got out of the way, in order to get good work done, but real conversations actually are the work. The work is done in the conversation.

In a recent workshop with Bertelsmann managers, who were all in the upper reaches of the organization, I told them,

All of your technical competencies for which you were first recruited are basically no longer needed at the level at which you are working. If you look at your work and what you do, it all has to do with human relationship. The technical competencies are simply a kind of ambient background which you need. But the central part of your work has to do with human relationship.

And they all look as if the scales have fallen away from their eyes and they say, "My god, that's true." So you have to face up to this fact. And you must apprentice yourself to the motif of human belonging, because that is where you will actually build this new competency which is really about human relationship. It is about the human relationships within the organization, between your organization and society and the people you are serving, and the relationship with the unknown future which still lies over the horizon.

Essex: You have criticized traditional organizational structures for constraining experience and the soul. When you speak in organizations you say some provocative things such as, "Organizations have spent enormous amounts of energy putting in place systems that attempt to hold back the shifting oceanic qualities of existence" [Whyte, 1994, p. 10], or you use a phrase by Oscar Wilde to suggest that an organization is like a person who "has no enemies, but is intensely disliked by all his friends" [Whyte, 1994, p. 294]. How does a typical corporate audience react when you say that kind of thing?

Whyte: It gets received very well! They are all very relieved to have it said. People like honesty, and people have to confront these difficult and often absurd dynamics every day. You have just got to be able to mention and admit these dynamics, and then you can talk about how they come about. But there is also a great place for humor, because humor simply widens the field so that you understand that whatever portion of reality you are speaking to, there is always a larger one which will make your perspectives absurd. That is what the dynamic of humor is about, and that is really what my whole work is about. It is about enlarging the field of perspective. So when I say provocative things about organizations people suddenly realize that many of the things they are doing, and the reasons that they are doing them, are based on ridiculous foundations.

This realization often brings a feeling of humiliation, but I always say that humiliation is a big part of growth. Life in a way is a constant cycle into humiliation and out again. I think of the ancient root of that word, which comes from the Latin word *humus*, which literally meant to be set upon solid ground. Therefore, to be humiliated

means to be put into the ground of your being. It is just that you have been radically simplified and much of the outer complicated carapace that you have grown, and that you think is your identity, cracks and atomizes and falls away. So you quite often do not recognize the person who is left, which is why humiliation can be so awful for a person, if they have no understanding that they are simply being radically simplified.

Essex: What would be an example of what you call "absurd dynamics"?

Whyte: For instance, if you look at the television and you see images of children starving in Africa and underneath it you see the Dow Jones ticker tape passing by, as if this is the ultimate context to tell you what is happening on the screen, it is not only absurd, it is immoral. But I do not usually speak about those dynamics right away. I am much more interested in working with people on their own ground to begin with. And only when we have got to a place where people actually ask about them and are really interested do I really plunge in and go to my own frontier of what I think about the dynamics of the corporate world and corporatism in our society.

Loaves and Fishes

This is not
the age of information.
This is *not*
the age of information.

Forget the news,
and the radio,
and the blurred screen.

This is the time
of loaves
and fishes.

People are hungry,
and one good word is bread
for a thousand. (Whyte, 1996, p.88)

Essex: When you introduce poetry into an organization do you have people try writing poetry?

Whyte: No, I try and keep away from that because so many people have allergic reactions to being put in a poetic workshop place. I try to keep it more in a storytelling, verbal mode, of simply hearing the poetry and having it work inside you and in a very intimate and particular and personal way. So you can read a poem by Rilke, Goethe, or Emily Dickinson to a thousand people and it will have a common correspondence with everyone, which is palpable in the room. But it will also have an intimate conversation, in a very personal way, with each one of those people—to my mind this is one of the definitions of a great poem. So there is emotion involved too. I do not think you can have any real change without some emotional involvement, some willingness to actually go through with the difficulties of the passage or changes. And poetry has a way of triggering that emotional

involvement without manipulating people. People are tired of being manipulated. Poetry has a great dash of wildness about it, and rebelliousness about it, and it really asks you to be the way you are made and put yourself in conversation with the world that way.

Mainemelis: When you read a poem to 500 or 1,000 people in an organization, how do you know that they become inspired and emotionally involved?

Whyte: Ironically, because of the silence in the room . . . profound silence. No one moves. When I read a poem, I like to let lines just stand in the silence for quite a while. And then I repeat lines and go into them again. And for many people, it is quite often the first visitation they will have had with silence in a long, long time. Where they can simply sit and be intimate with a part of themselves that they actually have forgotten about.

Essex: Is part of that dynamic being in a room with other people, too? That being silent in a big group of people is different than just a one-on-one relationship with a poem?

Whyte: If you have apprenticed yourself to poetry, then a line of poetry should create a profound silence in you even if you are alone. But of course it is magnified in a physical sense whenever there are hundreds and hundreds of people together. And it does magnify the immediate importance of it. Everyone realizes, "Oh my god, something has just been said that I need to listen to." And that is quite often why I repeat it again. So we must be very careful not to analyze this to death, because the reason it works is because it actually triggers people's stronger, fiercer faculties—the faculties of the imagination, the faculties of belonging—and it gives people heart. Out of that heartfulness comes courage to make change in their own lives, whether that is leaving the organization, or whether it is actually taking up the courage to have all the conversations with their coworkers that they have been refusing to have, hoping they would go away.

Mainemelis: How many companies have you worked with, and how many have you worked with more than once?

Whyte: I have worked with at least 500 companies all over the world, mostly the U.S., then Canada, Europe, and the Far East, in health care and in educational arms of many companies. Seventy-five percent of the time is once only, such as a conference, but others are cyclical, such as Boeing where I have worked for 3 ½ days per month over 13 months, Bertelsmann two times per year in Switzerland and Harvard University, and Thames Water in Oxford three times per year.

Mainemelis: Let us talk about Boeing, a company you have worked with repeatedly. What has your relationship with Boeing been?

Whyte: About 4 years ago, it was an intense time because I went in to Boeing 15 or 16 times over a year and a month. I just worked with them actually a couple of weeks ago too, but there was a long hiatus between those times and it was a different population that I worked with. I worked with about 60 managers each month out of their executive class. And you do get more focused. But what you feel is that there is a critical mass building in the company around the use of language and critical knowing. In a strange way, a critical knowing about unknown things. For instance at Boeing, they were able to use a phrase from *Beowulf* about wrestling with Grendel's mother in a way that was incredibly useful to them. Because up until that point they had no way of tackling taboo issues. They had no way of actually tiptoeing even into that territory

or even getting to the frontier. And halfway through the year I started to hear people say, outside of my class, "Do you know what Grendel's mother is in this situation?" And people would immediately get excited and say, "What?" And they would say, "We are not doing this," or "We are not talking about so and so." And as the language gets large enough it is a creature that is alive other than your everyday work. It is a dynamic, a mythic force that is actually shaping you all along. If you do not have the language of a certain world, then it is barred from you. So poetry is the language of human belonging, and strangely enough, the place where we actually run up against the dynamics of human belonging most of all is the workplace, and there is almost zero conversation about that.

Mainemelis: At Boeing, what was your goal in going into a session with 60 managers?

Whyte: For example, one of the sessions was called "Learning How to Learn." The message was that the art of learning is actually something you have to apprentice yourself to first before you can really learn, that learning how to learn is really about creating a relationship with the unknown. And then we had the *Beowulf* session at the end, which was about coming to terms with the shadows of the organization. And I did a session on working with others, "Self in Relation to Others."

Mainemelis: We'd like to hear about another company you worked with. Could you give us examples of the sessions and the poetry that you used?

Whyte: I have a core of poems that I work with when I have a short session and a couple of dozen poems from which I'll draw. And then I have about 250 poems that I can pull in just to make it different for myself and also just in the moment. I do work extemporaneously. When I worked with Bertelsmann 2 days ago in Boston I did not plan the session out at all. I just started in and tried to make it a frontier, a kind of passionate encounter. It was just an hour-long talk and then we had wine and then people came back in and we had a discussion. I was working around the power of conversation and the power of vulnerability—in vulnerability, actually, in leadership. It was very well received. And the great question was, "How do we take this back into our workplace?"

Essex: What was the answer?

Whyte: I gave them a couple of questions to take back with them into their workplace. "What is a courageous conversation we are not having as an organization today?" "What is a courageous conversation we are not having as a work group?" "What is the courageous conversation I am not having?" And simply to ask that, and ask it in some kind of silence when you are on your way to work, on the commute, your imagination will actually present you with the way to go. People really invite me in order to enlarge the language. I always say that poetry is like leavening in bread and it allows the whole loaf to rise, and so suddenly people are asking what yesterday were quite quotidian questions in a totally different context. So that is my hope, that people should be passionate about something by the time I finish my session, and they should be asking deeper questions about everything. If they are not, then I failed. I have not done a good job.

Mainemelis: How can real conversations and your world of poetry apply to people who work in mines, or clean office buildings for a living, or are otherwise performing jobs simply for survival?

Whyte: I have just written about that in my last book, about our ancestors and how privileged we are to even ask questions about work today. For many ancestors, they were lucky enough just to have the work itself. But I do not think that anybody is absolved from the conversation, and there are lots of marvelous instances of people in the most difficult work in the world right through to slavery asking the great questions of life. None of us is absolved. And quite often it has to do with finding some kind of power through forming a collective voice through a union or whatever it is. Actually you are seeing that amongst doctors now. Previously, they had been allergic to unions, but now that they are feeling completely powerless and dispossessed of any decision-making power, they are starting to form unions in order to get a voice that can be in conversation with all these other great powers that are out in the world there. So this feeling of powerlessness and slavery is not confined to people who do manual work. It is there; there is a kind of postmodern serfdom that is there even in the dot-com world. Except the poverty in that world has to do with the lack of time and timelessness, and the lack of imagination to live a life that is as large as your work.

Essex: Do you find any differences between working with line workers and working with more corporate types?

Whyte: No, you just have to shape the language a little differently, to make sure the context is right. But people like line workers are terribly underestimated. They quite often, in their own life, have lots of responsibilities, and they may be teaching Little League, they may be working in their local church, they may be doing all kinds of things and taking on things which their workplace does not ask them for. And so, they are usually incredibly thankful to be treated as if they have intelligence and imagination, and to be spoken to in an adult language.

So I really love working with people on the line. It is just that people rarely let me get to them. In my most recent book, which is called *Crossing the Unknown Sea—Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity*, I really talk about how in my own ancestry I come from long lines of the dispossessed on both sides—Irish, Yorkshire, Scots. I grew up just a half mile from the Dun Steeple where the Luddites used to gather, before they would walk across the fields to break up the machinery, at the beginning and the height of the Industrial Revolution. So the whole question about how, when you are ground down into your work, do you ask questions about it, is very close to my own heart.

I really think that people in professional careers, particularly in the United States, are ground down into the work in ways that they cannot even acknowledge. It is actually magnified in the United States, because if you go to Europe there is usually a corporal environment which is just as strong as the work. They will have a life, a cultural involvement outside of their work, which is quite complex and quite deep. In the United States you will see people's characters just worn down to a few dimensions, whereby they go out to dinner and they have no conversation whatsoever, apart from their work. I find that quite dispiriting, both to the individuals and to the society that they are forming, collectively.

Mainemelis: You said that sometimes you do not get in to those people, line workers. Why do you think that is?

Whyte: Well, I usually work with the upper and top management, who never think about saying, "This would be

great for people, way down the line." And I suppose to be truthful there is only one of me and I cannot keep up with the demand, and so my prices are quite high and usually they will not pay that kind of money even though there might be hundreds of line workers there. But it is not always true. I have been into construction companies in Dallas, Texas, and talked to everyone, including the riveters, and got just as strong a response, perhaps even more of an emotional response because they felt respected and as if their intelligence had been recognized. It is something that I am quite pleased about when I know that there will be line workers there.

Essex: In your consulting work, 75% of the companies you visit, you visit only once. How do you know the effect that you have on a company that you visit one time?

Whyte: From personal letters and correspondence—messages that people send afterwards. Usually we get something from the person who actually invited me in and who was heading up the program, and we get lots of individual letters too. Sometimes I feel as if the effect on the organization, when I have gone in once, it is simply that there is more conversation there. Things being spoken about that there were not before. Or there is at least a willingness to do that. And even if that does not last very long, quite often it has quite an effect on the individuals. I always go in under the aegis of organizational work, although with a personal dimension.

Essex: So the personal dimension for you would be affecting individuals as well as affecting changes within the organization.

Whyte: Yes. Ultimately you cannot tease those apart, because where does organizational change come from? It comes from individuals at whatever level in whatever number, either one person or a hundred people, changing what they do and what they say and how they do it, and of course, poetry is immensely helpful in that.

Mainemelis: Could you give us a couple of examples of what is in the letters that people write to you; what is the feedback you receive from them?

Whyte: I would say that one of the great things is memory, is that people suddenly remember qualities that were incredibly important to them but they have somehow let go of and forgotten. And it is suddenly as if they have woken up from a kind of amnesia. And they start making decisions that are quite radical, and so people will say that a particular talk either confirmed many things that were held in the background for years, or it helped them make a decision that has been put off for a long time. Some say that the poetry touched me in a way that I have not been touched for years and I was so relieved to understand that all that was still true. Because people, when they get incredibly busy, they tend to get very cynical at the same time. Because almost everything that is precious and worthwhile in life comes out of a silent presence, whether it is being with your children, your family, your garden, or the natural world. Otherwise you really cannot see any of those people or things. They are just things that need to be done. So poetry emancipates you back into the territory of silence, where you belong. It gives you an experience of the timeless and the eternal, without which people's labors and work simply corrodes away their character. I think we have seen a vast corrosion of the American character, through the overemphasis on work in the last 20-odd years. So that you can listen to anyone on the television and they all sound the same.

There is nothing original being said at all. And these obsessions with the NASDAQ and the Dow Jones are almost superstitious. It is pure idolatry. And yet it is dressed up every day to be our primary concern.

Mainemelis: You have worked with companies in Asia and the Far East, Europe and the U.S. Have you found any differences in the way people receive and react to your poetry?

Whyte: I find that Europe and the United States have a lot of similar dynamics, but when you go out to the Far East there can be huge cultural divides—almost the equivalent of translating poetry from another language. But the place that I love to work in the Far East, where I have done quite a bit of work, is the Philippines. And it is a perfect substrate because it is the meeting of East and West. In fact the Filipinos with their tongue in their cheek, they describe their history as 400 years of the Catholic Church and 70 years of Disney. And in many ways it is true. You could say they have an Asian soul with American personalities. I think that the Philippines is actually going to be one of the places of the future, simply because they do have an insight into both worlds. When I work with purely Chinese or Japanese audiences, then I do not have enough anthropological knowledge to pick up on the clues as to whether they are actually getting it or not. I find that I really have to ask a lot of questions to make sure that we are understanding one another. I talk about “Trust in the Land” for instance, and they can join the conversation, and in Rome, they want to know why you would trust anyone who is not a part of your immediate family. Which is a great question, a very old question in human societies. So that was a great question for me and really pushed me in my work, and I think we worked with the idea that you would have to extend your definition of family in order to create trust. I do think that poetry creates an underground conversation. And everyone is actually shaping the talk along with me, by the mode of their listening and their silence and their reaction.

Essex: What do you learn about yourself and your work when you work in organizations?

Whyte: When I work in organizations I am feeling a corroboration that the great poets have very forceful things to tell us. Not because they were great gurus but because they simply sang their struggles in a way in which we can all recognize ourselves. I just see us in a way hollowing out as human beings in the workplace and becoming incredibly bland and boring. And that we must reinvigorate ourselves. We must have greater goals than the Dow Jones and the NASDAQ and the production figures, and move away from this obsession with production and money. There is a strange irony, because the very qualities that the poets are speaking to are qualities that actually help organizations to be more productive. But the grander philosophical context is that as the poetry has some lasting effect, then people will actually simplify their lives even as they are being more productive and more creative. If you can make a home in the world which is your own, then you do not need to steal other people’s homes away from them. And you do not need a constant delivery of goods to your door in order to feel that you are a paid up member of humanity.

You certainly pushed me to see things in a different way and I appreciate that, because I have learned a lot about my work just from this conversation. I suppose what I learn in the work world is the same thing you learn

facing a blank page; you overhear yourself saying things you did not know you knew. I seem to be getting more forceful and more passionate the longer I stay in this world, which is a good sign, I suppose. And when that stops happening then I will leave it because I am a man of letters. I am first and foremost a poet who happens to work in the corporate world. I do have a life outside it. I work in international kind of diplomatic circles, such as the Gorbachev Foundation and the State of the World Forum in New York, and I am working there in a very different context. Then I also do straight readings in downtown San Francisco; I work with the Buddhist community around contemplative dynamics and things. So I hate being described as a corporate poet because I do not think there even is a beast like that!

Mainemelis: Do you know other poets who bring poetry into organizations?

Whyte: I know a lot of people who have started to bring poetry in because of my work. There are hundreds of consultants now who, every now and again, will draw on a poem in order to make a point. And many of them will have them memorized too. So that is I suppose the influence out of my work. Then there are people who use theater, of course, these theater groups that go in and do role playing, but there are few. I do not know any who are in a sense first and foremost artists, which is what I consider myself. I do not know really of any other artist per se who takes their work full-time into these questions around organizational development and the identities we form in work. And my work is not about organizational development, it is really about identity, the epistemology of human belonging. It is about the way we belong to our work and the way work shapes us, even as we shape the world through our work. It is about keeping an equal conversation with your work, because we spend so much time with our work shaping ours, that you have got to understand that you have got to shape it in turn in order to keep it a real conversation, so it does not overwhelm you, does not avalanche across your character, does not narrow you down.

Mainemelis: You mentioned earlier that you look for timeless motifs in organizational life. You have written about different conceptions of time, such as the routine time of organizations or our experience of irreversible, evolutionary time, but it seems that you are more concerned with the experience of timelessness where you locate the source of creativity.

Whyte: Our normal empirical view of time is the main weight that people carry in organizations. I would say that people do have experiences in organizations quite often of evolutionary time, where there are great turning points, where things change because of certain events, and they have appreciation of that. But there is less of an appreciation or an understanding of an experience of timelessness, an experience outside of time, which I think is the engine from which all our really imaginative and creative ways of being in the world come.

I think it is very hard to actually approach your own personal creativity or anyone else’s without creating a sense of timelessness or spaciousness, within your workday. And there are many ways to do that. You can do it through artful conversation, you can do it through humor, or you can do it through a celebrative atmosphere. You can do it through real creative contact in which ordinary linear time simply disappears—we have all had this experience at our desks, where you have been

so engrossed in what you are about that you cannot tell whether an hour has passed or a half hour or 3 hours.

I have that experience most days with my poetry writing. But I think it is something that millions of people are dying of, for lack of experiencing. They are hurrying from place to place, and there is no spacious dwelling in life. One of the great things about poetry is that it will lead people, often in quite robust ways, but often in quite gentle, compassionate ways, back into this conversation and reintroduce them to themselves.

When I go to organizations I work in two levels at once. One in the time-bound world of the corporation and I try to meet all their objectives. But I think it is possible to do that and also have an experience of timelessness which grants people a little spaciousness and more possibility of happiness. And when I think of happiness I do not think of simply having positive feelings about life. In true happiness you can actually take a lot of grief, difficulty, and fear because you have a more spacious or open consciousness which can hold all these losses. Therefore you have a life which is worth living while you are doing your work. The territory of human experience is much more of a frontier engagement where time actually disappears. The organizations that are most successful, and usually they are actually subsets of organizations where you have got a group of people who understand this, are people who are able to celebrate and have a good sense of humor, who are able to work really hard at specific crucial times, and who are also able to have a lot of enjoyment in their work, and not always be carrying great weights of responsibility or exhausting themselves in it.

Mainemelis: Does the experience of timelessness in the workplace depend solely on individual initiative and motivation, or are there certain organizational features which facilitate that?

Whyte: I think it is both, but if an organization is in a very bad way, then it almost always takes individuals making a courageous step, speaking out courageously in order to turn things around. An organization is an *organ*; a corporation is a *corpus*, a body of people who have come together to do something that you cannot do as an individual. So there is a way in which individuals have got to take individual responsibility, because they are the organization. Sometimes, of course, you can try your best and you can be as courageous as you want to be and still nothing happens. Then it is up to you to go and attempt the conversation somewhere else. But you should not come to that conclusion too early either. A friend and colleague of mine, Peter Block, says you should have three good faith attempts at speaking courageously in order to change things in the place where you are, because it is always so easy to think that the grass is greener elsewhere. But I would say that ultimately the onus is always on the individual. And when we talk about repressive organizations, we are actually talking about the way that the individuals in that organization have decided to run the place.

Mainemelis: Let us focus for a moment on those times that individuals decide to leave the organization and attempt their conversation somewhere else. Reports from the field say that when individuals in business organizations have important creative ideas, they tend, more often than not, to take these ideas and go somewhere else, to another organization or a new venture [see, for example, Sternberg, O'Hara, & Lubart, 1997]. How do you explain this phenomenon?

Whyte: I do come across this phenomenon quite a bit. But there are many people, too, who are able to have transformative experiences and stay within their organizations. And the question is, Is the organization large enough to hold them? Quite often, the answer is no. If it is large enough to hold them and they can move within it, and they can have the conversation they need to have, then they can stay there.

It may be that we actually choose organizations that are right at the edge of our own frontier, and as we first go into them, we actually find ourselves very uncomfortable with any more freedom than we were being given. Then suddenly you get to a place where you have matured and you are asking for more freedom, you are asking for more conversation, and it is just not there. So you naturally have to leave that organization because you chose it as a particular vehicle for yourself and it is just not large enough anymore.

The object in the future is to create an organization which will be able to hold people at many different levels of adventure, pilgrimage, creativity, courage, and offer them, almost like someone studying a martial art, higher and higher levels of mastery in the areas in which they are actually engaged. I do see some organizations actually being quite successful in creating that.

Mainemelis: Would you like to give us some examples?

Whyte: I would just say that it is a great question for all organizations now, around retaining good people, especially in this economy which is expanding at such an enormous rate. And so every organization that is worth its salt is asking how they can create a place that people would want to stay at and feel as if they were growing, and feel that they are actually engaged in a conversation that was enlarging them day by day, no matter how slowly. So I would say that that is a necessary dynamic to bring into a workplace, and that the really good workplaces, like Medtronic who I work with, are doing it. I see them doing it at Bertelsmann too. That is a big question for them because many of their recording executives are in direct conversation with rock artists and people who live in a completely different world, and so they have to have a frontline conversation with them. They constantly have to ask the question, "What is it I am offering this person that they cannot do, especially now that they can do it for themselves over the Internet?" Rock musicians can actually promulgate their own CDs and market them themselves, especially if they have a name already.

Essex: You talk about organizations creating levels of adventure, pilgrimage, and creativity, and higher levels of mastery. But how, if you were a manager, would you do that for the people who work with you, or for yourself?

Whyte: In a way, I already do that because I have my own organization here. I did not begin poetry in order to create a business, but a business seems to have gathered around my poetry. So the way I do it in my own organization is to ask the quite constant question, How do you keep the work interesting? How do you keep people at their own frontier so that they are not just little elves grinding out poetry books and tapes from this little salt mine that you have created? And so it is important to keep asking people, "What is it? Where do you think we should go now? What is the next step? What do you need? Where are you in your life?" And so everyone feels as if they are in the conversation. And they do not feel as if they are just putting in time. So, for instance, my assistant, Julie, who is always been a remarkable designer of

cards using various media and papers and colors, has begun to design covers for my tapes and books. And she is doing a lot of the Web site design. And that has come through exactly that conversation. How do we keep this work alive for you? This is a great question to ask everyday about yourself and your coworkers. How do we keep this interesting for everyone? I do not want anyone in this team just putting in the time, just having their shoulder to the wheel. Now obviously, there are times where you have to do that, where, no matter what you do, for the next 2 days the work cannot be interesting, you have just got to get it done. And people can take that, as long as the overall context is there, whereby once those times are over, you will go back to these questions.

Essex: When I try with students to make work interesting or to create a sense of adventure it seems a great many of them are very cynical about it. How do you get past that initial cynicism when you find it?

Whyte: You are in a very difficult position in that you cannot kick them out of your class. Whereas you can in an organization say, "I want this kind of conversation. If you are not willing to have it, you should go elsewhere." Now I have worked in the classroom and that is an awful dynamic—the fact that there is too much of an inevitability about why they are there. And there is too much of a lack of choice. Sometimes you just want to say, "Please leave and those who are interested can stay." And of course you cannot do that in the educational world. That is the taboo question in the educational world and that is a frontier that will have to be approached in the next generation or so. Does that make sense to you?

Essex: Yes, it does make sense, but I wish it was a different answer. I wish you had talked about a way to change that cynicism.

Whyte: I think you can create passion in the classroom. And so you have to call on your more articulate parts. And you have to ask yourself, "Here is this incredibly passionate subject—at least I am passionate about it, so why am I not getting that across?" You could even ask them that out loud. And that is a real conversation. So I think we all have to learn how to be passionate and carry the energy and quality of that which we speak about in the speech itself, which of course is the discipline of poetry. So, it must have sounded like I gave a very cynical response to your question about cynicism in the classroom. But that is just one dynamic. We have abstracted so many things, and there are so many pressures from the curriculum and from the targets that have to be met that quite often they avalanche across the subject itself. Sometimes I think we would be just as well disbanding all of our educational systems and starting again tomorrow.

Essex: In your poetry, it seems that silence and the natural world are necessary catalysts for creativity and timelessness. How can you bring silence and the natural world into the experience of working in an organization?

Whyte: I think monastic silence would be a marvelous thing to have in organizations, but it is a very big leap from where we are now. But there are other kinds of silence which are very powerful, and one is the silence that comes in an organization from the ability not to be calling for easy answers all the time. The inherited dynamic around the meeting table is that you force people into the quickest and easiest answer and they look smart that way. So I would say that an organization that allows people to really think deeply on a question is an organization that has silence in it.

There are many different kinds of silence and many different kinds of quiet, but I do think that the ancient modes of silence are no less important than they ever have been—particularly where we are racking up our economy and our use of resources to such an extent that we could easily devour the natural world and our own life support systems, without being fully conscious of it.

I do believe that there is a certain sanity that nature grants to people, partly in the same way that a pet grants sanity to its owner. It is not attempting to manipulate you into buying anything. It is not trying to tell you that this is good and therefore you should sign on. It is simply itself. And the patterns are quite astonishing in the natural world. They are soothing in themselves if you can give yourself over to them. Many of us have lost the imaginative capacity to actually have that conversation.

Now of course there is a frightening part to nature and as Camille Paglia says, "Nature shrugs and all is ruin." That is true, but it is another kind of sanity because whatever our accomplishments are in life, they are like Shelley's *Ozymandias*, which tells us that they will eventually be in ruin. So faced with the beauties of the natural world, you have to ask yourself, What is timeless? What of my experience is something that I would not do without? The natural world teaches us not only what to do, but how to be while we are doing it. It is that imagination, those images that we have coevolved with, over millions of years, that we naturally find nourishing and invigorating, like the color of the sky or the trees, because we actually grew up with them. In Saint Francis's words, "they're our brothers and sisters"—not in the literal sense, but in an evolutionary sense. They are part of our makeup and they lead us into much larger understandings of the world.

Where Many Rivers Meet

All the water below me came from above.

All the clouds living in the mountains
gave it to the rivers
who gave it to the sea, which was their dying.

And so I float on cloud become water,
central sea surrounded by white mountains,
the water salt, once fresh,
cloud fall and stream rush, tree root and tide bank
leading to the rivers mouths
and the mouths of the rivers sing into the sea,
the stories buried in the mountains
give out into the sea
and the sea remembers
and sings back
from the depths
where nothing is forgotten. (Whyte, 1990, p. 8)

Essex: How do you bring into an organization that sense of what we can learn from the natural world?

Whyte: I do it through the poetry. If you read Wordsworth or Keats or Mary Oliver, you get this tremendous feeling of how important nature was for the same kind of revela-

tions that they have in their poetry. In a way it is a reminder, because most of us have a deep memory of nature, whether it is a kind of racial evolutionary memory of nature, or whether it is a memory from childhood of when we first perceived the grass in our garden or the trees in the park, and we are naturally drawn to it. And you only need a very small proportion of it to know that you belong to it. So poetry can jog your memory in a very deep way. It can make you hungry for that kind of experience.

Many great poets have said, and as many Zen masters have actually said, that you do not actually get enlightened by finding out more and more about yourself. You actually get enlightened by paying tremendous attention to the world and by having your name spoken by that creation. It comes back to find you. But it is not a passive process, because it takes tremendous amount of attention in the first place, to be able to hear or see the soul of the world out there. But it is what is granted back to us that actually is more at the center of our identities.

This is why it is important to speak about these things in work, because work only ultimately makes sense when you understand what is being given back, either to yourself or to your society. And in your early 20s you can work away and just have sheer ambition and the sheer frisson of being involved. But as you get older you need more than that. You realize that it has to make sense in some grander way than just having another BMW in your garage. It has to make sense in what it gives to others and what it gives back to you. You suddenly realize you are going to be dead in 30 years, 40 years, 50 years, whatever it is, and you have an intimation of your own mortality. You realize that you spend more hours in the workplace than you do anywhere else in your life, including with your family. That is certainly true for many people in corporate America these days.

So I would say that your work must speak to the great and timeless questions of life. Otherwise you are saying that I will only be involved in the essence of what I am about, in the periphery of my existence, in the weekends, all the little time that I have left to myself. This is why it is very important to be able to bring intimations of eternity, which I think is not an endless amount of time but a moment outside of time, into your workplace.

Easter Morning in Wales

A garden inside me, unknown, secret,
neglected for years,
the layers of its soil deep and thick.
Trees in the corners with branching arms
and the tangled briars like broken nets.

Sunrise through the misted orchard,
morning sun turns silver on the pointed twigs.
I have woken from the sleep of ages and I am not
sure
if I am really seeing, or dreaming,
or simply astonished
walking toward sunrise
to have stumbled into the garden

where the stone was rolled from the tomb of long-
ing. (Whyte, 1990, p. 76)

Mainemelis: Talking about the eternal, what is your relation with your work and its extension in time?

Whyte: I feel that the best part of being a poet is to write a few lines which will, in the old phrase, "be immortal." And when we talk about immortality we are actually talking about them surviving just for a few human generations, because even something that was written 2,000 years ago, if it lasts another 500 years, that is nothing in geological time. But to the human heart, you have written something that is lasting for eternity and will speak for generations to come. Some years ago I had my tongue in my cheek in a radio interview when someone was talking about poets, and saying how marvelous they are, and I was thinking they had something of a romantic idea of poets. So I said, you know, the Hollywood mogul only wants power, sex, and money, but the poet is the true materialist because he wants, or she wants, immortality. The poet is the true materialist, the true grasper. I was being facetious and ironic, because I think it is one of the greatest feelings to feel that you have written something that will stand the test of time. And if the poet even has one poem that will do that, then you feel as if something about your life has been worthwhile.

Mainemelis: I asked this question because a lot of people in corporate organizations often find themselves limited to dealing with ephemeral tasks or consumer products which will last for a few years, unlike poets who are primarily concerned with how their work will survive and travel through time.

Whyte: I would say that people in organizations should be concerned with these larger issues. Many organizations think they need to be hardheaded in order to do good business, but then they shut off the wellspring of human participation and creativity and then wonder why it is so expensive to get people to do things that they want them to do. But you have to approach it from both sides, from the fact that, yes, the organization can be repressive, but there is nothing more repressive than an individual on their own power. Quite often the person will be frightened to death by being asked for their creative powers. So one thing you need to know as a leader engaged in courageous conversations is that you will scare people. You have got to know when you are scaring them too much, and you have got to be able to be compassionate with people and know where they are in the cycle and phenomenology of discovery about themselves. You have got to be able to bring people along slowly, like a good teacher does in any kind of apprenticeship.

Essex: How much do you think that the metaphors that we commonly use for organizations have an impact on how we perceive time and creativity? For example, we tend to use sports metaphors, and we do not usually use metaphors from the natural world such as the organization as a river or a forest.

Whyte: Yes, but that is changing quite rapidly actually. Biological philosophers like Maturana and Varela use ecological metaphors all the time and so do I. I think that the way we operate in the world is entirely dependent on our language, and entirely dependent on our metaphors. A person can write a poem at a certain stage in history, but it is so true to the phenomena of existence that succeeding generations can walk in under their own steam and have a different experience of it than might have been taken at

the time when the original poem was written. But those levels are always there, hidden in the poetry. I think it is exactly the same in organizations, where if we can use images in the work world that have a hidden life of their own, they will give birth to other images. Certainly this is one of the ways that Coleridge looked at the imagination. He saw it as the ability of one image to be able to change and modify itself into another. Ecological images are able to do this, because they are movable and make sense to us.

The way we act in organizations is dependent on the language we use, and certainly sports metaphors are of very limited use. Now and again you can use them for a specific situation, like "knocking the ball out of the park," but ultimately they are bankrupt. They are in a time-bound world, a world that is bound by the boundary of the field in which the sport takes place. I think this is why the images I use in the poetry are so useful to people. They are surprising, and they are frightening at times, but they are big and they will take you to places.

For instance, in my new book I talk about how work and life is like a sea journey. There is no fixed path, it is more like a bearing, and it is dependent upon the currents and the weather. And it is a wonderful metaphor too because if you look behind you from a boat you can see the wake of your boat for a while, but then it just disappears into the sea. I think that is a marvelous and very accurate way that we look back on our own lives. You cannot really explain to anyone how you got to this place. You cannot even fully explain to yourself.

Another image I use is that of following a star, which is also a motif of being at sea. There were some times in Galapagos, during my stay there, where the phosphorescence of the ocean and the absolutely piercing clarity of the stars at night, because there are no other lights around, formed just a single, almost like a single medium. So you actually felt as if you were floating in space. So I use that image of being at the edge between two worlds, where you actually cannot tell the difference between the two. And I also talk about the word *desire*, which comes from the Latin meaning "of the stars." So when you have a desire, you are literally keeping a star in sight that will take you through very difficult territory on the surface.

Mainemelis: What would be an example of a frightening image that you use and which takes people to places?

Whyte: The outlaw. When I was a child I used to visit the place where the Luddites used to meet, which was also very close to the mythological burial place of Robin Hood. His gravesite was actually a place of refuge for me, up in the trees. So I take the image of Robin Hood, the outlaw, and talk about how important it is for each of us to keep the outlaw image alive inside of us. Otherwise you will be suborned by the immense corporate forces around you. So the outlaw is an image of freedom. And each one of us, when we were children, we held these images of people who were outside of the pale, whether it was El Zorro, Robin Hood, or Amelia Earhart, or whether it was a rebellious aunt or uncle who did not quite live in the way everyone else was. So we really have to go back and remember what these powerful images of freedom and courage are inside of us.

Essex: How do we change and develop the metaphors and the language that we use in a way that will be enlightening and open up creativity?

Whyte: Start reading good literature and good poetry and introduce it into organizations and to classes.

Mainemelis: In my experience, sometimes it may take years before one is able to grasp the richness and messages of a poem. So when you introduce poetry into an organization or the classroom you cannot expect it to produce impressive results by the end of the semester.

Whyte: That is a good point, but I would say also that poetry is conversation. It is simply a very intimate, sacred conversation with incredible urgency. Poetry is intimate conversations, and if you can apprentice yourself to poetry, you will learn how to hold energies that you could not hold in conversations beforehand. I remember at times reciting poetry by Rilke or Wordsworth and the poem was so big that I could barely contain it. I had found myself in this extremely nervous state standing in front of hundreds of people because the poem was destroying me with its message. Do you know what I mean? My identity had not grown to hold exactly what the poem was saying. But it does teach you how to apprentice yourself to that edge. It is an edge; it is a frontier.

There is no better way of getting you into the gravity well of a great question than a good poem. You could spend 45 minutes talking your way around the houses to get into the first rung of the ladder, and a good poem will take you right to the center of the things. Did I mix my metaphors there? Between depth and ladder? But that does not matter! Yeats said, "I must lie down to where all the ladders start, in the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart." That again is speaking to the humiliation that comes when you go into these very difficult places and eventually you learn how to live in them.

One Day

One day I will
say
the gift I once had has been taken.

The place I have made for myself
belongs to another.
The words I have sung
are being sung by the ones
I would want.

Then I will be ready
for that voice
and the still silence in which it arrives.

And if my faith is good
then we'll meet again
on the road
and we'll be thirsty,
and stop
and laugh
and drink together again

from the deep well of things as they are. (Whyte, 1990, p. 103)

REFERENCES

- Barrett, F. J. (1998). Creativity and improvisation in jazz and organizations: Implications for organizational learning. *Organization Science, 9*, 605-622.
- Hatch, M. J. (1999). Exploring the empty space of organizing: How improvisational jazz helps redescribe organizational structure. *Organization Studies, 20*, 75-100.
- Sandelands, L. E., & Buckner, G. C. (1989). Of art and work: Aesthetic experience and the psychology of work feelings. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 11*, 105-131.
- Sternberg, R. J., O'Hara, L. A., & Lubart, T. I. (1997). Creativity as investment. *California Management Review, 40*(1), 8-21.
- Whyte, D. (1990). *Where many rivers meet*. Langley, WA: Many Rivers Press.
- Whyte, D. (1992). *Fire in the earth*. Langley, WA: Many Rivers Press.
- Whyte, D. (1994). *The heart aroused: Poetry and the preservation of soul in corporate America*. New York: Currency Doubleday.
- Whyte, D. (1996). *The house of belonging: Poems*. Langley, WA: Many Rivers Press.