Breakthrough - Championship Living in a Computer Age
Why Computers? Why Me?

Richard B. Byrne

Dr. Byrne was the featured Keynote Speaker at Bio'76, the combined annual meeting of the Association of Biomedical Communications Directors (ABCD), the Association of Medical Illustrators (AMI), the Biological Photographic Association (BPA), and the Health Science Communications Association (HeSCA). His 1976 Keynote presentation was powerful, and was filled with his technical insight, personal reflection, and comedic wit.

In 1985, Dr. Byrne produced a cassette series of twelve professional lectures, which defined what he called, "Breakthrough." The concepts presented in his Breakthrough series are universal and are applicable today. In conjunction with Dr. Byrne's wife, Mary Anne Byrne, the Journal of Biocommunication is proud to include the first four of Dr. Byrne's lectures in JBC 45-2.

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Dr. Richard Byrne

We live in an incredible age. It's an amazing moment in time. Every day, I thank God that I'm alive right now. I don't think there's any time in human history that's as exciting as what's going on right now - not the Golden Age of Athens, not Elizabethan England. It's just unbelievable.

We're in an age of breakthrough, and tremendous quantum leaps forward. The development of new technologies, new computers, or bionic parts for the human body. It's absolutely unbelievable to me what human beings are accomplishing.

I want human beings to be able accomplish the same kind of dramatic leaps forward in their own personal lives. So, what this lecture series is about is to explain the computer age to you. What is the computer age? Is there, in fact, really a computer age? Are we actually living in one now? Will it have an effect on you? Do you need to learn how to use a computer? We'll talk about all those issues in this series.

Second thing, I think we all need to learn championship living. How do we cope with the challenges of a computer age? What is it like to work within a championship organization, to be on a championship team, and to live a championship life. Where we go to achieve the very best all the time?

We're also going to deal with uncertainty. Are there going to be changes in our lives? Organizations are changing. Read the newspaper, look at television, and listen to the news on the radio. It's happening all the time, and somehow we have to cope with that. Every championship team has challenges. They're behind at the half, they're behind at the third quarter, but that really doesn't matter. What matters is the score at the end of the game. And so, I'm going to share with you techniques for what I call championship living.

Finally, and perhaps most important, I'm going to share a little bit about what I call breakthrough. Breakthrough is a quantum leap forward. It can be described as a discontinuity in time and space. When you have a breakthrough, suddenly all bets are off. All opportunities are now available to you. Some people think breakthrough is just a fluke. Well, yeah, he had a breakthrough, but you know, he's just lucky.

I mean they were the Wright Brothers! He was Roger Bannister (the British middle-distance athlete and neurologist, who ran the first sub-4-minute mile)! You know, he was simply lucky, or he was smart, or he was a genius, or he was just in the right place. I don't believe any of that. I call a breakthrough an arranged miracle. I think it's a miracle, but I think you can also learn to do it.

Before you proceed, let me tell you, I believe in the gospel of the single idea. I think there's tremendous power in a single idea. You can review all of this content in my series, but you really should be looking for the one point - and there will be one point for you. It may be halfway through the series, or it may not appear until you are nearing the end, but there will be some point and you'll understand it for perhaps the first time. There'll be a sort of a mental *ping*, that little funny sound will go off inside your brain. I know you don't believe that right now, but just trust me. Have you ever walked around through a store where they sell really wonderful crystal, Swedish crystal? And the salesperson will say, "Oh, look, this is such wonderful crystal," and they hit the edge of it with a fingernail and you hear the *ping*.

As you progress through this lecture series, somewhere you're going to hear that sound, and you ought to stop right then. Check around to be sure nobody's throwing rocks at the window. If they're not, go back and review that content or point again, because that's the point for you.

If you will take from this series one idea, which you understand, which you enjoy, and which you will put into action in your life, this series will be invaluable to you, and my ambition will be fulfilled. So, look for that single important idea.

Let me give you some background about this series and share who I am and what I do. You have never heard of me. I'm a speaker. I'm a professional speaker and a consultant. And I travel all over the world advising the leaders, the senior management of major corporations in America, Canada, and all over Europe, about the impact of new technologies on their personal lives, on how they're going to manage their organizations, on organizational change, on marketing strategy, and so forth. I also often meet with parent groups and talk to them about learning to keep up with their kids. Meaning, if you have six-year-old and you buy him a computer,

you're in deep trouble. I mean you'll just never understand the child again, forever.

Everyone is trying to keep up. First, they're trying to catch up, and then trying to keep up. I've had many experiences in the last three years, addressing probably 600 or 700 groups of executives, senior managers, thought leaders of large corporations, data processing directors, etc. When I travel to one of these corporations, I actually go a day early, and if I possibly can, I interview people asking, "Who are you? How are you? What's the problem? What do you do?" I always ask during my presentations, do you have any questions? Trust me, they have questions, and they're the same questions that you may have. They raise their hands and they say, should I buy a computer and which one should I buy? They ask if they are ahead, or behind, or how do they achieve success in what they do. All the stuff that goes on in your mind and goes on in my mind, and so I have learned from that experience. I have not just been presenting to them, but I have learned from their questions as well, from their uncertainty, from their fears, and what our shared concerns are. We all have the same problems. You may say, "Oh no, big companies have got this all figured out, they already know." Take my word for it, they do not know. They are just as uncertain as you are, and I hope they get to see this series.

We are all struggling and it's because we've gone through a breakthrough. We've gone through a breakthrough called the computer age. I will share more later on, but when you experience a breakthrough, suddenly nothing that you used to do seems to work anymore. It's a different world and we are all facing this uncertainty.

What is the computer age? Is there, in fact, a computer age? Do you think anything is changing? Forget the newspapers, forget the TV ads, and forget the magazine ads describing how badly you need a computer. Do you actually think anything is changing? Many people talk about the third wave, that originally we were agrarian, we lived on farms, and then we became industrial and we moved to cities and we centralized and specialized. Now we live in an information age. Do we live in an information age? Are you empowered by your ability to handle information? Let me ask it another way: Do you get too much mail? Do you get too many memos? Are you being swamped with an influx of information, about half of which you don't want? I think that we all are. I think we do live in an information age, and it is being fueled by the computer. The computer is what is making it possible for all that information to be generated. If we went back to cuneiform so that every businessperson had to stamp out their memos in wet clay, and then have them delivered by an ox cart, we wouldn't be so swamped! Maybe if we moved from photocopy machines to cuneiform, everything would calm down!

We are now in the age of transformation. We're leaving the planet. We're recovering satellites. We're doing amazing things, which are fueled by the computer. What's going on in the computer age is what I call the four Cs, first is computers. Computers are exploding. I don't know if you really pay attention to this, but the first microcomputer appeared 10 years ago. Within a year, there were about 5,000, then there were about 500,000, and now there are many millions. The general prediction is, within about four or five years, there will be 70-80 million personal computers flooding out over the landscape. I think somebody should turn the shower off; we're being inundated!

Does that mean you need to leap in and do it? No, not really. In fact, I sometimes say, "Aren't micros going to get smaller?" and the audience all says, "Yes!" and I say, "Aren't they going to get more powerful at the same time? "Yes!" and I ask, "Aren't they going to get cheaper at the same time?" "Yes!" Then shouldn't you wait? To which a lot of people say, "well, that's a good idea." What do you get by waiting and what do you get by leaping in? What did I gain by becoming computer literate and developing my own company based on the use of the computer six years ago, and what would I have gained if I were still waiting for the price to come down? If you're in the computer age, you're going to

want to be leveraged by that technology, and if you're not in a computer age, just forget it.

The second C is communications. We have telephones and we have satellites, which means that there's really no difference in making a telephone call to New York or making one next door. It may all be made by satellite. We have cellular phones, portable phones that you can slip in your shirt pocket or your purse and air phones so you can make telephone calls from the airplane while commuting across country. We have networks that link them all together, so clearly, communications have allied with computers.

The third C is convergence. The technology – remember the good old days? Remember when a newspaper was a newspaper? And a TV was a TV? And a phone was a phone? Boy, wasn't that great? You would come home and you just say, "Something's ringing," and it's almost always the phone. Nobody ran over and said, "Let me pick up the paper here because probably the paper's ringing!" Now, all of these technologies are being digitized. They're blending together, so now you can hook up a personal computer to a phone, to a TV set, and access a newspaper. A download, is what brings news and information from thousands of data sources elsewhere in the world into your system, into your home. This is weird, this is getting very weird, folks. And convergence is what's making it possible.

The last C, of course, is change. So, the real key is not computers. This series is not about computers, but we're going to talk about computers throughout it. It's really about people. It's about you coping with change. What do you do when the technology changes again? When communications increase again? When convergence multiplies again? What do you do? How do you cope with change?

Now, let me handle a key question, and I'll give you our first window into the world of conferences. Key question: Do you have to have a computer? I'll say it again in case you missed it. Do you have to have a computer? And I'll give you the answer. The answer is no. I will tell you why that you may not need a computer, as I share a transcript from a meeting I had with about 250 presidents of large corporations in the United States.

> "There are a lot of people, including many in this room, who do not need computers. My mom and

dad are a perfect example. They live in Independence, Missouri, in a house my dad built 40 years ago. My dad is a cabinetmaker; he builds walnut cabinets which he hand rubs with 60 coats of beeswax. If you have not seen a beeswax finish, it's absolutely amazing.

My dad does not need a personal computer with VisiCalc in order to catalog his nails, or determine how much walnut stock that he has on hand. However, there are a lot of people who are doing that. They're buying micros and then they're putting their recipes on the micro. You don't need that. My mom definitely does not need that. She's very religious. She gets up at 4 a.m., every morning, reads the Bible and often calls me right away. This is true. I love my mother. God bless my mother. But she'll run across a passage in the Bible that she thinks maybe I haven't heard lately, and she'll think, Rich is probably doing a speech today, this will be good for him. So she calls me at five minutes until 4:00 in Independence. But I live in L.A., and I tell her, Mom, the Earth is like a big orange! You know, it's got time zones! And my mom has never been on a plane. She doesn't know or care, "Just, you know, hush up, now and listen to this." And then she'll read it to me. And then I'll say, Mom, I have a new computer! And she'll say when are you coming to see us?

Now my point to all of that is that my parents will not be empowered by microcomputers. A 30-megabyte hard disk will not help them. They don't need it. It's not aligned with what they do. In fact, if they began to do that, they would stop doing what they do so well, which is making walnut cabinets. My mom paints and plays hymns on the piano, and she goes to bed about noon. Okay?"

That's my mom and dad! That is no exaggeration. Now, do they need a computer? Obviously, not. The question is, do you have the luxury to be my parents? Can you afford to paint and play hymns and go to bed at noon? And if you can, forget it; you don't need one either. However, if you work in a corporation, or if you, as an individual, need to deal with information; you have mail, you have memos, you have financial reports, etc., and you want to try to stay abreast of the current rate of change, you're probably going to have to accept the challenge and learn about "breakthrough."

In the next presentation, we're going to talk about the nature of change and what breakthrough is all about.

References

Bryne, R. *Breakthrough - Championship Living in a Computer Age* (Audio Cassette Series), Springboard! 1985.

About the Author

Richard Byrne was a former professor and dean at USC's Annenberg School of Communications. He was known for making computers less intimidating for all of us. In 1982 Dr. Byrne founded one of the first consulting firms of its kind, called Springboard! His company was devoted to acquainting executives with high technology. As president, Dr. Byrne traveled as far as Europe and Thailand presenting as many as 200 lectures a year. He enlivened complex computer terminology with humorous wit and common-sense explanations. Dr. Byrne, who had previously taught at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Texas, left his position as a full-time professor at USC in 1984 to devote himself to an increasingly lucrative lecturing career.

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