Breakthrough - Championship Living in a Computer Age

The Nature of Change – Presentation 2

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

I think there are basically two kinds of changes in life. The kind of change that you're very familiar with, called cyclical change, meaning it comes and it goes, and it comes and it goes, and it's not that big a deal. It's there and you deal with it. Like seasons, the leaves turn red and

brown, they fall, and in the spring they come back. Sometimes, I tell that story in Southern California and my blissed-out friends say, "Well, now how do you mean, the leaves fall," because we have no seasons in Los Angeles, but in most places, the seasons come and go. If you missed the color pictures this fall, you didn't get the pictures of the leaves, you wait until next fall, because it'll come back and you know that.

The same thing is true of hemlines. They go up and down, and up and down, and that's how retailers sell clothing; and you always seem to wear the wrong clothing. The fashion industry says, "Did you just buy that? Oh, good. You like it? Good. Well, that style is completely wrong, so here's the new one." Men's lapels get wide, and then narrow again, and whatever width your tie is, just keep it, because it'll come back.

There are also cyclical changes in business and also in family life. My favorite is the concept of centralization versus decentralization. It's just hilarious to me!

In companies, they look around and suddenly they say, "Holy smokes! Look at all the computers out here. I mean that guy bought one, and then they bought one, and they bought one, and then they bought twelve, and they bought fourteen! We've got to get some control here; I mean we're getting out of control! We need to control this!" So they bring them all together and they put them in a big room and they monitor them and keep track of them and make sure they're used right. Then about two years later they say, "Wow, this is a lot of work with all these computers in here! Let's get these computers out to the people, let's get them back out there where the people are." Autonomy and local control, it's just like a big heart that draws in the blood and then pumps the blood out, and in and out, and so forth.

I always think of that when I think of the commute I drive in L.A. frequently. L.A. inspires cars – it breathes them in in the morning. You can see that all the freeways are open on one side because those lanes are going out of

the city, and the other side is all jammed. It's a big parking lot, and they're all coming into the city. Then late in the evening, there's nobody coming into the city, and the outgoing lanes are all a big parking lot. I sometimes think that we're really missing the boat here! What ought to happen is that all the ranchers, way out east of the city, ought to live in high rise condominiums downtown, and in the morning, when they go out to round up 40 head of cattle, they'll "schoo" 70 mph out to the ranch, and then in the evening they can "schoo" back downtown to boogie for a while. As long as you went against the cycle, you're still a part of the cycle, but you'd have a completely free commute, ...except the people in L.A. don't do that.

A question: are microcomputers cyclical? They're in now and pretty soon they won't be, and then they'll be back in and then they'll be back out. Some people say, "Sure, in two years, there will be a micro stored in every garage. That means you'll buy the microcomputer, you don't learn how to use it, you won't get your recipes on VisiCalc or whatever, and then finally you just store it. Some people take great courage or comfort in that. They say, "This is a fad! This is a fad! We don't need this! We didn't need this ten years ago! We didn't need it five years ago! We don't need it now!" Well, if it's cyclical, and if it's only a fad, you don't need it now.

However, there's a second kind of change, a different ballgame, called structural change. There is a cycle, in and out, in and out, hemlines, lapels, microcomputers, whatever it is, and all of a sudden boom, something happens. There is a boom, a single event that changes everything, forever. All of a sudden there's upset and chaos and craziness. It's called a quantum leap.

Quantum means there's discontinuity. It's not continuous. It's not based on how things were before, it suddenly shatters time and space and then the new cycle begins. Boom! There's a leap to a new place. That quantum leap, that springboard from certainty to uncertainty, from where we are to where we're going, that quantum leap is the essence of breakthrough. Breakthrough is about making a quantum leap in your life.

It's not about improvement. In fact, I joke with friends of mine that my purpose in life is to stamp out self-improvement. Get rid of that stuff! It has an underlying belief that every day, in every way, we're going to get

better and better. Today I'll do 50 pushups, and then tomorrow I'll do 52 pushups, and when I can do 55 pushups, they'll like me. Just slowly creep toward getting better. Wrong! You can do that, and that's good, but that is not what's going on in the world; what's going on in the world is that people suddenly say, "I'm going to quit this job and form a company, and we're going to run it from a sailboat, and we're going to get some microcomputers, and I'm going to live in Guam." Boom, and the guy is gone. I mean, he did not figure that out, minute by minute, over twenty years. They would say, "The guy went crazy. The whole world is going crazy!" That is what breakthrough is all about. The arranged miracle is about sort of losing control, and transforming what you're doing.

I think that transformation can be totally positive. I don't think that it has to be just chaos. I think we can make quantum leaps in our personal lives, in our professional lives, in how we work together as organizations. The breakthrough is the arranged miracle.

Below is a transcript of me, in a conference room, talking about the fact that you can't get there from here. You can't figure it out from where you are, where you're going to be, when a breakthrough occurs.

"When you have a breakthrough, you can't predict where you're going to end up from where you were. But could you predict when we had horses and carriages, a city with 8 million residents? Now, could you predict – you have a city here that has 4,000 people in it. You say, well, I can see some day with 8 million people in it. Do you see any problems in having 6 million horses and carriages on the road every day? You see, you can't extrapolate from the old way of working. You can't look at the way horses worked and predict 7 million people. Where would you haul the hay from to feed 7 million horses? Who would haul the hay? How many horses would it take to haul hay for 7 million horses? And who is going to haul out the waste? You would need 14 million horses to feed the 7 million horses that just did the commute. People would just say, "Never mind." You can't figure out where you're going to be because there is a discontinuity. There is a discontinuity between where you are and where you're going. There is a leap upward.

Remember the four-minute mile? 1954, Roger Bannister? For nine years, nobody had lowered the mile time by one one-hundredth of a second and there were genuine beliefs that you couldn't do it. There were medical papers written that said if you ran a mile in 4-minutes, your heart would burst, blood would spurt out of your nose, your eyeballs would spring out of your head and you'd fall dead on the track. Is that any disincentive to running a four-minute mile? I mean that was the belief. The belief was that if you did that, that extra one-hundredth of a second would kill you. Okay? So, Bannister did it. He was a medical student and he said, "I think that's stupid. I don't see any reason why you couldn't run a 4-minute mile." He said, "I don't think the heart will burst." He said, "I think you'd be faint and stagger around and collapse." He ran the 4-minute mile and he got faint, staggered around, then collapsed because that's what he thought you would do. The next time he did it, he didn't get faint and stagger around and collapse because he found out you don't even do that. Now when he ran the 4-minute mile, what happened to the mile run? Everybody did it!

People all over the world said, "I didn't know you could do that. I thought you couldn't do that!" Within two years, there was a race where everybody in the race ran under 4-minute. So, what changed? Our minds changed. The world changed its mind about 4 minutes. The world changed its mind.

I believe the microcomputer is a stimulus. It's not the source, but it's a stimulus that has created transformation in the way business is done. What changes is not the technology; you change your mind about doing business. You start doing business in new ways. This is the problem with cost justification. , Imagine we're going to buy five micros, but how will we know when we've cost justified? I mean how do we know when we achieve a return on our investment? You look at all the work you're doing and figure out how much that costs. Then we're going to put in the computer and fire three people. And how much did they cost? And if we can do the work for two years minus those three people, we paid for the computers. No, no. That's saying, how many million buggy whips will we need to run a town like L.A.? See, that's arguing from the way you do it now, to the way you think you're going to do it, but it doesn't work that way. There's a discontinuity. All the rules are off when there is a break in time. All the rules are off."

That breaking of the rules, when all the rules go off, that's what's frequently called a paradigm shift. It means that a paradigm is our picture of the world, what we believe is real. A paradigm is, for example, well, I believe that business is run this way, and that we should wear this kind of clothing, and drive this kind of car, and park this way. And somebody else says, "Yeah, well, that's not my picture of the world. My picture of the world is that I'm going to go live on a beach and surf a lot." So they have a completely different picture of the world. When the breakthrough occurs, the world changes its mind. It suddenly decides that the beliefs from before are no longer relevant and new beliefs are possible. All rules are off.

I am going to share a fantastic story about a man named David Volz, a young athlete who transformed pole vaulting. You may not even know about him, but he made a unique contribution to the sport of pole-vaulting, and it's a perfect example of breakthrough. David Volz

believed that the fear, the problem in leaping high, jumping 19 feet in the air, was the certainty that you then have to fall 19 feet immediately after. You climb 19 feet, and then say, “Now would you step out of this third story window here, please? We have a mattress for you, so don’t worry.” The problem is not, ‘are you are strong enough to run hard, bend the pole, and pull and are you athletic?’ No, no, no, that’s not the problem; the problem is if you do it, you get to fall out of a third story window. Volz thought, “You’ve got to ‘own’ falling. You’ve got to ‘own’ falling. Falling can’t be in there anymore. You just can’t pole vault thinking about falling all the time. You’ve got to think about vaulting and forget about falling.” So, he began to step off increasingly greater heights and fall backward and fell backward and fell backward. He finally began to, sort of, ‘own’ falling.

Now comes the breakthrough. In one historic and momentous track event, Volz ran, planted the pole, bent the pole, inverted, pushed up, lifted through the vault, and knocked the bar off on the way up with his thighs. Knocked it off. Everybody went, “Oh no!” and he suddenly thought, “Oh wait, that’s not right,” and he didn’t have to worry about falling, because he’d already handled falling. He’d nailed falling, from someplace else. So he reached out and grabbed the bar and just lifted it right up, back up on the standers. He got it up on the standers in mid-flight, and he kind of steadied it with his fingertips, and then let go of it, he fell into the pit and the bar stayed up there.

The crowd said, “What? Say what?” The judges had a meeting and, of course, half of them said, “That’s stupid, I mean, he knocked it off. He knocked it off! We saw him knock it off. He knocked it off on the way up so he didn’t clear it! I mean clearly he didn’t clear it!” The other half said, “Well, that’s true. That’s true. He knocked it off, but he did put it back,” and the debate went on, they said, “Get out the rule book.” They went and got the rulebook, and they looked up knocking off the bar and found a lot about knocking off the bar, like if you knock off the bar! Like, if you know it is off, you don’t win; if you knock it off, you lose points, etc. Then they looked up putting the bar back during a vault, and they couldn’t find a thing in the rulebook about putting the bar back, because nobody ever thought of it! You knock it off at 19 feet, you’re going to put it back?! Nobody ever thought of it, and so they said, “He cleared the vault.” That moment transformed pole vaulting. That’s now called, “Volzing a jump.” Vaulters occasionally, if they tap it off, will reach out with their

hand. They can’t actually grab it and lift it, but they try gently to knock it back where it was. If you knock the bar off, tidy up! Give it a shot! It’s another option.

I think that’s an extra option – but, I don’t believe you’re going to see world records set by people going through belly high, they grab the bar, and then they slam dunk it behind them. We’re not talking about changing the sport; we’re talking about expanding the potential of the sport, which has already happened, as a result of David Volz.

When a breakthrough occurs, since the rules don’t count anymore, almost anything is possible. There are new options. When you have a breakthrough in the use of a personal computer, maybe you’re afraid of it, you have a phobia, you breakthrough that, suddenly you can use it. All sorts of options are now available that weren’t available before. Some people say, “We’re going to automate the office.” I don’t even have an office! My agent has an office, but my office is in airplanes, and in my home, and my den, and in hotels, and wherever it happens to be. I have absolutely transformed the way I work, and I’ll tell you about that later in this series. We use electronic mail through a portable terminal. I don’t just say, now, “Why don’t we have red filing cabinets? And over here, let’s have some blue filing cabinets?” No, that’s called fixing up the office. When I say, “I tell you what, why don’t you meet me in Acapulco, and we’ll talk about it?” That’s called transforming the office. That’s the kind of breakthrough that’s available when you leap into the void, the uncertainty, when you go through the paradigm shift.

There is a process for breaking through that means you will experience a breakdown before you have a breakthrough. That is, you will encounter a problem, a barrier, uncertainty, it will get worse. You’ll try this and that won’t work, and you try that and that doesn’t work and finally, you say, “That’s it,” and you breakdown. That breakdown is a positive sign. You should look for it. Some people, when they breakdown, say, “Oh no, I’m broken down!” No, you ought to say, “Oh wait! Hey! This is a symbol. The body is telling me something!” You know the joke, “Doctor, it hurts when I do that,” And the doctor replies, “Well, don’t do that.” It’s a symbol, it’s a signal, the body is telling you something. When you have a breakdown, the universe is telling you something, or you’re telling yourself something. Later, in the Championship Living section in this series, we will talk about how to prepare for an assault on a breakthrough.

The last step, before you go through that breakthrough, and before you have that transforming event, is that you are going to have to let go. You're going to have to relax. After you're prepared, you're going to have to relax and let go of your beliefs. Let go of your certainty about how this is going to turn out, and how it should be done. In fact, you'll always find that the barrier is not in front of you; it's behind you. The barrier is never in front of you; it's always behind you.

Imagine that there's a rope tied around your waist, and the rope is hooked to an anchor and the anchor is stuck in the ground about ten feet behind you, and the anchor is called a belief. There are some beliefs you have called out, like 'I don't type,' or 'I'm no good with numbers,' or whatever the belief is. We'll talk more about some of those beliefs, but the strain that you're feeling in front of you is not a wall that you're trying to scale, it's not a hurdle you're trying to leap over. It looks like it, and it feels like it, but it's not; it's an anchor to your past. You have to identify that anchor, figure out what is that belief, and you simply let go of it. Have you ever held a balloon at a football game filled with helium, and when the team scores, you just let go. It's the easiest thing in the world and just like that, 100,000 balloons sail up to the clouds.

References

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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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