Breakthrough - Championship Living in a Computer Age

Joy in the Void – Presentation 3

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

So, is the computer age real? I mean is it really real? You read the statistics, you read the headline, and you think, oh, an explosion of microcomputers! And then you hear, oh these companies Chapter 11'd, they went away and folded up. Some people say, "Oh no, it hasn't even begun

to happen yet!" and others will say, "Oh yeah, well, I got one and I never used it!" So, how do you find out if it's real?

It isn't really related to what's happening 'out there.' You know, 'out there?' Some people look at the paper, read the news, and say, "Boy, they're really doing it out there! But I wish we were doing it in here. If we were doing it in here, like they're doing it out there, boy, we'd really be doing it like they're doing it out there!" I could go on, but that's what people do. They spend hours talking about, this other company, they've obviously got their act together, now we've got to get organized, etc. It is not related to what's going on out there. The statistics do not count. The number of computers that have been sold are irrelevant. The computer age is real for you, entirely based upon you. It's real for you if you want it to be real, and it's not real for you if you don't want it to be real.

For instance, I recently saw an article in a major newspaper, a national newspaper, and it said, "The shakeout is over." I don't know if you know the meaning of shakeout, but it means there is a war between microcomputer manufacturers. Maybe Apple will win this war, or maybe IBM, or Hewlett Packard, or some new one that has a product that we ought to get. This article said, "No, no, it's all over. The competition is finished and the winners won and the losers lost." When I say that in a national conference of data processing directors, they laugh for like eight minutes. People, who are not in the computer business, don't quite get what's going on because they know that that's not true! It is not over! It hasn't begun to happen. It comes in waves, just like surfing. One big wave comes and, wait a minute, here comes another big wave, and so it is not over.

I saw an article in an inflight magazine recently and it said the myth of the information age is that it never happened. It was like we had a party and nobody showed up. There is no information age. There is no videotext, where you see news over TV, it never happened. Cable television, you can forget it, and computers – only a fad,

just here, and it will be gone soon. That's true for people who are not using the technologies, but it is not true for me. Everything they said in that article, I have been doing for three years. I do the research, I do the electronic mail, and I do the data processing. I have my own information base from which I draw information for my speeches, so it's totally real for me and it's absolutely unreal for someone else.

Have you ever been out in the rain? Have you ever walked in the rain? How do you know it's raining? Could you tell? You could kind of tell. I remember one time I was walking across a golf course and I looked up and I thought, oh, it looks like it's going to rain. Then about a 100 yards later, I thought, it looks like it's about to rain, like right away. Another 20 yards, it's raining and my behavior changed, I took off because all of a sudden, it was raining. When you see that it's real, your behavior changes. If it's real, you move. If it's not real, you talk about it.

A lot of people are talking about computers, they say, "Well, I've been thinking about getting a computer for my child." I always laugh. So, it's in your mind. The key is, if you believe it, do it. If you think the information age is real, that computers are an important part of the future, learn how to use one. Don't wait to learn how to use it right. Some people say, "I want to get the right

computer, wait until I get the right one." I think that's stupid. Don't wait for the right one, get one. Learn it, and then give it to a church. Get another one, learn, and give it to a school. I mean, you'll always find someone to give it to, but move on it if you believe the age is real.

All of the excitement, all of the thrill, all of the growth, all of the change, all of the problems of the computer age are only available to people who believe it's real. I guarantee you; I have had more hassle using a computer than I ever had using a typewriter. Typewriters, you just press the button and it says, "good," and then you press another button and it says, "thank you." The computer says, "Oh yeah? Well, let me show you!" You ask it to save something and it says, "I don't want to save it, I want to send it somewhere else!" So there's hassle, but think of the payback. Think about what it's like to raise a thoroughbred horse. You know the difference between a thoroughbred horse and a plug? I mean a thoroughbred horse says, "Oh, yeah, well not today!" but when you learn to cooperate with that device, that technology, that creature, look at the results you can produce together. The key is that you have to notice it. It's only real if you notice it. Let me say it one more time: It's only real if you notice it.

Below is a transcript of a conference that I addressed recently and included about 200 senior managers in the industrial sector. They are managers of manufacturing processes and large industries at a meeting, which was held recently in the south.

"How many of you have flown in the last month? Anybody here flown? When you fly cross-country, how high do you fly? 39, 41, 35, 31 thousand feet, depending on the weather, what's going on. What's the temperature at 39,000 feet? Answer: 60 below.

Good! See, most people say cold. How cold? Very cold. 60 below zero. Now we know how cold it is, right? IBM says there will be 50-80 million executive workstations in use in America within five years. 50-80 million. It's 60 below zero. How cold is 60 below zero? See, is that real for you? Some of you say, that's very cold! How cold is that? Answer: We all know that here.

You all know what a 60 below is? [Laughter] Has it ever hit 60 below here? Answer: Wind chill.

Well, I'm not talking wind chill. I'm talking temperature. How fast are you going up there? 550 miles an hour. You add 550 miles to a true 60 below, I'm talking wind chill! You'll find out what I'm talking about -- wind chill! 60 below zero, two minutes, your tush falls off! Less than that! Boom, you'd be dead.

See what I'm saying? We hear the numbers, but the numbers have no reality for us. Can you imagine sticking your arm out for a turn signal at 500 miles an hour? See what I'm saying? Two inches away is this hostile, change filled environment. Furthermore, there's no oxygen up there, not enough to live on. So, you couldn't live three minutes in a phone booth with that amount of oxygen. So, there's no oxygen, 550 miles an hour, 60 degrees below zero and you're sitting there saying, "There's no ice in this drink! Miss! Could you get some ice, please?"

That's called the little picture. It's all about, "I didn't get the report from you!" The question is whether this roaring current of change real? Is the information age real? Is the generate leveraging using microcomputers the way I say they are, or am I a phony? You have to figure that out because there are going to be other people who will say, "No, no, it doesn't add anything at all, boogedy, boogedy, boogedy. It's just a PR to try to sell wires." Fine, but you need to figure it out, because I guarantee you the people who are surfing on the third wave are picking up speed. It involves productivity, you have to make decisions, you have to do something that increases your speed and productivity because it's really easy to become hooked on computers and start losing time, money and your mind."

So, is it real? Yeah, it's real, but that's entirely up to you. There was an article on the op-ed page of the Wall Street Journal, and it said that computer literacy is for the birds, meaning you don't need it. Why go learn how to run a computer? Why learn all those odd commands, and all these things, because pretty soon it's going to be simple. There will be voice entry, you'll be able to talk to the computer and it'll talk back to you, so what's the point of wasting your time and learning to be literate on a technology that's going to disappear?

What do you think? I ask presidents of companies, "Do you agree with this article or do you disagree with it?"

and they look at me like I'm going to give them a clue, like, maybe I'll tell them to nod, yes, yes, yes, because they want to please me. Then I say to them, "Don't please me. Make your own decisions. You have to order dinner tonight at the restaurant. Have your own criteria, know what your own budget is, but the decisions are up to you. I'm telling you, just because you're in charge of an organization does not mean you'll see the reality of these changes."

Below is a transcript from another conference, with a large group of educators, at a meeting being held in the Midwest.

"I'll give you a perfect example. I was talking to a superintendent of schools in Northern California. I said to him, "Do you have a master plan for educational development, curriculum development regarding technology?" He said, "Ha, ha, ha! We don't have a master plan for technology!" I said, "Whoa, what kind of a response is that? Why is that?" He said, "Richard, I've been in this business a long time." I reply, "Well, that could be your problem right there." He said, "I've seen them come, I've seen them go. First it was overhead projectors, then it was Super 8 film cameras, now it's microcomputers." His belief was that they got all those overhead projectors and they're all in closets; they got all those Super 8 cameras and made movies and then couldn't edit them, so that wasn't it. Then, some of them had videocassette recorders, and that wasn't it, and now it's microcomputers. His belief is that this is cyclical, and it's another stupid cycle. Not only is it a cycle, but it's going to be as wasteful as the others were.

Now that assumes it's cyclical, as you recall cyclical and structural from earlier in this series. If you believe that it is structural, that when you can use a microcomputer, you are empowered in a different way, then you wouldn't have that argument, but he doesn't believe that. Well, what you believe is what's real."

Now, that's just one example of the problems that administrators and senior managers can have in trying to deal with reality. There's another problem, and this is a key problem, which you probably face. I'll ask you a question: Are you competent? Don't get embarrassed and don't be silly, but are you competent? My guess is you're

a pretty competent person or you wouldn't be reading this. You may be reading to increase your competence. Let me tell you a perverse problem with being competent. Competence is the enemy of consciousness. The better you are, the harder it is to see what's really going on around you. How does that work? Most people, when they encounter a new idea, pass through four phases. So we have four phases of dealing with a new idea, a new technology, a new skill. Skiing, tying flies, baking bread, whatever it may be. Four levels. Before I list them, you've got to live at level three. Remember that, you've got to live at level three. You want to get to level three and avoid level four, but let me tell you what the four levels are.

First level is called the unconscious incompetent. You cannot do it, but you've never even heard of it. It's not a problem for you, yet. I think about my mom again. My mom, I don't think has ever eaten sushi. I don't know if you're a sushi fan, but the Japanese prepare raw fish and they roll it with radishes and seaweed and everything. I just love it and I eat it all the time! I don't even think my mom's ever heard of sushi and I don't know where you'd go in Kansas City to get sushi. On Thanksgiving when I was there this year, she did not fix a sushi dinner for Thanksgiving. She doesn't know about, she doesn't think about it, she doesn't care about it. Furthermore, I don't tell her about it. I don't tell her the weird black little funny things that I eat in Los Angeles, or she might not let me kiss her on the mouth when I go home to see her! She doesn't want anything to do with it, and she is happy. She is not only incompetent and unconscious, but also, she is happy. My dad used to say, "Where ignorance is bliss, it is folly to be wise." If you're happy, forget it!

Recently at a conference, a woman came up to me and she was saying, "Oh, Dr. Byrne, I heard you before, this is wonderful! Do you know much about food?" I said, "Well, I don't know, what's the question?" She replied, "Those little black things over there on the mushrooms, are those snails?" I said, "Yes they are, they're called escargot." She gasped, "I was afraid of that!" because she'd just eaten a fist full of them, and she loved them! She didn't know what they were, and now she found out what they were, and now she has a big problem. You're the unconscious incompetent.

Second level up is when you suddenly discover it, like she just did. She said, "Oh, my, they're snails." You become what is called the 'conscious incompetent.' You now can't do it, and you know you can't do it. For

example, did you ever go off a high diving board at a pool? If you haven't, you might look into that. That could be the breakthrough for you! If you're 46 years old and never been off a high board, call me! There's almost always a summer before you go off the high board and you call it 'the summer before you go off the high board.' If not a summer, there's at least a month, but either way, there's a period of time where you're walking at the pool, you're looking at the high board, thinking, "I'm going off that board soon." Why don't you just go up and go off? Why don't you just go off? Just climb the ladder and go off? Generally it is due to a couple of fears. One fear is that people don't want to look stupid. You've got friends there, and you don't want to look stupid. So, you practice at home on your bed and you're trying to look like you're doing a swan dive or something, and, gee, I hope I don't look stupid because kids don't want to look stupid. Second possibility is all kids fear that they're going to forget how to swim on the way down to the water. They knew how to swim when they climbed the ladder, but maybe between going off the board and getting down, maybe they'll be so confused, maybe they'll forget how to swim. Lastly, of course, they fear they'll die. First kid to die at the swimming pool, you don't want to be the headline in the newspaper, 'First kid dies.' So, we're afraid we're going to die, we're afraid we'll look stupid, we're afraid we'll forget how to swim, and we're afraid we'll be ignorant. That's called the conscious incompetent. People approach a computer and they say, "Oh, I'll do it, but I'll look stupid, and I won't learn it, and I won't be able to swim, and on and on and on."

The third level up is the conscious competent. Now, you know how to do it and you know you know how to do it, and that's where all the ecstasy lies. Remember how you felt when you came through the water? You came up after the dive and you looked around, "Am I alive? Am I alive? Am I alive? Wow, I'm alive!" and then you swim over to the side, and then all summer you just go off the board, off the board, off the board, because the ecstasy is right after the breakthrough. It's right after you become competent, and conscious of your competence. That's where the juice is, and so you spend the whole summer going off the board.

Then you say, "I'm going off the board backward. Oh, no, this could kill me." And you just keep jacking the risk up, because if you don't jack the risk up, you don't have that pump. You don't have that ecstasy of becoming competent again, so you have to keep jacking the risk up.

I'm sure you know that the most exciting day of your job, your professional career, was when you had a new job and didn't know how to do it. You were afraid that the person who just interviewed you might show up at 10 o'clock in the morning and see that you don't know how to do it, and then they would fire you. But of course business doesn't work that way. We get people who are incompetent, and then we give them challenges and as soon as they're challenged, then we jack it up. You have to keep jacking up the risk.

What is the dreaded level four? The dreaded level four is called the unconscious competent. You now know how to do it, and you start mailing your life in on audiotape. You're not there doing it at all. Have you ever had a close call on a freeway? You're driving along and all of a sudden 8,000 cars have all stopped except you? You're like, "Oh no!" and you screech to a halt. Or, even worse, have you ever driven to work, you turn the key off in the parking lot and suddenly you think, "Oh! I'm at work! Oh no!" and you look at the fender to see if you've dented it in, because you have no recollection of going to work at all. That's because you're competent, you're a good driver. Believe you're a good driver, and you don't have to think about it. How often do you think about putting on your socks? Let me be sure I have the right sock on... good, there's a sock, now the shoes. You don't think about that stuff. You know how to do that stuff! So, when you become competent, you tend to go unconscious and then you lose vision of the changes in the environment around you. That's when you forget the temperature of the air, that's when you forget there's no oxygen, that's when you forget that you're going 550 miles an hour, and that's when you open the door and step out. So, I urge you to become competent but stay conscious. Level three is the prize.

Next in the series we will discuss the computer age and how it helps us reach out and touch each other.

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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