

# Breakthrough - Championship Living in a Computer Age

## Computershock

Richard B. Byrne

*Dr. Richard Byrne was the Keynote Speaker at Bio'76, which was the combined meeting of the Association of Medical Illustrators (AMI), the Biocommunications Association (BCA), the Health and Science Communications Association (HeSCA), and the Association of Biomedical Communication Directors (ABCD). His presentation was powerful, and was filled with his technical insight, personal reflection, and comedic wit. In 1985, Dr. Byrne produced a cassette tape 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 proudly included the first four of Dr. Byrne's lectures in JBC 45-2, and lectures five through eight, here in JBC 46-1.*

*The following article is the fifth presentation from this "Breakthrough" series. It has been transcribed from a cassette series produced by Richard Byrne in 1985. Some of the content has been edited from the original transcription text in order to provide clarity or context to the reader.*

OPEN ACCESS



*Dr. Richard Byrne*

### Computershock

All my corporate clients, for my speeches and for my consulting, fall into one of three categories. They're either under 42 years of age or they're between 42 and 56 or they're over 56! I don't say that as a joke, I choose these categories because the ages are significant. Most people who are under 42 – and I don't know where you fall on this curve, but try to pay attention here if you can – most people under 42 have kind of thrown it in. "Ugh, all right, okay, I'll learn to use a computer and I'll do electronic mail. All right." They're not excited, they aren't saying, "Oh boy! A new challenge! I'm ignorant again, great! I just love it!" They're not crazy, but they know that they aren't going to get out of it. We're going to have automated bank teller and debit cards, and you need to learn how to do it.

At the other end of the spectrum are the people who are over 56. Senior executives, presidents, chairs of the board, etc., and many of them are saying, "Well, forget it, I'm not going to do it. I was president of this company for 27 years and I never used a computer; I didn't need a computer then, and I don't need a computer now." The way they plan to get out of it is that they'll have staff members do it for them, or they'll just retire. I know executives where the company is going online, they're getting computers, and the executives just say, "Well, I've been thinking about going to Vail," and they get a cabin and retire, or some of them are just opting for early death. They just say, "Well, it's too early to retire, I'll just die and then they'll really feel sorry for me!"

The ones I think are really stuck are the ones between 42 and 56. Clearly, they are not young enough to just pitch it in and say, "Okay, all right." They certainly aren't old enough to retire or have a big staff do it for them, or just opt for early death. So they're the ones who are stuck. I see weird behavior on the part of people between 42 and 56 and I hope that's maybe where you are, because they are scurrying around figuring out a strategy: What are we going to do? What am I going to do? In California, a lot of these people between 42 and 56 are getting into wine. I don't mean they're drinking wine, I mean they're opening

little boutique vintners and leaving their high tech job or looking for some other high esteem, low tech role, like acting out a childhood ambition to build barns or becoming sail makers! If you read Entrepreneur Magazine, or Ink Magazine, they're full of stories of people who formed a new company, new entrepreneurial adventure, and you find out that they're not young kids; they're a 47 year old vice president of an aerospace firm, that has decided to build one-of-a-kind houses. It's high esteem and everybody says, "Isn't that great? He turned his back on industry and went off to do this self-fulfilling thing!" and the guy is scampering across the hills, away from the computers. It's because he has computer phobia and doesn't know what to do about it.

Oddly enough, it can even be data processing professionals. There are some people who have worked in data processing, or information sciences for 25 years. They know everything there is to know about the big huge mainframe computers and then you pop a little three-pound portable down in front of them and say, "Well, what do you think?" and they are just as panicked as people who have never touch computers at all.

What is this phobia? What is this fear about? What is this veiled threat? Have you ever felt that? Recall a television ad where a little child is taking the father by the hand and slowly leading him to a store and back home. Afterward, the father can run the computer, then the little child talks to another little child and says, "I'm very proud of him! My 42 year old father's doing very well!" What is going on here?

Many people may think they're afraid of computers. Let me give you a free pass, you are not afraid of computers. Nobody is afraid of computers. You're afraid of something else, and computers simply trigger that fear.

What is phobia? Some phobias seem to be genetic, it's just ingrained in you. You have a fear of a thing. When a baby is born and put on the carpet and the baby, for some reason, fears that texture of carpet. This is something they brought into the world with them. I have never encountered one case of a genetically based fear of microcomputers. It may be out there, but I have never encountered it. If you put a computer in front of a baby they will just press buttons, log on and start doing graphics! Then the father says, "How did the baby do that? I mean the baby can't even drink!" So, I don't think it's genetic.

The second kind of fear is what I call experienced trauma. It's a genuine fear. If you are a two-year-old baby, or a three-year-old baby, and you walk past the

dining room table at your grandmother's house that has a long tablecloth hanging down and you don't know it, but there's a white cat under there. The white cat scoots out and scratches your leg, and then for the rest of your life you have a deathly fear of tablecloths. People may say, "Well, I can't understand your problem with tablecloths!" You can see, it isn't a fear of the tablecloth, but it's something that happened to you around tablecloths. I don't see much of that regarding microcomputers, where you turned it on and it reached out and ate you or something terrible. I don't see experienced trauma related to computers.

A third form of phobia is called taught trauma. Were you ever taught anything by your parents like, "Don't do that! Don't eat that! Don't go there! Don't stay out late at night! Oh, snakes! Don't touch it, put it down! Don't walk through a park in the dark!" Later on, when somebody gives you a snake as a pet, and they think it'll be really great, it'll get rid of all the mice in the garden, you say "Oh no!" because you have been taught to fear that thing. I don't think that's the basis of a fear of microcomputers. I don't think your mom said, "Now, when you grow up, if a microcomputer appears, don't you fool around with it!" You see, they only appeared ten years ago, so the parents are the ones with the phobia! The kids don't have the phobia. The kids just look at it and say, "That's great!" A kid isn't afraid of snakes, they will walk over, pick them up and take them home with them.

So, what's the fear? What's the source of the fear? The fear is all symbolic. It is symbolic trauma. It's a fear of something else that's real, and the microcomputer makes you think of that other feared thing.

Let me list a few of the fears and see if one of these may apply to you. These are the anchors in your past. These are the roots you have to identify in order to let go of. If you can't let go of that anchor, you can't overcome that phobia.

The first is what I call 'The fear of the maze.' People don't like getting into something that they don't how to get out of. A lot of people don't like fun houses at the carnival, or they don't like a house of mirrors. I'll never forget the first time I went to London, I was in my late teens. I came out of my little hotel, and as I stood there I saw nearly 10,000 people run in a door and then they ran down a staircase. I'm from Independence, Missouri, and we had culverts in the streets with rainwater running into them. I didn't know what these people were doing or where they were going. I had never seen a door that went into the street! I thought, well, maybe it's a rest room! I probably shouldn't say that, but that's what I thought! I thought

maybe this was a rest room, but nobody ever came out. I thought, no, no, no, there's something else going on here! I thought, well, they're going somewhere! Now, you may think, oh, this is so stupid, but this is what I thought! This is related to your fear of computers. As I went down through the door, I was really scared, and I walked down the corridor and I thought, oh, they're buying tickets. This was my first day there, and I didn't know about the money, it all had women's faces on it, so I didn't know what it was. I didn't know which were the big ones and little ones, so when I went up, I just held out my fist with about \$200 worth of money in it, hoping the woman would take some and give me a ticket. After I had ridden through the maze, which felt like going off the high board, and I had learned to ride one ride on 'the tubes,' a subway system under London, I loved it and all the uncertainty went away.

The same thing is true of learning to use a computer, not knowing how it works. Once you're past that, you can love it. How much do you really need to know? About nothing. Almost nothing. How much do you need to know about how computer works? About nothing. When I train people, we put in a little floppy disk, we turn on the computer and it makes a little noise. It goes beep, beep, beep! A little red light comes on. The executive will turn to me, his knuckles are white from grabbing the desk, his eyeballs are round with little pupils in the middle and he says, "What's going on!" and they always use the same words, "down in there," like there's a 'down in there,' in there somewhere. It is as if he could see what's going on down inside the computer, then he'd feel better. I always explain to them, this is how computers work, "Computers work by magic, take my word for it!" and they say, "No, no, no, how does it really work?" and I say, "They really work by magic."

Sometimes ask them, "Have you bought a car within the last five years?" and if they had, I ask "Did you pop the hood once on the first day?" Almost everybody I know, when they buy the car, they pop the hood, they open it up, they look at it, they look around, and then they say, "That's a good engine! Good engine!" then slam the top down and they never open it again, because it's beyond comprehension.

I used to help my dad take engines apart and they had pistons. Things went up and down, up and down, there was an innie part and an outie part. I look at my car now and it looks like a chemical plant, a place where you manufacture toothpaste. It's just all tubes and stuff flowing around. Trust me, computers work by magic. Break through the fear of the maze.

A second fear is when people fear what I call 'uppity machines.' Below is a transcript of a large conference of mid-managers at a very high technology firm in a meeting on the West Coast.

*"I think people are afraid of uppity machines. Uppity machines. Machines that act like they're human. Sometimes I carry around a little hand calculator that talks. You ever seen those things? It says, "Hello, it's April 14," or whatever it is. I have a car that talks, which I did not know when I bought it. True story. I bought it because of the paint job. I was driving down the road, I saw this burgundy paint job, with this T-bar glass roof and I thought that paint is going home with me tonight. I must drive that paint home! So, I bought the car and I drove away, or leased the car and drove home. I drove under my condo, got out of the car and the lights were on. The car said, "Lights are on!" and I didn't know the car talked, so it made me nervous. I looked around because I didn't even know where the voice was coming from.*

*A guy told me a story recently, a banker in Wisconsin. I was doing a thing for the Economic Development Commission in Wisconsin. A tiny little guy, black suit, gold chain, honor key, bald head, white hair, president of a bank. He said, "I have a very amusing story for you to tell." and I thought, good! Lay it on me here because I need everything I can get! He said, "I drive an E Class Crisper, and recently I was in a wreck. A young man in a pickup truck hit me on a snowy road. My car turned over. My arm was broken, my head was cut." He tipped his head down and there was an enormous red smile scar on his head and I thought, oh my God! This story is delicious so far. He said, "The night before, in a hotel, I had seen CHPS. You know the TV show, California Highway Patrol? In the first eight seconds, they always overturn a school bus and it's engulfed in a big ball of fire." So, he thought he was going to go up in fire in the next 20 seconds. He said, "I've got to get away from the car!" so he pushed the door, and slid out into a snow bank with his head down in the ditch. His legs were up in the bench and as he was trying to get out, his car said, "Don't forget to take your keys!" and he started laughing. He said that when the cops came, he was near shock, just laughing, with his arm broken and bleeding."*

One fear is that people don't like machines that aspire to know more than they do, and the fact of the matter is that many of these machines really do know more than you do. You learn a little, they already know that. You learn basic programming, and guess what, they already know that. Later on, you learn Cobol, Pascal, Fortran, they already knew those as well. So, you have to be willing to

live in ignorance. This is another of these symbolic fears: People fear not knowing. They fear being ignorant. Later in this series I'm going to share much more about living in the realm of "not knowing." You're going to have to embrace ignorance and being unsure of things, and think of these as positive circumstances.

As another example, many managers dread a disruption of value systems. If you get the rules straight, you get the manila folders labeled, you get the parking lot laid out, the lines painted, and now, you've got to run this place, keep operations going. Operations is about doing things the same way. It's about making that \$50 billionth hamburger, frying it exactly the way you fried at first one. You want it to be the same. You do not want each fry cook at 200,000 outlets saying, "I'll tell you what, why don't we have some anchovies on the side here and let's chop up a little bit of broccoli in here, and I think it'll be kind of good!" Those good, new ideas are not what you want; you want operations.

New technology shatters all those rules. The technologies say, "Hey, we got a better way to do it!" and so many people fear that roles are going to change, that young people will know more than the old people, that the people, who have been in charge, won't be in charge anymore. Now, all of these are genuine fears. These are actual problems that every corporation in the world is now dealing with. There's no way to simply say, "Well, the organization will work by magic! It'll all work out great!" No, these are real problems and the key is that there are real solutions, but they have nothing to do with the computer itself.

I'll conclude by telling you that I had computer phobia more than you do. I had computer phobia in spades. I was terrified when I first bought my microcomputer, which was now some six and a half years ago. I regarded myself as a humanist, as much as a musician, as a photographer, an artist. Those are the kinds of things I did, and I thought that computer people were different. They studied physics, they read a lot of Einstein, they had plastic pocket protectors with a lot of ballpoint pens in them and favorite slide rules, and they were different. I thought that somehow, if I learned to use a computer, I would become like them, I would lose the essence of who I was, and become someone else, who I didn't want to become. I found out a miraculous thing: You don't lose anything, you simply gain.

## References

Byrne, 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.

## Licensing

Mary Ann Byrne has chosen to license this content, on behalf of her husband, under a Creative Commons Attribution, NonCommercial, NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

The *Journal of Biocommunication* Management Board and Editors believe that transparency in academic research is essential. Our *JBC* authors are now required to disclose any possible conflict of interest when submitting a manuscript. In accordance with the *Journal of Biocommunication's* editorial policy, no potential conflict of interest has been reported or declared by the copyright holder.

## **Acknowledgment**

The *Journal of Biocommunication* wishes to acknowledge the late Mary Anne Byrne, who, prior to her own death in August of 2021, had graciously allowed us to publish the content from her late husband's recorded lecture presentations.

Dr. Byrne's portrait was provided by Mary Ann Byrne.