

Going with One's Grain

Published on Mar 29, 2015 by Niko Canner



People differ. Great achievement rarely goes against the grain of an individual's particular strengths. Twyla Tharp's metaphor of focal length conveys this notion of with and against one's grain:

When I apply a critic's temperament to myself, to see if I'm being true to my DNA, I often think in terms of focal length, like that of a camera lens. All of us find comfort in seeing the world either from a great distance, at arm's length, or in close-up. We don't consciously make that choice. Our DNA does, and we generally don't waver from it. Rare is the painter who is equally adept at miniatures and epic series, or the writer who is at home in both historical sagas and finely observed short stories.

The photographer Ansel Adams, whose black-and-white panoramas of the unspoiled American West became the established notion of how to "see" nature (and, no small feat, helped spawn the environmental movement in the United States), is an example of an artist who was compelled to view the world from a great distance. He found solace in lugging his heavy camera on long treks into the wilderness or to a mountaintop so he could have the widest view of land and sky. Earth and heaven in their most expansive form was how Adams saw the world. It was his signature, an expression of his creative temperature. It was his DNA.

Focal length doesn't only apply to photographers. It applies to any artist.

The choreographer Jerome Robbins, whom I have worked with and admire, tended to see the world from a middle distance. The sweeping vision was it for him. Robbins's point of view was right there on the stage. Others besides me have noted how often Robbins had his dancers watch someone else dance. Think of his very first ballet, *Fancy Free*. Boys watch girls. Girls then watch boys. And upstage, the bartender watches everything as if he were Robbins's surrogate. His is the point of view from which the ballet's story is told. Robbins is both observing and observed, at a middle distance...

Other artists see the world as if it is one inch from their nose. The novelist Raymond Chandler, who's Phillip Marlowe books like *Farewell, My Lovely* and *The Long Goodbye* are classics of American hardboiled detective fiction, was obsessed with detail. He works in extreme close-up, a succession of tight shots that practically put us inside the characters' skulls.... Chandler kept lists of observed details from his life and from the people he knew: a necktie file, a shirt file, a list of overheard slang expressions, as well as character names, titles, and one-liners he intended to use sometime in the future. He wrote on half-sheets of paper, just twelve to fifteen lines per page, with a self-imposed quote that each sheet must contain what he called "a little bit of magic." The "life" in his stories was in the details, whether his hero Marlowe was idling in his office or in the middle of a brutal confrontation. No long-distance musings on the state of the world. No middle-distance group shots. Just a steady stream of details, piling one on top of the other, until a character or scene takes shape and a vivid picture emerges. Up close was Chandler's focal length. (i)

People differ not only in the shape, but in the magnitude of their capabilities. This magnitude may evolve over time, but it is important to understand the size and limits at any given moment in time. The late Elliott Jaques developed among the most useful and precise systems for conceptualizing these differences in the "size of people's worlds" and the size of the challenges individuals are able to undertake:

Cognitive processing... has to do with the particular characteristics of the mental processing in individuals that is required for handling and organizing information. This processing enables the individual to deal with information complexity: when a person's cognitive processing is up to the complexity, he or she is comfortable; when the information is too complex, information overload occurs; and when the person's cognitive processing could handle greater complexity, boredom and frustration result.

Cognitive processes are the mental processes by means of which a person is able to organize information to make it available for doing work. We have defined complexity in terms of the number, ambiguity, rate of change, and interweaving of variables involved in a problem. Task complexity thus has to do with the amount and quality of information that must be processed in the course of carrying out any task, and understanding this reality provides a useful insight into the nature of the maximum potential capability in the individual. The ability of individuals to handle complexity in doing work is reflected in how they manipulate and organize variables: some people seem to be able to gather up and deal with huge quantities of variables all at once, some with medium amounts, and some with very few.

It will be evident that, regardless of the necessary values, knowledge, skill, and wisdom for a particular type of work, there will always be a ceiling on the number of variables - the amount of information - that a given person can carry; that is to say, there is a maximum level of complexity that any person can cope with.... *Cognitive power* is the potential strength of cognitive processes in a person and is therefore the maximum level of task complexity that someone can handle at any given point in his or her development....

By the very nature of things, problems come in an enormously wide range of degrees of complexity. For example, in sweeping a floor there are only a few variables to be taken into account, such as where to start and how vigorously to sweep. All are directly observable, not changing, and not nested and tangled up within each other.

At the other extreme, to direct a program of putting a man on the moon contains an uncountable number of variables: the state of the surface of the moon, its movement and position, the art of rocketry, the art of computers and control systems, human physiology, selection and training of astronauts, and so on. Each of these variables is a shifting and changing conglomeration of entangled elements, new knowledge is appearing, many factors are at best incompletely known, and all are interwoven in a great tangled skein whose pattern keeps changing.

In between, tasks and their problems may range in complexity from the relatively straight-forward writing of a routine computer program to competing for a major contract (with all the difficulties of assessing client needs and outlooks and of best-guessing what the competitors might be offering), or building a new factory and getting into production, or buying a new company.

Just as we find that the greater a person's cognitive power the greater is the mass of information that can be coped with, so we find that the greater the person's cognitive power the longer is that person's.... "time-horizon." Time-horizon is the longest period into the future within which a person is capable of organizing and carrying through given tasks or projects, handling problems as they arise on the way, and reaching the eventual goal. Some people can work up to a maximum outreach of a day or so, others up to some weeks, others months, and still others years.... The longest tasks of any kind that a person can cope with gives a direct indication of that person's cognitive complexity, or cognitive power. (ii)

By understanding the extent and limits of one's reach - in time and in terms of complexity - one can aim to reach for that very limit, without overreach. By looking accurately at others in this way, one can give them enough room to be their best, without placing others in the quicksand of a problem too large for them to navigate through.