

Introduction

BOLKO VON OETINGER

Poetry?

I must confess that I was a skeptic when a few years ago Clare Morgan and her coauthors brought me—as director of The Strategy Institute of The Boston Consulting Group (BCG)—a proposal for a book exploring the value of poetry to strategic thinking.

Certainly, the beauty of poetry elevates the mind, but can that higher consciousness go beyond the aesthetic? Aren't these two fields so distant from each other as to have no opportunity for cross-pollination? Can an argument really be made that a manager should read poetry *for the good of his business*?

The book in your hands is proof that I was convinced. Not entirely on that first day—although Clare's answer was certainly plausible enough to justify exploring the idea further—but increasingly as the project evolved. While I never found the “hard” proof I'd initially thought essential, over time it was reading and working with the poems themselves that won me over.

In particular, it was William Stafford's poem “Traveling through the Dark” (p. 59) that made me a believer in the value of poetry to business thinking. (For you, it may well be a different one.) It's a poem about road-kill. A pregnant deer lies dying by the side of the road. What to do?

During the course of this project, I have participated in at least half a dozen discussions of this poem with clients and BCG colleagues in the United States, England, Germany, and Japan. Clare told the participants only that she wanted to discuss and interpret the poem. Yet despite the significant cultural differences, the discussions were remarkably similar. (If you haven't already, go to page 59 and read it quickly now. You may be

surprised to find that it's hard to read quickly, so engaging is the dramatic situation.)

Each time the discussion felt almost surreal: the dying doe, the unborn faun, the darkness of the night, the danger on the road, and the relationship of human to animal. The readers quickly and intensely found themselves in the shoes of the narrator who has found the deer. Every participant was drawn into the dilemma, the ambiguity of the situation, and the struggle to find the moral response.

In one of these gatherings—with engineers from a major automaker—the discussion brought the group together in the way that intense shared experiences do but in a fraction of the time. We started out superficially acquainted, but after living together for two hours inside the narrator's head we suddenly knew one another in a completely different, deeper way. How and why would a person behave this way or that? The answers given and suggestions made offered deep insights into the character of each member of the group. We discovered that we were ready to take another look at our own views, recognized the weight of others' arguments, and struggled with them and ourselves. We had all left our comfort zones and were together in a liminal situation looking for a way out.

Over the course of this effort, I've realized a number of things about the power of poetry, especially lyric poetry, to sharpen and open the mind. Three in particular:

Reading poetry is worth it in and of itself. This was not unexpected, and no doubt many readers will share this sentiment. Yet the pleasure we get from a poem may be its price of admission into our psyche. But private pleasure is one thing and commercial benefit another, so I suspect the following two arguments will be more important for the curious but as yet unconvinced reader.

Poetry forces you to find meaning in ambiguity. The language of poetry is like the future, full of vague hints, a mixture of fact and opinion, unclear forms, and incomplete models. It is open and emotional, accommodates multiple meanings, and is frequently controversial. It allows a multitude of paths, detours, and escapes. Different readers will not necessarily agree on what the poem is about, but they will be able to discuss the different assumptions that underlie their conclusions.

The language of business, by contrast, seems clear. In the operational and financial spheres, terms are tightly defined to enable efficient communication and effective collaboration within and beyond the global enterprise. Poetry has little to add here. It will not help you make new calculations, build better projections, increase throughput, minimize scrap, balance a budget, or locate a factory in China.

But when it comes to the sphere of strategy, executives can often find themselves (as is said of the British and the Americans) divided by a common language. Despite, or perhaps because of, the manifold frameworks that try to pin the concept of strategy down, words become buzzwords and are never questioned. Recipients of directives interpret them in their own way and act accordingly. A well-developed poetic competence, as argued in this book, can help executives look behind the words to find, weigh, and resolve alternate meanings.

Beyond its value in clarifying *semantic ambiguity*, poetry can also help develop both a tolerance for and a facility with *situational ambiguity*. The reader/manager will be able to traverse Carl von Clausewitz's "fog of uncertainty" with both greater courage and greater impact. By understanding the multiple meanings at the heart of ambiguity, the manager's ability to make appropriate decisions "on the fly" is enhanced.

Poetry fosters interpersonal understanding. This insight was perhaps the most surprising to me. In a group discussion of poetry—as happened with the auto engineers—people reveal themselves and, since few aspects of a poem are black and white, develop real empathy for the thoughts and ideas of others.

This ability to see the world through the eyes of others is a critical and all too rare management skill. If you can sit inside people's heads, it's easier to convince them. If your people aren't afraid to replay and test their interpretations of your directives, you'll ensure greater strategic alignment. And this kind of empathy can be achieved only to a limited extent through more "rational" approaches. In a world where we need to ensure that strategies are commonly understood, well-defended, responsive, and consistently implemented, poetic competence may represent a new *sine qua non* for strategic alignment.

But if poetry is so critical, why haven't tens of thousands of managers—me included—known this for ages? Why isn't it taught in business schools? And do I need to read a whole book to get the gist? Couldn't it all be summarized in three pages with bullet points? Perhaps it could, but there's no way of getting around the poems. They entice. They demand attention. They invite interpretation and discussion.

The authors are well aware of the reader's likely skepticism. Consequently, they have made it easier for the reader to be taken along on the trip. The book isn't a theoretical tome; it's a book about writing a book about poetry for executives. At the heart of the book are poems and an imagined dialogue between Clare and an engaged yet skeptical reader. Poetry, doubt, theory, and whimsy coexist, and poetry and doubt are not bad travel companions.

If my experience is any guide, discerning the value of poetry to business is one of those rare gifts that only once you have been given it do you realize you'd always wished for it. I thank Clare, Kirsten, and Ted deeply for giving it to me. I wish a similar experience for you.

On behalf of The Strategy Institute of BCG, I'd like to express my sincere thanks to those colleagues who have assisted the team. They were sometimes more in number, sometimes fewer, but they were always entirely convinced that poetic competence is a truly valuable business skill.

Bill Matassoni, BCG's longtime marketing head, again and again (and even after his retirement!) encouraged us to bring managers closer to poems. In December 2005, he, Clare, Ted, and Gary Callahan, BCG's director of design and publishing operations, developed an edition of poems—read aloud by BCG staff—that was distributed as a holiday gift to clients. Then in December 2007 BCG's Marketing Team, led by Antonella Mei-Pochtler, Massimo Portincaso, and Federico Fregni, selected four chapters from this book as a holiday gift for BCG consultants to give to their clients.

Tiha von Ghyczy, a fellow of The Strategy Institute and strategy lecturer at the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia, encouraged the team and warned it not to debase poetry by treating it as a "tool" but instead to emphasize its indirect impact on enhancing communication and mutual understanding. Matthew Clark, who runs marketing for BCG's global strategy practice, helped make the book clearer, simpler, and more distinct, and to have no fear of the encounter of economics and poetry.

I am, of course, particularly grateful to and proud of the team of Clare Morgan, Kirsten Lange, and Ted Buswick and also Matthew Wikswo, a team member during the early stages. During this project, they received more "advice" than they'd bargained for. They persevered. Indeed, the stronger the storms of doubt they faced ("Is poetry really useful for businesspeople?") the harder they worked on their message. At the Institute, we are always grateful for doubts and criticism. They enliven thought, sharpen arguments, and show us where the connection to practice has to be strengthened. The Institute thrives on this energy. Also I thank the many poets, businesspeople, and professors who helped the team with their opinions and advice.

BOLKO VON OETINGER recently retired as a senior partner and managing director in the Munich office of The Boston Consulting Group. He was also director of BCG's Strategy Institute, which he founded in 1998, until his retirement.