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## **Inviting Wonder in Organization: Tiger, Sandstone, Horror, Snowball.**

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Who would follow the Way  
must go beyond words.  
Who would know the world  
must go beyond names.

Nameless, all things begin.  
Named, all things are born.

Empty of intent, one may be filled with awe.  
Full of intent, one may know what's manifest.  
One source, different fonts.  
Wonders both.

From wonder into wonder,  
existence opens.  
- *Daodejing*, chapter 1 (transl. Allchin, 2002)<sup>i</sup>

Wonder is a fundamental quality of human experiencing, one that has occupied many of the world's greatest thinkers and is held to underpin all imagination, formation of deep interest and empathic turning to the other (Nussbaum, 2001, Rubinstein, 2008). Yet, wonder is largely missing from the field of organization studies, especially as a line of empirical inquiry. In this paper, we call for an organizational and managerial consideration of wonder as a major source of creativity and meaning making in organizations. We point to overlooked and important parallels in the treatment of wonder in Western philosophy and the East Asia philosophy of Daoism, particularly as featured in *Daodejing*, and extend a threefold invitation to wonder for scholars and practitioners of organizations.

First, we invite consideration of the manifestations and potentials of wonder in organizations. Wonder is to be seen as a relational quality of ordinary experience rather than solitary dwelling on grand miracles. The examples we reason from include the creation and experiencing of services and larger entrepreneurial quests as well as

conversations in traffic and the care for humans at the end of life. The sample ranges from service providers in Scandinavia and Shanghai to entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs in Silicon Valley and Ferran Adrià in Catalonia/Spain. We show how wonder underpins the search for austere beauty, the passionate pursuit of burning questions and the immersion in service experiences. These examples cast experiences of wonder as integral to organizational meaning making and performance, not something outside or in opposition to it.

Second, we invite a philosophical consideration of wonder as a universal quality of organizational life. We see the phenomenon of wonder across widely differing organizational contexts, cultural settings and philosophical origins. Chapter one (see above) of *Daodejing* might be the first philosophical text known to man in which the phenomenon of wonder features centrally. It was written some 200 years before what is considered the inaugural treatment of wonder in Western philosophy (Plato, *Theaetetus*, in Cooper, 1997: 173), and precedes many of the central themes in Western philosophy of wonder. This includes the affective, felt nature of knowing, the limits of language and the ineffability and processual nature of existence (Yu, 2003, Chang, 1977/2014) or the mutual entailing of opposites (Ames and Hall, 2003). Pursuit of the mystery of mysteries involves a shuttling between naming and non-naming, intending and non-intending (Lau, 1963/1989/2012), or being and non-being (Liu, 2009).

Third, we invite consideration of wonder as an embracement of Mystery for its own sake, in organizations and our inquiry about them. Wonder can be defined as a combination of (1) feeling startled or struck by something unusual in the usual, *wondering at*, and (2) being moved into self-transcending search that address Mysteries of being, *wondering about* (Carlsen and Sandelands, 2015). In simpler terms, wonder is a primordial source of sensory arousal and passionate search. Thus we move beyond mere astonishment (the arousal part) and beyond a casual use of the term, which may refer to almost any set of questions in everyday life, like ‘I wonder what’s on TV tonight’. Emphasizing the search part of wonder means accepting its endless, baffling and ineffable character (Liu, 2009). Wonder cannot be tamed, pinned down or sliced, weighed and measured in the service of calculative reason. It has a thousand faces and achieves its significance and invitational force precisely because of that. Every moment of existence must be regarded inherently unfinished, open to being cast into estrangement and a potential invitation to wonder (Platt, 1997, Ames and Hall, 2003).

In that spirit we start with a conversation, in the tight traffic of Shanghai, where a spiritual descendant of Socrates works as a driver.

## Inviting discovery in conversation - Mr. Driver and the great bug

Jan Ketil: A stranger asking the locals about their culture may be ignored, informed or left confused. Sometimes he may also be invited into discovery.

One day as Mr. Driver and I were stuck in a traffic jam, I spotted a Chinese character that was unknown to me on a license plate. It looked like this: 闽. “What is that character on the car in front of us,” I asked. “That one?” Mr. Driver said and peeked downwards. “It is the character “min”. That is the character representing Fujian province.” “It depicts a bug in a gate,” I suggested, and Mr. Driver agreed. “Why would anyone represent the Fujian province with a bug in a gate,” I continued. Mr. Driver shrugged and replied that this is just how things are, it is the character “min” and it has signified Fujian since time immemorial.

“Could it have to do with seafood?” I kept asking, exposing my Western preference for logical and linear explanations. “The bug part of the character is frequently a part of characters describing seafood, for example shrimp or crabs (虾 and 蟹). The Fujian province is a coastal province. Earlier, people could have thought of it as the gate to seafood, thus a gate with a bug inside it.” “Good thinking,” Mr. Driver lauded my suggestion, “but that might really not be the core idea. You must understand that in ancient Chinese, the bug is also a tiger.” “A tiger,” I echoed, “you must be kidding me?” “No,” Mr. Driver said, “it was called the Big Bug – 大虫, originally written as three bugs on top of each other (蟲). Check your dictionary if you don’t believe me.” I checked, and found to my amazement that the dictionary confirmed his claim.

“By what strange line of thinking have people come to describe the tiger as a bug,” I wondered. “Because it is really awesome,” Mr Driver explained without hesitation. “Just in the same way that the snake was called the Long Bug (长虫).” Another check with the dictionary proved him right again. “Someone is straining the conception of a bug here,” I mused.

“It is due to all the awesome properties displayed by these animals,” Mr Driver continued. “Just think of dragons.” “Dragons?” “Yes! The dragon is an awe-inspiring animal that brings power and happiness. Does not everyone want to be a little bit of a dragon?” “Well actually,” I had to admit, “at least in China...” “There you see,” he triumphed, “and you can adopt the properties of the dragon by eating a bit of one. The problem is of course that the dragon belongs to creatures of fairytales, we all know that, and so you will never be served one.” “No?” “But of course people have found solutions! Because what is, after all, a dragon? It is a tiger-like snake, or a snake-like tiger, right? And so they use a Long Bug, that is a snake, and serve it with a Big Bug, a tiger.” “Tiger? As a dish?” “Of course that is hard nowadays as there are so few tigers. Then again, the tiger is only sort of a cat. Therefore, the actual dish you will be served in most places is a cat, stewed in a snake. Then you will be eating dragon. No wonder it is a popular dish many places, and especially in the wintertime.”

Coming home at last, I was fortunately treated to more common dishes such as potato silk and Ma Lan Tou. While Hong Hong ladled out the good stuff, I could not keep from asking her: “Hong Hong, may I ask you a question?” “Of course. What is it?” “If I say Big Bug to you, what does it make you think about?” Hong Hong put down her bowl of rice and dates, her face taking on an astonished expression and answered: “Big Bug? Ahem, it would have to be a tiger, wouldn’t it?” “But why on earth is it called a big bug?” Thereupon Hong Hong beamed with relief as she served the tree-ears, explaining with a smile: “That one is easy. It is obviously because of the way the tiger moves.”

The accuracy of the explanations could be disputed. While some argue that the character 虫 is an ancient generic term for “animal”<sup>ii</sup>, others contest this (Sterckx, 2005). Moreover, the dish Mr. Driver referred to, using cat and snake as ingredients may be 龙虎斗 (Long Hu Tou). This is a Cantonese dish and the name is derived from the idiom 龙争虎斗 (Long Zheng Hu Tou) literally meaning a dragon and a tiger in fierce combat.

Beyond accuracy, what mattered was the felt invitation to a world of discovery.

### **Inviting creation – burning questions and howling horror**

The joint discovery of Mr. Driver and Jan Ketil on the character representing the Fujian province escaped closure. It may even be seen as partly ignorant. Can wonder also be part of more deliberate creative pursuits that are beneficial to organizations and the people in them?

We move to Scandinavia and a four-year action research project that searched for lessons of the extraordinary in everyday creativity from six leading service firms, companies that are all engaged in “idea work” (CarlsenClegg and Gjersvik, 2012). One of the key qualities of the extraordinary that came out of this research was the craving for wonder by top performers.

The thirst for wonder first appeared in an interview with a seasoned explorer of oil and gas – Sigmund, a legend amongst his peers and the protagonist behind many large discoveries. Sigmund tells a story about doing a post-mortem of a dry well on the outskirts of an area where oil companies had been drilling wells for almost 20 years with meager results. He had noticed something that did not cohere with the dominant geological model for the area:

“I had these questions that just burned and burned: ‘Darned, if this is a structural trap, why did not all the oil leak through the thin layers of sandstone that are above the main reservoir and that are also filled with oil?’”

It turned out that his hunch was right. Sigmund managed to find backing for an alternative geological model and initiated exploration that led to a discovery of 700 million barrels of oil. In the most intense part of the interview, Sigmund leans forward, saying.

“I had asked the *questions* beforehand. I would just have to say that this is simply the way I work. It applies to both my hobbies and my work. I have this great desire to figure things out, to find answers. I *wonder* a lot. Whether it has to do with geology or not: the questions kind of take over, regardless of whether I ask others or try to figure it out for myself. My wife sometimes thinks it is too much. But I think wondering is a good thing in exploration.”

Colleagues of Sigmund later described him as a person who instilled an atmosphere of loud discussions and constant questioning in all the teams he works with, heatedly inspiring people to ask: “why, why, *why* is the geology like that?” – also after discoveries.

Other creators told similar tales of enchantment. One was Craig, co-founder and chief architect of one the the world’s leading architect firms. Craig spoke of how the experience of the embodied human being is the real part of architecture and the buildings are abstractions. He talked about creating architecture that can incorporate contrary

experiences and “engender memory and therefore lodge itself into the physicality of being human”, why architectural concepts first of all need to be generous and never work quite as intended, the precarious nature of interpretation and its ruining by method, and the sensuous experience of listening to the larger stories in culture. Afterwards, we have seen Craig in a documentary. Here he talks about ownership in vertical sections, how philosophy is expressed in buildings, and shows us one of his favorite places in New York city. He explains, for example, how the sunlight at a certain angle reflects in the old window glasses of a building and creates the fleeting images of ponds in the grass. Craig just can’t seem to help himself. Above and beyond any rational pursuits, he invites people into mystery and wants to share his wonder of the world. Architecture just happens to be the primary expression.

Then there was Kjetil, an award-winning feature journalist. Kjetil describes coming to his inquiries as encounters with mystery, the whiff of an incipient story whose potential he can “feel in a purely physical way”. He sees his prime job as transferring that feeling to readers. Language need to be stripped down. The story should tell itself and evoke feeling: “It’s a mystery, there is something untold, and then the reader will feel that something is untold.” Examples include stories of a girl’s struggle with cancer seen at the micro-level of the battle within her body, and reporting from the the skinless horror of witnessing the trial of the July 22 killings in Norway. These are numbing essays, tearing the reader between the bottomless howling of the bereaved and the triteness of the monstrous.

### **Inviting mystery – beyond words, beyond appearances**

Looking across these examples we may suggest that a distinguishing feature of all three top performers seems to be their ability to feel wonder, their insatiable craving for it in their work and their ability to invite wonder in others. Sigmund, Craig and Kjetil, quite like in the exchange with Mr. Driver, all receive *and* give invitations to wonder. They *receive* invitations when being stimulated and aroused by something – a geological puzzle, a question, or the turns in a conversation – that somehow make them question the given of the ordinary. They *give* invitations to wonder when sharing the source of their arousal and further open up for joint inquiry, whether with colleagues or clients or in an interview. There is no calculative intention in these invitations, either in their giving or receiving. It is not like people wake up one morning and figure out that “today seems a good day for some wonder to fuel my creativity, let’s try that.” Rather, our protagonists are unsettled, struck with wonder, “wounded by the sword of the strange event” (Parsons, 1969: 85), and loose

themselves into limitless exploration as a rift in understanding appears and bewilderment needs to be endured. It is a form of invitation that underpins desires for knowing or creating and that seemingly serves our protagonist and their organizations well. Preserving mystery in oil exploration, architecture and journalism may lead to discovery, winning contracts and reaching readers.

A key distinction here is whether the invitation to wonder is intentional or not, whether it is utilitarian or more open-ended. In the opening to his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle cast wonder as something that begins as a stimulus to inquiry but that ends when a satisfactory explanation is reached; wonder in the service of determinate knowledge (Aristotle in Barnes 1984: 1554). This idea of wonder has been criticized for taming wonder by reason (Rubinstein, 2008, Platt, 1997). The freeing of wonder from its utilitarian and teleological shackles is also a main point in how it is treated in Daoism (Loy, 1985, Yu, 2003), though here wonder arises more indirectly as a central theme rather than being given an explicit phenomenological treatment. Daoist writings encourage us to look for and embrace paradox and mystery, to seek out and accept that many of our experiences are only seemingly coherent (Chang, 1977/2014), and that the world is filled with enigma that is at once darkness and light (Yu, 2003). The founding texts, *Zhuangzi* and *Daodejing*, repeatedly refer to the importance of not accepting the apparent as given and being suspicious of making arbitrary distinctions in our world. *Zhuangzi* attempts to show the way our faith in words gradually undermines our sensitivity to lived experience (Feng, 1948/2015). Common usage of language may distance us from lived and embodied experience, and it is through wonder that existence may (re)open to us.

All of the four accounts so far in this paper, from the exchange with Mr. Driver to Sigmund the explorer, Kjetil the journalist and Craig the architect, can be seen as sharing this heritage from Daoism. They share a craving to search beyond appearances and the manifestations of being, a bottomless search that points to Dao in Daoism (Yu, 2003, Liu, 2009) and the blind wandering back to the knowledge of God in Western philosophy (Patočka, 1974-1977/2002). In more functional terms for creativity in organizations, it amounts to a search beyond established clichés and schemas, whether characters of language, geological data, media notes or conventions in architecture.

### **Inviting arousal and immersion in service experiences**

Our next encounter with the phenomenon came in a somewhat surprising setting, one in which the competitive rationalities of service experiences were in focus. 67 young

executives in two MBA classes on organizational creativity in Shanghai were asked to do half a day of fieldwork in high-end service provider settings – through personal observations as well as brief interviews of staff and other users. The executives were told to look for sources of *magic*; what made services stand apart and somehow extraordinary to them. The task was framed in a fairly utilitarian way. What came out was less so.

One group talked about the unexpected delight of receiving nail decoration service in the waiting line at HaiDiLao hotpot restaurant as well as its genuine staff and dancing waiters. Another described being immersed in the colorful world of M&M's flagship store where they “feel the brightness and innocence of life” and “escape from the world of adults”. A third told of the lure of how “feeling friends with wild animals” and hearing the “the singing of black swans” at a lake in the Guangzhou Chimelong resort invoked “feeling the sweet calling of nature”. And a fourth told of the pleasant scare of being immersed into horror stories at a game center where staff became eager co-players.

Later, when asked to generalize from these experiences, the following four sets of qualities of the extraordinary service experience emerged: 1) something that aroused interests due to its spectacular, unexpected, beautiful or peculiar nature, 2) a journey to the unknown with a sense of adventure and limitless exploration; 3) the experience of transition and immersion into a new world with an escape from daily life, and 4) production of memories that one could revisit, dwell on and share afterwards.

We understand these experiences as pointing to wonder as a potential distinguishing quality of services, in particular interactive services with elements of “experience goods” (Israel, 2005). The road to extraordinary services may pass through arousing the sensory apparatus of people, evoking the thirst for immersion in the mysteries of new worlds and expansion of understanding, experiences that in turn produce cherished memories.

We have seen such invitations to wonder in other service settings too. Steve Jobs' fiery striving for bringing “insanely great” and “enlightened” handheld computer products to the world was born by inspiration from calligraphy, architecture, the whole earth catalogue and design traditions in Italy and Japan, the latter also heavily linked to his deep interest in Zen-philosophy (Isaacson, 2011). The search for simplicity and essences beyond appearances in Zen-Buddhism is one of its strongest inspirations from Daoism (Feng, 1948/2015, May, 2011). Jobs' restless desire for creating sophisticated simplicity was an explicitly zen-inspired quest, with a question-everything mindset, a constant stripping away of the cluttered and overdesigned, and a search for minimalist, austere beauty that arouse and enlist the imagination of others. Conceived as such, it was a search in and

through wonder.

The El Bulli restaurant in the Catalan seaside town of Roses, and its chef, Ferran Adrià, came to the status as world leading through a similarly obsessed search (Abend, 2012). Here, the scientific and artistic approaches to cooking, with spherification and methods of deconstruction, provided unparalleled artistry of contrasts (hot-cold, soft- crunchy, solid-liquid and sweet-savory) and surprising combinations (SvejenovaMazza and Planellas, 2007). More than anything, Adrià and El Bulli brought new worlds of arousal to guests and critics alike. As remarked by one biographer (Andrews, 2010: 61), even seasoned Chefs would experience life-changing amazement at El Bulli: “When I ate the food, I felt fear, delight, confusion, real joy. The world changed. For a chef, it was like Eric Clapton coming out of hearing Jimi Hendrix for the first time. What do you do now?”

These observations come with a disclaimer. Wonder cannot be reduced to another marketing ploy or be faked. The executives in Shanghai also reported on the importance of experiencing service providers who seem empowered and exuded positive energy of being immersed and genuinely interested in the service experience themselves, whether that meant being childish at a Disney store, treating animals respectfully at Chimelong, eagerly engaging guests in co-playing, or simply “smiling from the heart”. Instances of wonder occur in the micro-processes of spontaneous interaction. To *promise* wonder in a service offering is as credible as vowing that one will fall in love. In Daoist terms, it is like ensuring people they may glimpse the Dao when all you can offer is an empty ceremony (Feng, 1948/2015: 184-185). Wonder resists being turned into a prescription. The search for mystery pushes beyond the apparitions of mindless rituals.

### **Inviting life**

In its deepest sense, wonder may be seen as a way of enhancing people’s connecting to life itself, not just by entering new worlds but by suspending our preconceptions and engaging reality in a direct, immediate, and new way (Merlau-Ponty, 1962/2002, xiii). Nussbaum (2001) has argued that wonder plays an important part in a child’s capacity for love and compassion. It is through wonder that children come to culture and people connect with worlds they do not know. In this sense, wonder is to be found in experiences common to most of us. It could be looking beneath seashore stones, listening to the chorus of birds or smelling the low tide (Carson, 1965/1988), or it could be dwelling on the irreducible indeterminacy of the other (Levinas, 1969).

So our path to life may begin in wonder. Might it also end there, as a last invite? BJ

Miller, a palliative care physician and executive director of Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco, reasons in a stirring TED talk (Miller, 2015) about how to create a dignified, graceful end of life for patients. Miller was close to death himself after an accident that robbed him of three limbs. During his stay in a burn unit, he gets to see a new possibility for care:

And one night, it began to snow outside. I remember my nurses complaining about driving through it. And there was no window in my room, but it was great to just imagine it coming down all sticky. Next day, one of my nurses smuggled in a snowball for me. She brought it in to the unit. I cannot tell you the rapture I felt holding that in my hand, and the coldness dripping onto my burning skin; the miracle of it all, the fascination as I watched it melt and turn into water. In that moment, just being any part of this planet in this universe mattered more to me than whether I lived or died. That little snowball packed all the inspiration I needed to both try to live and be OK if I did not.

Miller's main point is that organizing for care needs to incorporate creative and playful acts, tending to dignity and inviting wonderment by way of the senses, "making life more wonderful, rather than just less horrible".

### **Inviting re-search**

Ludvig Wittgenstein (1980: 5) once famously stated that "Man has to awaken to wonder — and so perhaps do people. Science is a way of sending him to sleep again." Wonder may be resisted by a calculative science bent to dispel mystery and doubt (Parsons, 1969, Rubinstein, 2008). If we want wonder to matter in organizational research, whether as subject worthy of study or a quality of inquiry, we need to take it back from the higher echelons of philosophical thought and set it free as something in service of more than reason. Inviting wonder in organizations is important because it may unleash creativity, seed empathy and allow people to come more fully alive in their work while also serving others better. Inviting wonder is also important because it points to a horizon beyond calculative consequences, beyond manifestations, answering to a longing to understand and be taken away, to the enchantment and the beauty of ideas for their own sake (March, 2003).

A call to wonder is a call to the mysteries of being. We find wonder in everyday conversations, may awaken to wonder when we become enchanted as creators and consumers, and the invitations to wonder may matter the most at the edges of life. The study of all of those phenomena needs to be less than putting people to sleep again.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The 5000 sign text of Daodejing has a great many English translations with several controversies that there is little room for us to deal with here. Those translations that use the word wonder, derive it from the Chinese word *miao*, which gets variously translated into wonder, marvel, subtleties, mysteries, enigma, darkness (Loy, 1985; Yu, 2003). Our use of this particular translation of the first chapter is a shameless picking of a version that is explicit on wonder and at the same time carries the spirit of the original text in its ambivalent beauty and elegant simplicity. For comparison, see acclaimed translations by Chang (1977/2014) and Lau (1963/1989/2012).

<sup>ii</sup> The reference to tiger as a big bug can be traced back to Dai De's *Da Dai Li Ji* (大戴礼记, an ancient book of Confucius studies written in Han Dynasty) which referred to all animals as bugs, and categorized them into 5 kinds: birds are bugs with feathers (羽虫); beasts are bugs with hair (毛虫); turtles are bugs with shells (甲虫); fish are bugs with scales (鳞虫); and human beings are naked bugs with nothing on them (裸虫). The tiger has traditionally been viewed as King of the animals in Chinese culture (also for the 王-shaped pattern on its forehead), hence 大虫, the big bug (SWFP, 1986, Shi, 2001).