

Dream Songs, Information Theory, and CT

Let's begin with a passage from John Berryman's "Dream Song 10":

It is in the administration of rhetoric,
on these occasions, that—not the fathomless heart—
the thinky death consists;
his chest is pinched. The enemy is sick,
and so is us of.

"The thinky death": what a strange phrase. Whatever can it mean? Avoiding it animates my life, but I lack a clear understanding of its dimensions. I have assigned Berryman's *77 Dream Songs* for my complementary reading on Individual and Global Responsibility, even though I don't know how or if this work actually pertains to the theme. But the crucial point is this: I don't know what the outcome will be, and neither do the students. Such is the mystery of poetry, that a few lines might express Individual and Global Responsibility in a way that I could never have anticipated. Poetry demands that students mull over each and every word, and deliberately practice analysis in order to extract deeper meaning that addresses a Big Question. John Berryman only trafficked in Big Questions, and so his poetry will work well for helping students hone this important skill.

Berryman's opus is also highly controversial, which in no way diminishes my appetite for it. In fact, it is precisely this edginess that I crave—and so do our students. Again, one of the benefits of poetry is that it doesn't teach students *what* to think but *how* to think. Berryman's use of minstrelsy in his poetry is intentionally incendiary; it's supposed to make the reader uncomfortable—much like the concept of "cognitive disequilibrium" that undergirds much of the pedagogical theory of CT. A great poem does this naturally and ineffably, as do our best professors, who seem to understand on an intuitive level one of the most compelling insights of the last 200 years. To wit:

The more predictable a statement (or book, lecture, film, class) is, the less information it contains.

This comes from pioneering computer scientist Claude Shannon, who has reshaped our world in profound ways. Wireless communications would be impossible unless data could be compressed, and it can be compressed only because of the repetition embedded within all modes of communication. One form of "thinky death" is to become predictable, which might include being ideological or repetitive or just plain boring because you are not in a state of Hegelian becoming. Great poets use language in a way that is highly unpredictable—notice the arrangement of words in Dream Song 10, how syntax is twisted, demanding that the reader really pay attention.

As you end this class with your students, I would circle back to the beginning. What does it mean to be a human? We never really defined this term, perhaps assuming everyone "knows" what it is. Yet defamiliarization demands that we look afresh at what a homo sapiens truly is. A species name? Who named it? Why these words? Why is our "experience" so important that we spent a year studying it? Why not "bacteria experience" as these are the most important living things on our planet? Is our "human experience" so vastly different than the elephant experience or the dolphin experience? What is an "experience" anyway? Whose definition do we use? Jimi Hendrix's? OED's?

As our students begin to write themselves a letter to their future selves, research on CT tells us that we should go over the theory behind why we asking them to think about thinking—or engaging in

metacognition. Why is it important to re-examine your patterns of thought? What if you never think about thinking? Well, you would be an idiot, and as Berryman tells us in his *Dream Songs*, “idiots elect idiots.” As we attempt to create some well-trained dialecticians, let us not follow Plato and banish the poets.

Jeff Howard had the wonderful idea of sharing some summer reading ideas with the students, “to keep the conversation going.” Here are my humble suggestions:

Non-Fiction

1. Ariely, Dan. *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces that Shape Our Decisions*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008.

A fun and fast-paced introduction to behavioral economics, with many examples drawn from college students. Author is professor at Duke University.

2. Banerjee, Abhijit and Esther Dufflo. *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*. New York: Public Affairs, 2012.

MIT researchers who have compiled a tremendous data set to explore what works and what doesn't. The web site for this book is nothing short of remarkable. A major contribution that is thought-provoking and based on empirical evidence.

3. Gregg, Justin. *Are Dolphins Really Smart? The Mammal behind the Myth*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013.

A smart synthesis of extant dolphin research that asks some big questions about language and intelligence.

4. Levy, Steven. *In the Plex: How Google Thinks, Works, and Shapes Our Lives*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011.

The definitive history of one of the world's most important companies, written by the dean of technology journalism.

5. Sandberg, Sheryl. *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. New York: Knopf, 2013.

COO of Facebook's engaging examination of women in today's economy.

6. Shapiro, James. *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.

A compelling novelistic account of a tumultuous year in British history. A page turner.

Fiction

1. Burke, Shannon. *Into the Savage Country*. New York: Pantheon, 2015.

A poetic account of life west of the Mississippi River in the 1820s.

2. Dunn, Katherine. *Geek Love*. New York: Vintage, 2012.

Reprint of a classic. Story about a family of traveling carnival freaks. Mesmerizing and unforgettable.

3. Toole, John Kennedy. *The Confederacy of Dunces*. New York: Grove, 1987.

Cult classic posthumous novel that might be among the funniest works in American letters.

4. Littell, Jonathan. *The Kindly Ones*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2010.

A Goncourt winner, written in French by an ex-pat American, it tells the story of a gay SS officer who is erudite, cultured, and homicidal. Unspeakably brilliant.

5. Russell, Karen. *Swamplandia!* New York: Vintage, 2010.

Set in Florida, a Southern gothic tale of a family of alligator wrestlers.

6. Walker, Karen Thompson. *The Age of Miracles*. New York: Random House, 2013.

What would happen if the spinning of the Earth slowed? Elegiac, funny, mind-bending.