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## **In Praise of Antinomies**

1 Knightsbridge Green, 15 July 2008

I've got two reasons to talk about antinomies this evening.

The first, of course, is to show off. Antinomy is quite a long word and an unusual one – and I know what it means and you probably don't.

And the second reason is a great deal more respectable and even more important.

What antinomy means doesn't often get talked about – perhaps because it's difficult to talk about things that don't have familiar names. And the best description of antinomy I know comes from the wonderful and sadly neglected E F Schumacher.

Thirty five years ago he published a book called *Small is Beautiful*. That's not really what it's about – the title was thought up by his publisher – but it's full of wisdom, almost all of it still relevant to business, to invention, to making things happen: and therefore to the future of planning. Let me quote:

'Top management ... inevitably occupies a very difficult position. It carries responsibility for everything that happens, or fails to happen, throughout the organisation, although it is far removed from the actual scene of events. It can deal with many well-established functions by

means of directives, rules and regulations. But what about new developments, new creative ideas? What about progress, the *entrepreneurial activity par excellence*?

‘We come back to our starting point: all real human problems arise from the *antinomy* of order and freedom. Antinomy means a contradiction between two laws; a conflict of authority; opposition between laws or principles that appear to be founded equally in reason.

‘Excellent! [writes Schumacher] This is real life, full of antinomies and bigger than logic. Without order, planning, predictability, central control, accountancy, instructions to the underlings, obedience, discipline – without these nothing fruitful can happen, because everything disintegrates. And yet – without the magnanimity of disorder, the happy abandon, the entrepreneurship venturing into the unknown and incalculable, without the risk and the gamble, the creative imagination rushing in where bureaucratic angels fear to tread – without this, life is a mockery and a disgrace.’

Remember that this is an economist, born in Germany and working at the time for the National Coal Board. It’s magnificent stuff. Never has antinomy been more evocatively defined. I suspect I’m going to read that bit several more times before I’m done.

For those of you who’ve read the Art and Science chapter in Stephen King’s brand planning book, with its entertaining introduction by Rory Sutherland, you’ll already have an agreeable sense of the familiar. We’re back to that centuries old debate about logic, induction and intuition.

Let me start by trying to rescue an extremely dirty word. One of the most devastating accusations you can make of account planners is to accuse them of a despicable act of intellectual dishonesty called *post-rationalisation*. The underlying inference is this: they've been shown some really weird idea, apparently plucked out of nowhere by two under-educated people in black T-shirts; and all the planner has done, with Jesuitical levels of low cunning, is to re-present its origins – *as if this weird idea had been arrived at through some linear, evidence-based and respectably scientific step-by-step process of deduction*.

Non-scientists tend to be more respectful of the scientific method than the better scientists are. Or to be rather more accurate: non-scientists like to believe that the scientific method employed in the act of discovery eliminates luck, guesswork, the wild generation of hypotheses, human prejudice and – naturally, post-rationalisation. In believing all this, of course, non-scientists are not to blame. Those responsible are the scientists themselves who for a couple of centuries led us to believe that all properly scientific discoveries were arrived at by a process of forensic thought in which every step was wholly dependent on the demonstrable validity of its predecessor. And we believed that to be true because every scientific paper published in every learned journal told us in peer-reviewed detail that that was indeed the way it was done.

It was one of the greatest scientists of all, the Nobel prize-winner Sir Peter Medawar, who first blew the gaff. This is what he wrote in a racy little number called *Induction and Intuition in Scientific Thought*. 'Scientific papers in the form in which they are communicated to learned journals are notorious for misrepresenting the processes of thought that led to whatever discoveries they describe.'

In other words, by a wonderful and circular irony, those marketing case histories, which we all suspect have indulged in shameless post-rationalisation, have done so in the sublime belief that this makes them almost as scientific as those scientific papers who've indulged in precisely the same deceit.

(It's possible that the only honest case-study in the history of marketing is the BarclayCard case written by Paul Feldwick of BMP - which describes in hilarious detail just how luck, agency stupidity and a collision of events entirely fortuitously led to an award-winning campaign of great commercial effectiveness.)

Marketing case-histories and scientific papers don't put much store by antinomy – or at least in one half. They quite like the bit about order and central control and discipline but they're not so keen on 'the unknown and incalculable, the risk and the gamble, the creative imagination rushing in where bureaucratic angels fear to tread' – without which, says Schumacher the economist, 'life is a mockery and a disgrace.'

But this is where real life yet again intrudes. However beguiling the risk and the gamble, however fruitful the unknown and the incalculable, at some point a real life client has to be persuaded that they should spend £35 million of their company's money on – as it were – an animated vampire duck. For all I know, there may be exceptions; but I've yet to meet a client who's perfectly happy to sign off £35 million of their company's money on an animated vampire duck on the sole basis that somebody in a black T-shirt tells them that it's pushing the creative envelope. One half of this particular antinomy may favour the 'trust me

I'm an art director' school of campaign planning and presentation but the other half certainly doesn't. Nor is the reluctance of clients to accept work on this basis, as is sometimes suggested, clear evidence of their cowardice. Penicillin may have been discovered in part by happy accident – but a lot of retrospective digging had to be done before penicillin was released on an unsuspecting public. 'Here, take these tablets. I invented them yesterday. Trust me, I'm a scientist.'

Post-rationalisation is not only respectable; it's essential. But it's also essential that those who practice it don't cheat. Tom Peters advanced the cause some years ago by describing the process not as post-rationalisation but as 'retrospective sense-making'. Edward de Bono said that you sometimes have to get to the top of the mountain to discover the shortest way up. All these things are true and nobody gains by pretending they aren't.

Stephen King famously plotted account planners on a scale from Grand Strategists at one end to Ad Tweakers at the others. It's easy to see these two figures as representing the two wholly contradictory pressures that form our particular antinomy: order versus freedom; discipline and deductive logic versus risk and unanchored intuition. At the one end The Grand Strategist, with a 72-slide PowerPoint deck, coshing his audience into exhausted submission; and at the other, the Ad Tweaker, performing elegant little creative pirouettes with never a single validated fact to spoil the party.

But to Stephen, these were just extremes on a scale: not alternatives. We seem to be bemused by alternatives. We've all caught binary fever. Everything has to be zero or one. Black or white. Britain or Brussels.

Grand Strategist or Ad Tweaker. If you're not totally in favour of one while being totally opposed to the other, you're a wimp.

Let me return to the great E F Schumacher.

'Whenever one encounters such *opposites*, each of them with persuasive arguments in its favour, it is worth looking into the depth of the problem for something more than compromise, more than a half-and-half solution. Maybe what we really need is not *either-or* but *the-one-and-the-other-at-the-same-time*.'

And Schumacher points out that, in every aspect of our lives, our home lives and our working lives, on a daily basis, we're having to face, and manage, the simultaneous and contradictory requirements for order and freedom. And somehow we do. The very best parents do it instinctively, twenty-four hours a day.

The real danger in Schumacher's antinomy is this. To people in creative organisations, one of his compelling laws or principles is so much more attractive, so much sexier, than the other. If you were interviewing a potential creative director, what would you think if he claimed blind and blinkered allegiance to 'order, planning, predictability, central control, accountancy, giving instruction to underlings, obedience and discipline'? (Come to think of it, there are some agency CEOs who'd probably say, Thank God. But that's for another evening.)

To creative companies, 'the magnanimity of disorder, the happy abandon, the risk and the gamble, the creative imagination rushing in where

bureaucratic angels fear to tread' – these are infinitely more alluring and more flattering. And therein lies their danger.

If, over the next forty years, account planners are to deliver as much worth to their agencies and their clients as they have over last forty, they cannot choose between the competing halves of Schumacher's antinomy. They will have to embrace both - and put them both to good use.

To celebrate the magnanimity of disorder and risk liberates no one from the responsibility for maintaining discipline and order and painstaking accuracy. They'll need *the-one-end-the-other-at-the-same-time*.

Those that can deliver the first without the second will be valued data analysts, responsible administrators and deadly boring drinking companions. Those that can deliver the second without the first will be valued as the occasional alchemist but irredeemably flaky.

Those that can deliver both – the one-and-the-other-at-the-same-time – will inherit the earth.