The Weekly WoKer

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1 Welcome to the Weekly WoKer

Welcome to Volume 8 of the Weekly WoKer, the first weekly newspaper for WoK Forums. Inside this edition you will find:

- An editorial piece offering my personal view of what has happened this week

- Letters to the editor

- An overview of the week's events

- Next week's schedule

- 'Piet's Page,' a weekly column by forums mayor Piet Hut

2 Letter from the Editor

The focus over the past week and a half in WoK has been grounding. Last Saturday Steven Tainer shifted his Saturday presentations from a discussion format to an experiential format, last Sunday Prof. Davina Chan gave a talk on research about meditation, last Monday the reading group paused to discuss how to proceed, the Working Hypothesis discussions have focused on personal experiences, and the followup to Davina's Sunday talk focused on critical evaluation of research. More recently Piet Hut has talked about making friends with phenomena–a powerful exercise in grounding–and this Sunday Steven Tainer's talk will announce his upcoming dream yoga teachings. I am encouraged that we are taking these measures to ground ourselves, and I would like to take a moment to talk about technology, grounding, the working hypothesis, and how this relates to the WoKer.

The original WoK Working Hypothesis has two parts. The first part tells us 'Ontologically, all that IS is already complete,' and the second part tell us 'and this completeness functions as a basic resource that can be explored directly.' Note that the hypothesis does NOT state that the completeness can be used as a resource, but that it *functions* as a resource, quite independently of anyone using it. But what does it mean, this business of a resource, and how does it relate to what we are doing with WoK and the question of the effects of new technologies? This is not a theoretical question. Due to the nature of our experiment our methods and our content are intimately related.

There are many different kinds of resources. Food, money, pretty rocks, vacation cruises, plasma televisions, bricks, social circles, time... the list of resources both material and intangible is arbitrarily long. But what is a resource exactly? The dictionary tells us (in its first definition, with the others closely related) that a resource is 'a source of supply, support, or aid, esp. one that can be readily drawn upon when needed.' Basically it is something that has value, typically in a way that allows one to *do* something.

We basically understand what this means in an ordinary way. If a mugger tries to rob us we can hit him with a brick, so for that reason the brick is valuable. But the etymology of resource provides an interesting suggestion about an altogether different way of looking at resources. It comes from Old French for 'recover' or 'rise again,' which comes from the latin *surgere* 'to rise.' *Surgere* is also the root of 'source.' We might say that something that is 'resourced,' then, is something that is connected to its source again. Contrary to conventional belief, which relies on the principle of scarcity, a resource is something that returns/connects us to our natural state.

WoK aims to address topics ranging from grounding things like meaning and value in modern life to the effects of virtual communication on human beings and human issues. We might say that these questions basically amount to asking how we, as human beings, might remain connected to our natural state, given all of the pressures and distractions of modern life. Given that we conduct the vast majority of our business virtually, our methods and our questions are intimately related. There is a kind of boot-strapping necessary to the success of the project on even a very ordinary level: in order to address the question of how to ground meaning in a modern, highly technologized world we have to ground our thoughts, actions, and writings meaningfully. WoK is a resource for finding resources! But how do we understand the role of technology in this, and what does this have to do with the WoKer?

As I was driving up to Princeton yesterday to visit Piet for a few days I turned on the radio to listen to some music. It struck me how much we, as human beings, are

using technology to broker resources. The singer that I was listening to is basically a monkey howling in a particular way into a metal device, and then it comes out of my car speakers as a pure sound–or at an even more processed level as pleasant language, and evokes a particular response, without even nodding to the howling-monkey picture. Once I become aware of the howling monkey picture, I am free to either just look at it as some kind of silly display, or I can choose to look at it as a silly display and then embrace it in a delightful way.

The point is that technology speeds things up in a way that can obscure what is actually present. Since the invention of language the world seems more and more like a bunch of word-meaning-sounds. Since the invention of writing and print the world seems more and more like a bunch of ink-meanings-on-paper. Since the invention of the internet the world seems more and more like web-pages. And since the invention of virtual worlds it seems that the world seems more and more like virtual spaces. But where are the seams in this seeming? How are all of these technologies connected to the ground of things?

All of these technologies–oral language, written language, recordings, the internet– are kinds of symbols. Using these symbols we have been able to do things that probably we wouldn't have otherwise been able to do. The symbols give us a kind of leverage, but the leverage comes at the risk of running amok and losing connection to the ground. At least it seems that way. I would like to suggest a slightly alternative picture–that we are not actually doing any of the things we seem to be doing, but that these symbols are kinds of ornaments, like on a Christmas tree. Maybe the tree is still connected to the ground–thats what we're talking about, the ground. At the trunk level it is easy to see how it is connected to the ground. Maybe at the branch level it is a little bit harder, and then at the level of the leaves it is even harder. But then there are ornaments on the leaves, and the tree starts spinning and playing Christmas carols and shooting lasers all over the place. Maybe at this point we are so caught up in the show that we forget what we are standing on, what the tree connects to.

What does this mean for WoK, and the WoKer? The essential thing to do seems to be to keep in mind that whatever we say must ultimately be grounded to our direct experience, and to realize that the more synthesized and easily distributable the medium is the easier it is to shoot off into (or out of!) orbit. My hope is that a more traditional format like the WoKer will help bring the whole media-tree into perspective.

3   Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor:

I am writing this letter in response to the letter from the so called 'Supreme Central Council on Teachings.' I am responding to the paragraph:

> We further propose that everyone use the same hypothesis, or, barring that, that those working with a working hypothesis provide an explicit statement of what hypothesis with which they may be working. Otherwise the term working hypothesis becomes essentially meaningless, and refers only to whatever particular spiritual- materialistic concept of reality a given speaker may possess.

The form of the working hypothesis that I am using is 'freedom from identity.' I am drawn to it for a number of reasons. The first is that it is generally understandable to me. The second is that I take it as a restatement of an idea that is central to my own spiritual path, renouncement. Renouncement is seen a bit atypically, not of material goods, or the 'world' as that word is typically understood, but as renouncement to oneself. Freedom from identity (i.e. renouncement) then can be seen in our usual state of consciousness as giving up something, disattaching from a feeling, an opinion, an idea and so on. It is also freedom from identifying with the inner stream of consciousness, the background noise, of my mind and it then allows me to discover inner silence. From a more ineffable state, renouncement is the movement of freedom.

You might accuse me of being lazy - i.e. using the form of the wh with which I have already been working and, to use Piet's term, go after the 'low lying fruit'. Or, I suppose, I might accuse myself of this. However, since I meditate daily, I have gotten new insights and so on from sharpening the themes with the wh freedom from identity.

Now the day may come when the form of the wh of reality's essential completeness makes its way into my practice, but so far it has been sporadic.

My best,
Bob Magrisso

4   Prof. Davina Chan Gives Lecture on the Long-Term and Short-Term Effects of Meditation

On Sunday, February 3 Prof. Davina Chan gave a lecture on the long-term and short-term effects of meditation. The studies that she discussed emphasized mindfulness

meditation and compassion meditation, and looked at objective changes in brain activity and structure. The studies found that meditation increased the thickness or the cortex, and increased activity in the left frontal area of the brain. Both of these results were taken to be positive, but Prof. Chan noted some biases in the studies in favor of finding positive results, given that many of the researchers had a strong motivation to improve the popularity of meditation.

5   Prof. Piet Hut Gives Lecture on Making Friends with Phenomena

On Sunday, February 10 Prof. Piet Hut gave a lecture on making friends with phenomena. He drew on Rumi's 'Guest House' as inspiration, as well as texts by Tilopa, Shodo Harada, and Tarthang Tulku.

6   Regularly Scheduled QSL Meetings, Reading Group, and Saturday Presentations Draw to a Close; Dream Yoga Begins Sunday

Regularly scheduled Qwaq-Second Life Liaison (QSL) meetings in Second Life have drawn to a close. Future QSL meetings will continue on an at-notice basis.

The regularly scheduled reading group and Steven's Saturday presentations have also drawn to a close. We are presently considering how to utilize these time slots.

Sunday Steven Tainer will introduce his upcoming dream yoga teachings and discuss the best times of the week to offer them. I strongly encourage everyone who is able to attend at 5PM in the colloquium room, since this promises to be one of the rarest and most interesting offerings WoK will ever present.

7   Next Week's Schedule

Next week we continue our regularly scheduled working hypothesis chats, thursday followup to sunday talk, and sunday talk, as listed on the website at http://www.waysofknowing.net/VR_Stuff/VirtualEventsSchedule.html. We will not be having regularly scheduled QSL meetings, reading group, or Saturday presentations this week.

8   Piet's Page

After having spent a year organizing many different types of meetings in virtual worlds, I finally turned back to the real world, to see whether I could apply there what I had learned. Starting from my experience with organizing events in Videoranch, various Qwaq Forums, and most recently Second Life, I grew more and more curious to see to what extent the many lessons learned there would carry over to good old conventional reality.

A nice opportunity offered itself while I was brainstorming together with a colleague of mine, Caroline Bynum, like me a faculty member at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. A couple years ago, we had organized a series of interdisciplinary lunch meetings, which we called *conversations*, in which we brought together people from very different backgrounds. As a format, we let one speaker talk about a topic of his or her choice, but related in some way tot the main theme of the conversations, 'time and silence.' Each speaker had only five minutes to talk, and the remaining 55 minutes were reserved for dialogues.

These meetings were successful, drawing a steady crowd of interested people, but after a year it began to feel a bit like a burden to have to set aside so many lunch time slots. We started to look for a more informal way to accomplish the same goal, of interdisciplinary conversations. It was at this point that I thought about the many informal gatherings I had been part of in virtual spaces, where the avatars were just standing in a circle and chatting, people having a good time exchanging ideas, listening and responding to each other and learning from each other.

A natural implementation then arose, in the form of after-hours chats, at the end of the day, around 5:30 pm, for half an hour, in a bar like setting. It turned out that various others, including the Director of the Institute, had independently thought along somewhat similar lines, and the time seemed right to start such an experiment. The result is a new series called After-Hours Conversations[1] which we kicked of earlier this week, for an initial trial period of two months, with three gatherings each week. The first three meetings have already been quite successful, drawing a substantial crowd that nicely filled the bar area above the dining hall, where the meetings were held.

For me, at least, it was a wonderful example of virtual worlds forming an effective testbed to try out various approaches in a more flexible fashion, before unleashing one of them in the real world.

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[1]http://www.ids.ias.edu/conversations0708.html

9 Quote of the Week

It is only when you despair of all ordinary means, it is only when you convince it that it must help you or you perish, that the seed of life in you bestirs itself to provide a new resource.

– Robert Collier