

Polanyi and Peak: A Short Semantic Symphony

by

William E. Goding

University of Calgary, Alberta

OVERTURE

The chemistry – and I choose that word deliberately – out of which these lines emerged is my departure point. About two years ago while on leave I was introduced to Polanyi. His work intrigued me, and fortunately, I had considerable time to ponder it. Reading, reflecting, repeating the process several times – his ideas began to grow on me. And yet, I couldn't seem to find my own word for what his word was churning up inside. Well over a year passed.

Not long ago, I met the man from a different perspective, one that began to unlock the turmoil. Gelwick weaves his account of Polanyi's major ideas around a series of woodblock prints.¹ I was fascinated – proceeded to mount, frame and hang the pictures in my office. The intent? Much more than I can tell, but at least these three things: to serve as a frequent visual reminder of a powerful verbal paradigm, to continue sensitizing my awareness to its possibilities, and to keep drumming into my being the critical importance of indwelling. (Besides, I just plain liked the art work!) Perhaps in time, I thought, my own message would find daylight.

Weeks passed, but still no word. Then something happened which was to further undo the snarl. Polanyi indicates that we tacitly know a thing by what it leads to, that we comprehend a theory by using it.² I'd read that before, agreed with it and moved on. This time I stopped. Maybe I've been in one place long enough. Maybe I'm not getting anywhere, because I'm not getting beyond the paradigm. Maybe I should try to rely on its interiorized clues in examining something else. But what?

My thoughts ranged widely at first with no evident pattern. But the longer I thought the more I kept coming back to a single theme, the so-called peak experience. Could such events be viewed as special cases of personal knowing? Perhaps a high serves as a kind of catalyst in the birth of intense insights – insights capable of gripping the whole being in

unmistakable fashion. Maybe a scientist's rage to unravel a promising hunch is kin to peak. I shared my ideas in all their initial fuzziness with a colleague who, himself an Explorer, nudged me to my office and with a gentle smile suggested that I close the door and not come out until I had written a poem.

A poem! I sat stunned – for how long I don't know. I seemed unable to move. My eyes wandered from the horizon beyond my seventh floor office back into the room, to the pictures – focusing eventually on Archimedes. I remember hearing Mozart in the background. A kind of word-picture-sound blend began to resonate within. Something strange was happening inside. I seemed to begin to sweat without actually perspiring. It was as though millions of cells in there began to dance on tiptoe. Was my body trying to speak? No doubt. Thinking back, I'm reminded of Eliot's comment that to "... look into our hearts and write ... is not looking deep enough; Racine and Donne looked into a good deal more than the heart. One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts."³

Archimedes – Mozart – tacitness. Demarcations between "me" and "it," already badly blurred, began to disappear. You are so right, Polanyi! Paper joined typewriter. The first line of the first poem came. With diminishing reluctance, others followed.

FIRST MOVEMENT

"All knowing is personal knowing – participation through indwelling."⁴

Secondhand Knowing

Oh, to hear Archimedes shriek, "Eureka!"
 Share St. Peter's plea for tabernacles,
 Glimpse Maslow as peak dawns at inner edge,
 With Prather, enter rare ways of seeing
 Wherein, "I and all things 'round me are changed,"⁵
 Sense countless others' brush with wholly new,
 Whatever form or substance.

Can I know what another can't tell,
 When other's words touch no more than hem?
 Can I at least touch hem of hem?
 In reaching out, have I closed distance?
 Do I intrude in private sanctums?
 What could an outsider come to know?

Put the questions on simmer.
 Maybe I'll go for a walk.

What's New?

Solomon said, "There's nothing new under the sun."
 Stretching Polanyi, "Everything's new under the sun."
 ... An interesting polarity.

Maybe S and P weren't talking about the same thing.
 Maybe nobody cares what either was talking about.
 Maybe I'm renting a stadium to give birth to a mouse.
 Maybe I should punt and forget the whole thing.
 Now, that's a possibility —

Think I'll go with P and add a postscript on S.
 . . . An uneasy cop out.

.

The argument simplified:
 Is reality already out there waiting to be found?
 Or,
 Do I create my own reality from what's out there?
 In brief,
 Is knowledge outside, or inside?

Old P spent forty-odd years saying,
 "If it's not in both places, no knowledge."
 There's always a knower-known chemistry.
 No hyphen, no event.
 Split subject and object — husks!
 Oh, there's secondhand stuff out there—
 Another's firsthand stuff.
 But it's not just a bunch of animal-vegetable-mineral
 To be handled distantly, dispassionately . . .
 By me!

Polanyi has only begun—
 "Three centers of all knowing," he said.
 Out there: a target — a problem, task, event.
 In here: a few clues — a dim, dim awareness of them.
 A person: linker, integrator of target-clues.
 Meaning always emerges as personal achievement,
 A process of one's own inferring—
 A process within one's body,
 Utterly unobservable.

No matter the issue—
 Painting a picture,
 Framing it, hanging it, enjoying it, valuing it . . .
 From motor skills to metaphysics!

Staggering!
 Always a tacitness to knowing
 With person as glue.
 Always a chemistry involving me.

Like it or not,
I and my knowns are bedfellows!
. . . An intriguing paradigm!

.....

For P, knowing's an intimate affair.
And yet, third-person-style plagues man's house.
Imagine . . .
Detached from what I see, hear, feel, do!
So many seem to miss the point.
Suppose S got bored "understanding" the same old things?

Most interesting—
Boredom and peakdom aren't bedfellows!
. . . An untested hypothesis.

About Indwelling

I wonder . . .
I sometimes wonder.

About excitement, consternation,
Gibberish or struck-dumbness,
Whatever-elseness
Of anyone confronted, overwhelmed by immense—
Large or small,
Near or far,
Real or fancied.

I wonder about pausing and reflecting.
About interiorizing—
Mind and spleen cooperating
INSIDE a single clue.
About knower-known stuck-togetherness.

What of apparent contradictions,
Parallel planes intersecting?
Can one speak of urgent patience,
Of restless peace?
Of flying while transfixed,
Of vision during blindness?
Of mixed feelings blended — for a moment?

What's it like when every fibre seems alive?
Not just alive — ALIVE alive!
What of struggles to reinvent language
To accommodate the unaccounted for?

I wonder about such things.
I sometimes wonder . . .

SECOND MOVEMENT

"Once we have solved the puzzle of the meaning of these pictures, we shall find that our achievement is irreversible."⁶

Watching . . . Remembering

Have you ever watched . . .

A boy
Watch a life guard?
A father
Watch his son
Watch a life guard?
A stranger
Watch a father
Watch his son
Watch a life guard?

. . . Involving!

Guard—
Bronzed, muscled, poised,
20/20-ing sea.

Boy—
Imaging, imagining, interiorizing,
20/20-ing guard.

Father—
Regarding, recalling, reliving,
20/20-ing son.

Stranger—
Encompassing, embellishing, enjoying,
20/20-ing event.

. . . Invigorating!

Polanyi's everywhere in the scene —
Consider the probable targets,
The possible clues,
The potential inferences,
The inside-outside partnerships.

Prelude to a fugue.

And what of peak?
 Could something special dawn here?
 I was the stranger thirty years ago –
 It's as though it happened yesterday . . .

La Parole

According to Prather,
 "No matter what we talk about,
 We are talking about ourselves."⁷
 That's not bad, Hugh, not bad at all.
 I kind of like it.

But, you want to know something?
 Polanyi spent much of his life
 Saying much the same thing
 In a thousand different ways.

Maybe you already knew.

.

If P and P are both right,
 What "says" peak—
 At the moment of happening?

"I and all things 'round me . . ."

Hmmm . . .

Consider
 Escher's tantalizing
 "Hand with Reflecting Sphere"⁸—
 A mingling of disparates,
 A joining.

Escher and reflected Escher
 Become one.
 More than that—
 Escher, reflection, context
 Become one!

An implicit tacit-explicit "I"
 Blending into "it" . . .

"An integration . . . will often override single items of contrary evidence."⁹

Inversion

A peak may be a strange seizure,

Seemingly unlike that of epilepsy—
Possibly a mysterious convulsive kinship?

Could it be that peaker and epileptic
Come to certain tacit knowns—
Though dissimilar, similar?
Unrecognizable by others?

Oh, how little we seem to know
About how we come to know
Whatever we may know!

"Polanyi's philosophy is one of tentativeness, risk, and effort, none of self-indulgence. The 'I' who counts is tacit."¹⁰

Candidates for Highs

Who's most apt to soar?
Manipulators, mesmerized by power?
Perpetuators, paralyzed by yesterdays?
Educators, anesthetized by luke warm?
Hardly—
The odds are odored.

Who, then?
Who gets caught up?
"Unless you come as children . . ."
Children?
No — AS children.

They're the ones most apt
To tingle at times.

Beautifully unpredictable,
Valuing the valueless,
For whom forgiving
Means forgetting, too.
Like young fawns—
Caressing liveliness,
Bounding tacitness.

They're the ready ones—
Peak's for them.

Afterward

What's it like after descaling event?
Can one ever go back—
Find same spot, drink same cup?
Can past happening be deposited for safe keeping—

Taken out, revived, fondled at will?
Absurd!
Like placing an order for three quarts of gravity.

Does clutched high only echo itself?
Is an echo worth holding?
What happens if one lets go?
As in the song, "Is that all there is?"

An inside unscratchable whispers, "No."
Perhaps a tacit attack . . .
A NEW one, maybe?

For the moment, my inkwell's dry.

THIRD MOVEMENT

"Man lives in the meanings he is able to discern. He extends himself into that which he finds coherent and is at home there."¹¹

Inside Fresh

Back for another crack at afterward . . .

Maybe yesterday's high
Seasons tomorrow,
Gives it new hue.

Not bad for starters . . .

Perhaps past wonder
Becomes untellable known.

Perhaps, you muse!
Get beyond the obvious . . .

Hmmm.
Could there be—
Untellable untellable?

Maybe—
At least I now agree with me on one count:
Words for wordless wordless are not obvious . . .

It's sort of—
A different kind of inner something-or-other.
But what might IT do that other untellables don't?

Ah, there's a good question!
Let's see . . .

Might its aroma yeast a different life,
Alert being to bundles of new possibles,
Make days – undimensionable?

Don't quit probing yet . . .

Perhaps a happening catalyzes inside nonwords,
As person faces rush of outside words.
New spokens resonate through new unspeakables—
Like seeing through different sounds.

I like that . . .

Afterward of peak?
A new kind of innerness.

. . . Perhaps Polanyi would smile.

Secondhand Knowing Revisited

"Eureka!"
How thrilled-chilled I was!
I'd made a start—
Went for a walk.

Since then?
Well . . .

Gravity and unscratchables,
Mind-spleen things and unobservables,
Untellable untellables,
Spokens and unspeakables,
Struck-dumbness-stuck-togetherness-whatever-elseness—
Beautifully unpredictable,
Caressing liveliness . . .

And more . . .

Clutched highs and echoes,
Seeing through different sounds,
Even bedfellows!
Reinventing language,
Prelude to a fugue . . .

Such words and phrases
Now swell to paragraphs and pages—
Inside . . .

And so, Archimedes again . . .

.....

What about peaking someone else's peak?
Not afterward—
By then, it's secondhand to peaker,
Thirdhand to bystander.

No, not afterward—
During,
As happening's happening.

The question now sounds ludicrous.

I'd probably wonder what Archimedes was babbling,
Want to evaporate from St. Peter's mountain,
Think Maslow was having a migraine,
View Prather as losing marbles.

No doubt about it—
The question IS ludicrous!

But if I'd known that,
I might not have set sail . . .
How could I come to know
Without entering the clues?

Fascinating . . .

Let's see . . .
If knowing's a private affair,
And highs are intense firsthand—
What do we have?
Maybe it's knower-known to the nth.
Eavesdropping wouldn't produce much . . .
Perhaps a tangle—
Unintelligible secondhands.

.....

The seventh floor view—
From green to white to green.
Hmmm.
I think the trip was worth it.
In fact, I "know" it was . . .

"Eureka!"

CODA

When to quit? Better still, how? Do beginning-ending Archimedean references do it? That doesn't feel right. Do they rather serve as parentheses inside a larger process? That's better, but it makes shutting down harder. Let's see. Try shifting to a different perspective, Bill – maybe the fog will lift.

While I was and continue to be interested in peak experiences, the primary purpose was to employ that theme as a vehicle for better understanding tacitness. Polanyi was right – the process works! That goal doesn't appear as distant now as when this all began. Such is to be expected given the fiddling, ruminating, juxtaposing, sorting, discarding, etc. that occurred along the way. And yes, I did experience highs (and lows) along the way. As Escher once said, "If only you knew the things I have seen in the darkness of night . . ." ¹² It was fun – work, too – striving to find the right images to match my internal chemistry, and I dare say that my growing sense of at-homeness with that kind of struggle will remain usable in the future.

These outcomes really aren't surprising. What came unexpectedly, however, were certain oblique discoveries as I sought to pull it all together – discoveries that served to deepen my appreciation for Polanyi's thought. These bonuses need comment.

Again, the first and last lines of my "symphony" fit one another. This is appropriate on one level, for classical music often leaves the impression that finale fits prelude (assuming one has heard and made sense of what happens between). On another level, such music can generate a desire for an unending, an unquenched thirst for more. It isn't difficult, then, to picture a symphony as but a single strand imbedded in a huge fabric with no visible edges. Perhaps great composers have sensed that as they worked.

As in music, so in art. Many Escher paintings with their rhythmic Strange Loops ¹³ reflect no beginning or ending. They somehow appear to be part of a larger whole while at the same time inviting the viewer to interiorize them as single entities. Made explicit by Escher, an awareness of "more" appears to be just beneath the surface of most great art. Perhaps the artist has no more than a fleeting, temporary sense of completeness regarding any given piece of work. I like that.

Strange Loops. Isn't this phenomenon deeply imbedded in Polanyian thought – a continuous shuttling back and forth between tacit and explicit domains of knowledge? ¹⁴ Each venture into the known-unknown begins with prior clues, ends (temporarily) with new matter brought back to be chewed, sorted, kneaded together with what was already inside. An enhanced awareness then makes it possible to venture out again . . . and then again. A paradigm that seems to be complete in its "incompleteness."

ENDNOTES

¹Richard Gelwick, *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 66-75.

²Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967), p. 17.

³T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1950), p. 250.

⁴Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 44.

⁵Hugh Prather, *Notes to Myself: My Struggle to Become a Person* (New York: Bantam, 1976), no page number.

⁶Gelwick, p. 65.

⁷Prather, no page number.

⁸Bruno Ernst, *The Magic Mirror of M.C. Escher* (New York: Balantine, 1976), pp. 73-74.

⁹Polanyi and Prosch, p. 42.

¹⁰Aviva Freedman and Ian Pringle, eds. *Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition* (Conway, Ark: L & S Books, University of Central Arkansas, 1980), Sam Watson, Jr., "Polanyi and the Contexts of Composing," p. 23.

¹¹Polanyi and Prosch, p. 66.

¹²Ernst, p. 15.

¹³Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Vintage, 1980), pp. 10-14.

¹⁴Gelwick, p. 77.