

Dialogue, Debate, and Discussion

In Memory of James G. March

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LAST KISS

I last met with Jim March August 4, 2018. Leaving the Sequoias in Portola Valley, CA that August day, I received a kiss.

Our meetings were always a warm and light affair – first, of course, sharing the news related to SCANCOR, the Scandinavian Consortium of Organizational Research of which I had the privilege to serve as a board member for many years. After the SCANCOR update, our colloquy often moved to my travels. I very much looked forward to sharing thoughts and experiences with Jim. He would listen and laughed heartily at my traveler’s delights and troubles (Välikangas et al., 2013). For me, a journey was only complete after I had shared my experiences with Jim.

Our discussions reflected the joy of life that so characterized Jim – an ability to relish the necessary foolishness that is required for such a traveling lifestyle, and a sharing of his appreciation that despite all the madness, there was hope for us. ‘... [T]hough hope for minor progress is a romantic vision, it may not be entirely inappropriate for a theory built on a romantic view of human destiny’ (March, 1978: 605). I felt like a Sancho Panza to his Don Quixote.

‘YOU SEEM SCANDINAVIAN. WELCOME’.

My 1994 invitation to visit SCANCOR at Stanford University was most peculiar. It contained the salutation, ‘*You seem Scandinavian. Welcome*’. I was rather puzzled as I moved from Keio University in Japan to Stanford, California, until upon arrival, I found a Scandinavian community clustered around Jim. Wednesday research seminars and Friday wine afternoons were part of the scholarly education. I also found a treasure trove of Jim’s writings in the closet of the SCANCOR offices. Reading them was the post-doctoral year’s occupation.



Don Quixote: A photo from Darwin, CA in the Sierra mountains I shared with Jim March, 2012.

The originality of his writings was obvious yet learning to speak ‘Marchian’ was a challenge. In addition to his scholarly writing, Jim had a strong worldview, romantic or otherwise (‘There is no merit in loving someone who is very lovable’). But he suffered no fools. ‘You speak with the passion of people who usually are wrong’ was one comment over lunch as I had become rather too keen on a particular argument. The most memorable shorthand was about organizational learning: ‘We improve ourselves to obsolescence’.

This became a motivation for traveling – a quest for discovery. In Merton and Barber’s (2006) account of the origins of the word serendipity, the three Princes of Serendip travel and make unexpected discoveries along the way. Travel, according to the inventor of the word serendipity, invites something fabulously termed ‘accidental sagacity’ – calling for accidental or serendipitous observations if we are alert, or perhaps wise or sagacious enough, to take note of what we see. Sharing experiences with Jim provided such sagacity to understand the serendipities of my travels.

SLOW LEARNING

Jim was also far ahead of the Slow Movement with his call for slow learners. I recall he once referred to an economist and suggested it was too easy for such a smart person to instantly draw the right conclusions. ‘If he only would make up his mind more slowly’! If learning was slowed down, ambiguities of the issue could be explored. Perhaps such slower learning could surface ‘not-knowing-what-to-do alternatives’ that Piao and Zajac (2016) suggest necessary for continued exploration beyond the myopic ‘having-immediate-application alternatives’.

Temporal stewardship, or the ontology of the slow (Ulmer, 2017), seems particularly important for the current scholarship. How can we cherish rather than

quickly eliminate ambiguities and thereby perhaps deepen our understanding of how to tackle society's grand challenges – in the vocabulary of today (Gibbert & Välikangas, [forthcoming](#))? Learning slowly is about a keen interest in nuance rather than solution. Obliquity (Kay, 2010) may be as good an approach under ambiguity as any. Or in terms closer to the behavioral theory of the firm, perhaps what local search renders is already part of the condition. As Jim pointed out: Organizations should learn from their newcomers before the newcomers become socialized to the particular organization's ways. In the era where Fail Fast rules with supremacy, perhaps we need to learn to work slowly!

MINOR REBELLING

My conversations with Jim struck a note of minor rebellion. I shared with Jim the case of a Finnish cooperative that engaged in problematizing the field of finance and in surfacing the desirable new, including an investment algorithm called Parasite that was used in the New York stock market. In its minor rebellion, the organization was shuttling between political contest and open-ended social inquiry, involving anti-sentiments but also being *for* something (Välikangas & Carlsen, 2019).

This act of rebellion seemed to delight Jim. We were rebelling together. Like punks we, for the moment, refused '...to give up on imagining something other than the world as it is' (Thompson, 2004: 4). We were, I felt, enjoying laughing at ourselves laughing at the world.

ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Finally, I learned at SCANCOR, through Jim, that the world viewed through an organizational perspective offered uncommon insights. Why incumbent companies often failed in a contest to innovate was not a question of poor leadership, better processes, or wrong incentives. It was indeed something to be expected as organizational exploitation easily kept refining itself, 'to obsolescence'. What many organizations lacked was curiosity of the new and the courage to break their routine. The quality of such foolishness can only be judged in retrospect; as Jim was fond of saying – only history can tell heroes from the fools. But I think we may all look like fools in the end, so hopefully it is because we were curious and courageous!

Portola Valley, California, where I have lived for many years and where Jim and his wife Jayne lived during their last years seems empty now. The speed of the economic and intellectual activity near Stanford University is surely more intense than ever; the sun will keep on shining on the wealth of Silicon Valley; new business model disruptions will crowd the horizon – yet why does all that matter again? It is the laughter, the hug and the kiss, and the delightful chat that make all the difference in sharing life's serendipities.

It is a great privilege to host a Dialogue, Debate, and Discussion Forum in memory of James G. March. Bilian Ni Sullivan from Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Youmin Xi, Peng Liu, and Xiaojun Zhang from Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, and Xueguang Zhou from Stanford University share their personal memories and provide reflections on March's extensive legacy.

And, last but certainly not least, it should be noted that Jim was most proud of his children and grandchildren. We the children – aka the alumni – of SCANCOR are grateful for the place for intellectual scholarship and joy that Jim offered for us at Stanford University.

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