



EDITORS' CHOICE

Breathing Life Into Organizational Studies

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As the title suggests, this article asks two basic questions of organizational scholars: How do we come alive in how we do our research? What do we look for in organizational contexts to see life? Drawing on personal experience and an extraordinary example of a life-filled unit in a billing department of a community hospital, this essay engages these two questions.

Keywords: *positive organizational scholarship; life*

Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

Howard Thurman (but not sure from where)

Two hopes inspire this article. First, by personal example I hope to inspire reflection about the connection between our professional practices—how we do the work we do—and our aliveness as organizational scholars. Second, by the use of vivid research examples and theoretical storytelling, I hope that you, as organizational scholar, can imagine new possibilities for seeing and studying life in organizations. Together both hopes, if actualized, have the power to reveal and honor the pulsating, vibrant, generative aliveness of

being an organizational scholar and studying organizational worlds that are brimming with life.

Life and Death in Our Professional Practices

We are what we do and how we do it. How we conduct our work as organizational researchers, teachers, and administrators breathes or depletes life from our scholarship. Five years ago I had signs that I was on the dying side of scholarly living. Although I had all the outward signs of success, inside I felt like I was dying, one day, one paper, and one class at a time. Each of us has indicators of the trajectory of life in our work, but here were some of my telltale signs:

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- I felt I had *not had a good idea* in a really long time.
- I was *crusty and critical* and always on the edge of angry.
- I was producing and plugging away but *everything was an effort*.
- I felt *completely weighed down* by the burdens of too many reviews, too many demands, too many students, and too many obligations.

Today, my scholarship has come back to life. The signs are self-evident:

- I've got *more ideas than I know what to do with*.
- I more often *see the promise and possibilities* in other people's work rather than its flaws and shortcomings.
- I awaken in the early a.m. raring to go—I *am energy ignited* as opposed to energy depleted.
- I *love the work* I am engaged in and the collaborations that create it.

For me as an individual, and for us as organizational scholars, the question is, What changed? What would explain how a garden that felt so barren and cold could so zestfully come back to life?¹ And moreover, what can we do as organizational scholars to breathe life into our field? By breathing life into our own professional practices, can we transform our scholarship? I hope these questions inspire you to consider the life in your own scholarly practices.

Coming Back to Life: Breathing Life Into Our Professional Practices

I can identify four ways that my practices—ways of doing professional work—have changed. Although no one step alone has created sustained zestfulness², together these measures have brought me back to life.

Finding Questions I Am Deeply Passionate About and Moving Toward Them

I am coming back to life by rediscovering and more ardently pursuing questions that resonate with some core puzzle relevant to me and to my life. I am following a deep desire to find more relational ways of describing what happens in organizations. This search has guided me to study the relational work of hospital cleaners, narratives of compassion at work, accounts of the significance of relationships in professional development, the creation of energy in connection,

and a more general focus on the quality of connections between people at work—what it is, why it matters, and how to create high-quality connections. These are questions that tap into my own form of inner resourcefulness because they draw on multiple sources of insight from both my own life experience and my 20 years of observing and talking to people about their experience in work organizations. Although doubts sometimes hover as I struggle to find research sites, explain the research to my dean, and work hard to find a niche in organizational studies where this kind of work fits, the joy of my questions sustains me.

However, it took me 12 years to get the courage to move toward these questions. I believe our scholarly training and experiences as graduate students often put us on research paths that take us away from the questions that we find deeply interesting and meaningful. There is path dependence in our research trajectories that keeps us capitalizing on economies and reputation advantages that are associated with early research successes. If you did not begin with research questions that tapped into your passion and abiding interest in a phenomenon, then it is likely you traveled away from your own center of interest and curiosity.

For me, and maybe for some others reading this article, it has been a struggle to reengage the organizational questions that are deeply meaningful to me. The questions may not seem theoretically critical. The question may not pass the "that's interesting" test³. Finally, questions you care about may not seem practically useful. For researchers in business schools the practical utility question is increasingly urgent and may deter us from pursuing questions that cannot be directly traced to the actions and concerns of managers or rooted in direct implications for organizational performance and/or effectiveness.

Studying People and Organizations That Inspire Me

My experience over the past 5 years is that the study of individuals, groups, or organizations that are "positively deviant" (Quinn, 1996; Quinn & Quinn, 2002) is an immense source of energy and motivation, as well as a source of insight on what happens in work organizations. What I notice is that as I study instances that inspire (I share some below), it creates this vital, positive dynamic that nourishes and revitalizes the research practice. The dynamic goes something like this. I ask people in work organizations to tell tales of

their own experience that are often traces of extraordinariness that they have been part of. For example, "Can you share an experience in which you have experienced or witnessed compassion at work?" Everyone is able to tell about an experience like this. It may take a few minutes, but when they begin to share this instance, it narrates their experience and themselves, at that moment, as positive and meaningful (Gergen, 1994; Gergen & Gergen, 1988). The effect is palpable. You see the light in their face. Their rendition typically affects us as witnesses and listeners in a bodily way. We feel more alive in listening. We collect the tales and they inspire our research team. We often find ourselves connecting these tales of inspiration to incidences in other work organizations or instances in our own lives that are similarly meaningful and powerful. Thus, the tapestry of inspiring experience expands. We analyze and tell the stories as part of research presentations, and the same kind of connecting, motivating, inspiring, and weaving happens. The whole process feels generative and enlivening.

So where do the generative dynamics come from? Perhaps they are due to the social processes that unfold as emotional responses to moral beauty revealed through documentation of these kinds of human behaviors. Psychologists who study awe and elevation tell us that when instances of humanity's higher or better nature are uncovered, witnessed, or shared across different cultures and contexts, people report a consistent set of experiences. They experience an opening up or directing of attention outward and toward other people, a bodily sensation of warmth and energy, and a sense of being part of or watching something basically good (Haidt, 2002). Perhaps the dynamics are what happen as the people we study build positive images of possible futures for themselves and for the organizations of which they are a part. At the same time, we, as researchers listening to these tales, are able to imagine more vivid positive images for ourselves and for society more generally. Cooperrider (1991) articulated how these positive images are transformative as human systems evolve in the direction of the positive images.

Perhaps the dynamics arise because the sharing of these types of inspiring incidences of individual or organizational behavior connects listeners to the basic human experience of social life. Sandelands (2002) used the idea of moments to capture when and how social life is felt. When people in organizations share narratives of compassion, for example, they are

describing a key moment of social life that Sandelands called love.

As an insubstantial moment of living form, love is known by its tension, energy and movement. Love is not a quantity that can be possessed, exchanged, divided into parts, passed around, or saved for the right occasion. . . . And love is not glue that bonds people together. Rather love is a moment of life that includes people, a moment of life in which people are caught up. (p. 26)

By studying incidences of organizations and groups that inspire, we get closer to what Sandelands called social life as it shows up in organizations. And its effects are palpable. When you hear, see, or learn of these instances, you literally feel the life in them. You get caught up in them. You become more alive in bearing witness to their existence. In this case, life seeps into organizational studies because it is simply more present in these kinds of accounts.

There is much that goes on in organizations that is extraordinary. It surpasses what we imagine is possible or "normal," and for that reason, we may discount it as "not representative," rare, fleeting, or therefore inappropriate for study. Furthermore, our problem-centered approach to studying organizations, which is also reflected in how we teach organizational behavior, may blind us to the everyday acts of extraordinariness in organizational systems. However, if we turn toward instances, processes, structures, and their interaction that produce human flourishing, vitality, capability, resilience, and other positively deviant behaviors, we get new angles on organizational life and a new injection of inspiration to sustain and invigorate our own scholarship.

This is the insight of the expanding community of scholars and practitioners who are pursuing appreciative inquiry (AI). Led by the original articulation of this paradigm by Cooperrider and Srivastva in 1987, this community of action research has at its core the idea that a primary task of research is to "discover, describe and explain those social innovations, however small, which serve to give 'life' to the system" (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p. 88). This look toward life for understanding, for insight, and for inspiration takes AI researchers and practitioners toward the positive exemplars of human organizing. The focus on positive deviance and what it is about organizations that enables this deviance is also gaining momentum under the umbrella of positive organi-

zational scholarship⁴ (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, in press). The movement to focus on what in work organizations enables human strengths and virtues follows from the movement and growing interest in positive psychology.⁵

Using Research Tools That Preserve and Celebrate Lived Experience

Part of my coming back to life has involved using research tools that celebrate the lived experience embedded in the stories I collect. Although I have not fully dropped the tools that I was trained to use⁶, I am more aware of how the traditional tools of my trade limited my capacity to see, appreciate, and learn from the dynamics, patterns, and ideas embedded in the stories that people in work organizations generate as they live storied lives. My seeing, appreciation, and learning expanded as I came to more fully use methods of narrative inquiry. After all, narratives are known by their degree of verisimilitude or lifelikeness (Bruner, 1986). Narrative inquiry, by definition, puts lived experience center stage. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) put it, "Narrative and life go together and so the principal attraction of narrative as method is its capacity to render life experiences, both personal and social, in relevant and meaningful ways" (p. 10).

By relying on stories as ways to capture people's lived experience in organizations, I find myself surrounded by portrayals of organizational life that are deeply moving and transformative. As other social scientists have said, narratives "offer windows into personal experience, specifically human agency in the face of life events" (Reissman, 1997, p. 157). They allow us to capture the particulars, the richness, and the complexity of subjective accounts of people's experience. They are fundamental to how people make sense of their lives and the social world around them (Bruner, 1986). Not only do they offer a window into "truths that are flattened or silenced by an insistence on more traditional methods of social science" (Ewick & Silby, 1995, p. 199), but they have potentially transformative power by allowing new voices to be heard that are formative in constructing how we understand life in organizations. As Ewick and Silby (1995) reminded us, building on arguments of many who preceded them, "narrative scholarship participates in rewriting social life in ways that are, or can be liberatory" (p. 199).

The turn toward stories as a way to capture and celebrate lived experience in organizations also fits me as

a person and develops me in a particular direction. Our method choices and their fit with who we are and in what direction wish to grow are worthy considerations. The tools we use to parse life in organizations are not neutral. They not only allow us to see and write about different things, they enact us differently as scholars and as people more generally.

I was trained as a traditional positivist researcher. Although much of my research involved the collection of stories, for years I sliced and diced these stories into measured variables and used them to test and explore causal ideas. It took some time to fully acknowledge that I was muting the life and wisdom in the stories through my practices of parsing, analyzing, and extracting. At the same time, I was enacting myself as a scholar and research participant in ways that were destructive for me.⁷

When I write with stories and analyze stories, I AM and I BECOME a storyteller. Although other organizational scholars have long claimed this role (e.g., Barry & Elmes, 1997; Boje, 1991; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995; O'Connor, 1997; Van Maanen, 1988), for me it is a newly claimed identity. More accurately, I am a coparticipant in the creation of a joint story of organizational life formed by a narrative inquiry that involves collaboration between participants and researchers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). For example, when Connie Gersick, Jean Bartunek, and I (Gersick, Bartunek, & Dutton, 2000) began our study of the meaning of professional relationships, we did not intend to weave a tale of life as academics in ways that revealed the full range of joy and pain in being in connection and disconnection. As we struggled for 6 years to find an effective way to use the stories that composed our data to convey pattern, we came to see ourselves more and more as researchers trying to tell a story of differential lives of men and women in business schools. The change in framing our research role from one of analyzing stories to telling a compelling story helped to inspire a different way of writing the paper that made it more coherent and meaningful to us (and we hope to the readers as well).

Often I serve as a carrier of other people's stories, and my joy is to put them "into play" or weave them together so that organizational researchers or students can see organizations differently. This form of weaving still permits the voice of the study participants to be heard. It invites them in to the research process as people with a perspective and wisdom that are worthy of hearing. It invites me, as a researcher, to be a learner, to let the research participants teach me. Robert Coles

(1989) made this point beautifully in describing his relationship with the patients he studies:

But on that fast-darkening winter afternoon, I was urged to let each patient be a teacher: hearing themselves teach you, through their narration, the patients will learn the lessons a good instructor learns only when he becomes a willing student, eager to be taught. (p. 22, as cited in Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4)

Treating Professional Collaborations as Vessels for Joint Growth

I have always worked collaboratively. Most of my work is jointly conceived, executed, and authored. Five years ago (or so) my thinking changed about how these collaborations functioned. Rather than seeing them as merely fun, efficient, and enabling ways to do research, I started to see and benefit from their power as vessels for joint growth and development for participating members⁸.

Although this view of collaboration affirms what organizational scholars have been saying who study the role of developmental relationships for professional success (e.g., Gersick et al., 2000; Kram, 1988), the practical implications of this view of collaborations are quite stunning. They suggest that the practices we use in our research collaborations enliven or deaden our growth as human beings. They do this by creating safe and useful harbors for learning, for being, and for exchanging. We try on new identities in connection with others. We gain valuable advice, support, and instrumental and emotional help. We tell stories that carry wisdom and knowledge about our profession, our field, and our local contexts. These kinds of processes-in-connection are critical.⁹

This view of collaboration suggests research and teaching arrangements create microcommunities in which we flourish or flounder. They imply we ought to apply a whole lot more care into how we design and live in these collaborations, given how important they are for our own and our colleagues' development. This means attending to and reflecting on the practices that compose our collaborations to ensure that they are growing us well.

To make this general claim more concrete, let me share a description of the practices that we are evolving in one of my research collaboration "vessels," called the Compassionlab. The Compassionlab was originally a five-, now a six-person research collaboration formed 3 years ago to study how and why com-

passion matters at work¹⁰. We call ourselves the Compassionlab as a type of playful label to legitimate and "harden" what was for my colleagues seen as a soft and somewhat marginal topic in organizational studies. Compassion is the heart of our work focus and our practice, lab is the legitimating scientific label. The intentional choice to name ourselves affirmed our commitment to do work that would last more than a single project. Becoming "official" also afforded the opportunity to make explicit our purposes and practices (see <http://www.compassionlab.com/>). The practices and aspirations we adopted as a lab team include:

- We do our work in a spirit of playfulness and joy. We aim to have fun!
- We use our personal experiences of living and learning in organizations as a basis from which to understand the world.
- We treat experience other than our own as a deep and valid reflection of ideas about social and organizational life.
- We acknowledge that our practices are our garden—the more we tend and nourish them, the more we will flourish.
- We learn best through empathy. We are there for each other as research partners while respecting each other's boundaries.
- We honor the physical and emotional aspects of learning as well as the mental ones.
- We create a broad foundation for all of our work, drawing from art, literature, religion, history, culture, and social theory.
- We build bridges to other work in our field, attuned to the ways in which we enable people to enter our work and to walk along with us.
- We accommodate the flux in our lives at the same time that we aspire to create high impact products.
- We aspire to represent our work in diverse forms so that it increases understanding and inspires people to see new organizational possibilities.

By naming these practices we make them more discussable. We also make more concrete the possibilities for making our collaborations at work (around teaching, research, and service) more restorative and generative. The practices, I know, have helped us to create conditions for growth that Miller and Stiver (1997) argued are so essential: mutual empowerment and mutual empathy. There are also the conditions conducive to connections that Mary Parker Follet (1937) called "power with" as opposed to "power-over" connections. They have at their heart the idea

that relational practice (or ways of working that enable growth in connection; Fletcher, 1999) in our work groups is essential for knowledge and development.

In my experience, groups with these qualities rarely happen by chance. There is logic in their aliveness. Perhaps it is this logic that explains Hal Leavitt's (1996) description of the two "hot groups" he had been part of during his career that, in his words, were "sparkling spots, full of excitement, ideas and innovative research that bubbled all over the place." Perhaps if we tend more often and more consciously to our professional collaborations, keeping in mind the significance of their livelihood to our liveliness as scholars, we will breathe life into organizational studies.

In sum, through the practices we deploy as organizational scholars, we enable or disable our own aliveness and the liveliness of our colleagues and our coparticipants. These practices enact what I do and who I can become as an organizational scholar. I have mentioned practices associated with the questions we ask, the contexts we study, the research tools we deploy, and the collaborations we create. But there are so many more clusters of practices that enact who we are as individual scholars and what we do as an interdisciplinary field. My hope is that each one of us will reflect on how these practices individually and in communion enliven or deaden the field in which we toil.

BREATHING LIFE INTO ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES: CHANGING WHERE AND WHAT WE LOOK FOR

Beyond our personal quest to breathe life into our own professional practices, breathing life into organizational studies offers new possibilities for unearthing excitement about the scholarship of organizations. Although there are multiple avenues to take for breathing life into our field, I will elaborate two. First, we should look for and theorize about what life IS in organizational units or organizational wholes by finding contexts where life abounds. Second, we should seek to understand what it is about these contexts that creates and sustains life in organizations. Both pathways make life in organizations more central to the pursuit of describing, understanding, and knowing organizations. Both pathways breathe life into organizational studies by focusing on the energy and generative possibilities inherent in any organizational sys-

tem. By shining light on these possibilities we invest in understanding where life in organizations is transparent, and we learn how to enable this life as we strive to deepen understanding.

Pathway 1: Looking for Contexts That Enable Life

Pursuing this path means asking ourselves this question: Where are individuals and collectivities thriving or flourishing in work organizations?

Signs of life. The quest begins with the important but challenging task of identifying the signs of life in organizations. What would we look for if we were trying to identify signs of thriving and abundance? My experience in organizations suggests that we know life is teeming in an organizational unit as much by how it feels as by how it looks. Signs of life include the feel of energy, vibrancy, and engagement, a sense of playfulness and mutual caring, and an overall pattern of resilience and health. These signs may or may not be associated with effectiveness as organizational scholars traditionally define it (Cameron, 1978). When looking for signs of life in organizations we focus less on patterns of outcomes and more on the patterned qualities of the behaviors that people exhibit toward each other. The qualities that we are calling life signs are telling indicators that a unit or an organization is a social form or dynamic structure that is alive (Sandelands, 2002). Although difficult to describe in purely analytical or logical terms, we know it when we see-feel it. Units that are teeming with life are often found in unexpected places. However, their vibrancy is felt by anyone who has contact with its members.

Life in unexpected places. We did not initially plan to study the physician billing department in Midwest Hospital. We had arrived at Midwest Hospital to study compassion at work and the difference it made for individual employees and for the hospital as a whole. In preliminary interviews several people hinted that we might want to take a closer look at this 30-person, all-female staff unit called physician billing, as they were "off the charts" in terms of compassion. It turns out that they were "off the charts" on multiple dimensions, all indicating a vibrancy and aliveness that invited deeper inquiry.¹¹

A physician billing department unit is responsible for securing accurate and timely reimbursement for

claims for reimbursement on behalf of all physicians affiliated with the hospital system. It is repetitious work that is relatively low in task variability, driven by constant time pressure to quickly secure reimbursements for the hospital. The physician billing department at Midwest Hospital (hereafter called Midwest Billing) had historically been a lackluster performer in terms of the scorecard measure of the amount of time it took to collect one dollar of reimbursement. In 1998 it took an average of 180 days to collect a dollar of reimbursement, but by 2001, when we were studying the unit, this period had been drastically reduced and sustained at a rate of about 60 days—a rate that makes them an industry leader.

The performance triumph of Midwest Billing is one byproduct of the aliveness of the unit as a whole. However, a focus on unit performance paints an incomplete picture of the unit's vitality. A fuller picture of life in Midwest Billing requires richer stories of how the unit does things—not only how it conducts its official work, but how it creates and sustains life in the in-between spaces of daily interactions between members. In the few examples below, I offer a brief sampling of stories that are intended to illustrate the unit's vitality. This aliveness, in turn, is intended to invite inquiry into how and why this context is so vibrant. My assumption is that as organizational scholars, if we respond to these invitations for inquiry we will unearth generative processes that often remain hidden or obscure in current accounts of organizational functioning. Furthermore, if we can better understand these generative processes and nonlinear positive dynamics, we can better understand how organizational contexts enable life.

Sign 1: The feel of vitality and personal growth. When a unit is more alive, so are its members. As an organizational researcher trying to gauge life in a unit, signs of zest and growth (or their opposites) are everywhere. They appear in words that are spoken and behaviors exhibited in daily interactions. They are evident in the visible artifacts that adorn public and private spaces. Finally, they are evident in energy-creating interactions. Some examples from Midwest Billing make these abstract concepts more concrete.

Members of Midwest Billing use "life talk" in their interactions with each other. They frequently used the word *love* to describe their affective response to the unit and their connection to each other. They talk about being engaged with what they are doing and

whom they are working with. Although traditional organizational research might see these indicators as signs of motivation, attachment, and commitment, I also see these expressions of feeling more alive when in the unit. Listen to Angie as she describes her delight at how people have been wonderful, friendly, supportive—all infusing her with energy and a sense of positive regard:

I for one love working up here. Absolutely. Everybody—Sarah (the unit manager) up here has a good heart. It's amazing to me. I came from a place that wasn't nearly as friendly, not half as supportive and coming up here's it's just amazing.

Or here is Marge talking about how the felt connection inspires mutual helping:

You love being there . . . and I don't know. I don't think you even think about it. When it's this close I don't even think twice about, "I'm not going to go help with . . ." You just jump in and do it without even thinking you are having an impact or not. Does that make sense?

These kinds of statements were made by all of the individuals we interviewed. In addition, members of Midwest Billing talked about the full engagement they felt in the life of the group, where people openly chipped in to help others accomplish the work. This sentiment is certainly in Marge's quote above but is also revealed in Michelle's words: "Nothing is below anybody here. They don't care what it is. They'll do it as long as it helps the department get the job done."

Finally, the vitality of the group was expressed through how people spontaneously talked about how they had personally grown from being a part of the unit. Like a flower in fertile soil, each person expressed in her own way how she felt transformed by what she had experienced at Midwest Billing. It is important to note that we did not ask people about growth. We asked what it was like to be in this particular unit. This general query prompted these growth narratives. After the first few interviews, we were surprised. After they were all completed, we became used to these types of testimonials about personal transformation. Here is one told by Lannie, explaining the effects of being a team leader:

I didn't have self-confidence when I first started there. Sarah approached me with being a team leader, and I said, "Sure, I'll try it." And then I came to her later and

said I didn't want to do it. She gave me a really great pep talk and said, "Lannie, you can do it. You do know what you are doing and you do have the self-confidence. You just have to believe in yourself." I have come a long way. I know I have.

The liveliness of a unit is also felt in the energy generated in connection with others. Sometimes this is created in conversational interactions where people feel heard and known (Baker, Cross, & Wooten, in press; Dutton & Heaphy, in press; Quinn & Dutton, 2002). Other times the energy is created through a sense that one is providing something of value to someone else. According to Miller and Stiver (1997), these forms of mutuality create zest and vitality. This was certainly the case at Midwest Billing. Members routinely described going into the manager, Sarah's, office feeling depressed or overwhelmed but leaving the office feeling reenergized and invigorated. The conversational dynamics, often involving simply listening and joint problem solving, were active replenishers of a sense of vitality and life.

Organizational artifacts are rich with symbolic meaning (Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2002; Trice & Beyer, 1993), and they can enact people and the units they work for as more or less vibrant and growing ways. At Midwest Billing there is a profusion of bright colors as soon as you enter the billing area. Family pictures of different types adorn cubbies and walls. The colors and decorations are a mosaic formed from individuals' displays in their own cubbies as well as group-based decorations of the common areas. The common areas are decorated to reflect nature themes from changing seasons. The prominence of nature themes in the decorating of place and the abundant displays of family pictures are just two of the subtle yet critical reminders that members of Midwest Billing are living, breathing, whole human beings who inhabit this space for a significant portion of their day.

Sign 2: A unit that plays. The physician billing department is full of surprises in terms of the degree and forms of play. Play is interwoven in daily activities. It is a signature quality of the culture and is well known by people outside the unit. It is also a sign of life and aliveness of the unit as a whole (Sandelands, 2002). Midwest Billing is organized into six pods, with each pod dealing with a different client group. Yet the whole unit is distinctly playful. For example, when we began our observational period at Midwest Billing,

the unit had just completed a playful interlude with Jeff Daniels, a local actor who has made it big time and was making a film in the downtown area within sight of the ninth-floor windows where Midwest Billing was located. For a 1-week period members of Midwest Billing kept up an ongoing dialogue with Jeff Daniels and his crew through painted signs taped to the windows and displayed from the ninth floor toward the street. There was teasing and an invitation to attend a brunch in the ninth-floor kitchen area. Although the lunch never happened, Midwest Billing department made the local news, and the playful exchange was an endless source of energy, strategizing, and playful banter with people inside and outside the unit.

The unit has created an elaborate system of squirt-gun fights that allows for breaks and disrupts the intensity when work gets "too serious" or when someone simply needs a "good soak." A big part of the squirt-gun norm is the guessing involved in who is going to begin a squirt-gun barrage. Some people take their squirt guns home and surprise people coming in to work at the beginning of the next day. Others never bring the squirt guns out of their cubbies. Some, not wanting to be soaked, simply put umbrellas over the cubbie portion where they are working. No matter what stand a member takes, no one is immune to being squirted, and the practice infects the place with a bit of playful uncertainty and spattering laughter.

Midwest Billing plays through the codesign of collective artifacts. A molded plastic goose that one unit member put outside her cubbie has become a virtual unit member. Lucy the goose has her own timeclock, a trash can, bulletin board, lotto tickets, a computer, and even inbox—with claims in it. The objects that surround her have been handmade by various unit members. She changes attire with the seasons and for special occasions. Lucy has a made-up life that the unit members contribute to, including the significant other "goose" she goes out with and the dates they enjoy.

At the boundary of fantasy and reality, play is an expression of the life of the group (Sandelands, 2002). In play, new behaviors, social units, divisions, and units are generated and emitted, cultivating new sources of creative tensions and meanings for a group or social unit (Bateson, 1955; Huizinga, 1950). Play indicates life and promotes life in a unit by building key resources such as social bonds, intellectual resources, and physical resources (Fredrickson, in press).

Sign 3: A unit that cares. The physician billing department demonstrates an extraordinary level of care for its members. Interpersonal caring is woven through all that Midwest Billing does. It shows up in how people are trained and encouraged to allow for mistakes and grow as part of the natural learning process of becoming a biller (Worline et al., 2002). Caring is part of the daily ritual as people catch up, share information, and comfort each other around the unit's kitchen table and during regular and irregular breaks. It's also part of special occasions and pooling of resources to help people with the normal ebbs and flows of demanding lives. People in this unit bear extra weight, as a large majority of the employees are single moms who struggle with the difficulty of supporting their families. The pervasiveness and competence of everyday caring is captured in one biller's account of her surprise at finding a work place with this caring quality:

I have never been in a place like this. It is very different. . . . Because people do care and they can sense it even when you don't say anything. Of course, with me, I don't have to say anything usually, but they pick up on anybody in the department that is having a rough time. We all do. We all see it. We've learned to read each other and for the most part everybody's pretty readable. There's a few that aren't but I think it helps all of us open up and allow ourselves to be a caring person.

The quote suggests that the caring is enabled by a collective sensibility to the changing life conditions for unit members. People describe being able to read each others' emotional health, and they remark about the variety of ways that they respond to each others' pain and hurt. Sometimes it is in the form of individual acts intended to bring comfort—an envelope of money left anonymously at someone's desk for someone who is having a tough time making ends meet, or the making and delivery of a home-cooked meal for someone who is ill. Other times, the caring acts are more collective. The department is known for giving elaborately decorated cards to commemorate special events and to acknowledge changed circumstances in someone's life. Many times, the unit members have pooled money to give to someone who is suffering from financial difficulties.

Caring also shows up in how people conduct their daily work and whether they keep in mind how they

can enable others (Dutton, in press). Sarah, the unit manager, talks about how she sees everyday caring in simple acts of how people attend to each other's material needs:

You're walking over to the supply cabinet to get paper and on the way down you look at all the printers and see which ones need paper, and if there's three of them on your row that don't have extra paper you bring three extra packs back and as you go by you put them in the printer cart. I see people do stuff like that all the time. It's very nonchalant to the group now because it happens all the time. But it's caring. It's looking out for your fellow man.

The caring acts extend inward and outward from the unit's boundaries. Three years ago Midwest Billing adopted a grandmother and her grandchildren as part of a Christmas giving program and continued to support the family for a full year. Pictures of the grandchildren adorned the unit walls. Grandma Vera and the grandkids made occasional visits to the unit. Midwest Billing improvised a variety of means to support Grandma Vera and her children. For example, one creative invention involved an in-office rummage sale to which all unit members contributed items. To gain access to the goodies, everyone had to pay the dollar admission price. Other hospital employees attended, and admission fees became the next installment for Grandma Vera and her grandkids (Worline et al., 2002).

The caring practices of Midwest Billing are important signs that the unit is alive and vital. It is a behavioral testimony to the quality of the connective tissue that binds people (Dutton & Heaphy, in press). Although some may call caring an indicator of the ethical ideal (e.g., Noddings, 1984) or a learned expression of instinctual impulses to be kind (Wuthenow, 1995), one can also see these practices as evidence of the basic dynamic of love and connection between members of a community (Sandelands, 2002). Caring is essential to sustain and nourish the life in a system. "It is a species activity that is everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so we can live in it as well as possible" (Abel & Nelson, 1990 p. 40). It is an activity that if present signifies that a system is vibrant and alive. It is a critical indicator for organizational scholars to attend to in the search for contexts that create and sustain life.

*Pathway 2: Life Is Found,
But How Do We Explain It?*

We are only partway there in our quest to breathe life into organizational studies if we find positively deviant cases where organizations or units within them have strong vital signs (Quinn, 1996; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, in press). As organizational scholars, the really tough job is to explain why and how life thrives in some contexts and not in others. I do not have answers, do you? I do have some suggestive directions to explore as ways to invite deeper exploration of how organizational contexts enable life-generating and life-sustaining processes in organizations. The suggested starting points come from collaborative work I have done with my Compassionlab colleagues in our attempt to understand why some contexts enable compassion and others do not (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2002; Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002; Frost, Dutton, Worline, & Wilson, 2000). These suggestions also surface from work that I have done on how organizational contexts enable the building and sustaining of high-quality (i.e., life-giving) connections at work (Dutton, in press). These studies offer three directions to pursue for explaining how organizational contexts enable life. A caution before we proceed: These suggestions are preliminary. They are intended to direct attention and create interest in a slightly different way of explaining dynamic qualities of the whole of an organization or of its units, particularly ones that are indicators of flourishing life.

Direction 1: Look for composites of organizational features that enable patterns of behavior associated with life. Our work on why some contexts encourage compassion suggests that it is important to consider the unit or organization's social architecture and its role in facilitating direct and emergent processes that are life generating and nourishing. By social architecture we mean that pattern of networks, values, and routines that characterize an organization or a unit for a substantial period of time (Dutton, Worline, et al., 2002). We see an organization's capacity to mobilize, customize, and deliver compassionate caring in the wake of suffering of individuals or groups of organizational members as an important indicator of the system's life-sustaining quality.

The general argument for the importance of social architecture of an organization goes something like

this. The social architecture of the organization hardwires certain action tendencies that produce patterns of behavior that increase or decrease the presence of life-giving behaviors (e.g., care, play, engagement). We assume that the social architecture creates the context for discretionary individual action in organizations. The social architecture bends this discretionary action in particular directions by affirming and easing its occurrence. It follows a type of logic of appropriateness (March, 1996) that at the margin makes discretionary individual action take a particular form. The shared values work to affirm certain kinds of actions. The routines and networks make certain actions easier and more appropriate to execute than others through well-grooved and accepted ways of doing (in the case of routines) and the already used lines of communication and interaction patterns (in the case of networks). In concert, these three elements of an organization's social architecture can make care, play, or engagement more or less likely.

Let's try a specific example from Midwest Billing, in an effort to explain why caring (as a life sign) is so prominent in this unit. The presence of certain values (e.g., "It is good to treat each other with dignity," or "Lives outside of work are important and deserving of attention") affirms the desirability of certain actions when people in the unit see someone in pain. Thus, when Deb's husband was sick, requiring frequent trips to the hospital, ultimately an extended medical leave, and a year of being in high alert to be able to leave the unit at a moment's notice to aid her husband, there was a major outpouring of care¹² and the granting of informal and eventually formal slack so that Deb could attend to this tough situation. The values affirmed and encouraged billing department members to act on their instincts to help. At the same time, the routines for notifying members of their peers' personal circumstances, and the dense ties between and across billing department pods, meant news of Deb's circumstances and of local responses traveled quickly and efficiently. Thus, the shared values affirmed the worthiness of the prompt to act, the routines made acting in a caring way relatively painless and almost automatic, and networks activated information and interests quickly. The burst of caring in response to Deb's circumstances was a common occurrence in the billing department, very much facilitated by the amalgam of values, network, and routines that marked the social architecture of this unit.

Knowing just one quality of the context would not have sufficiently explained the enablement of caring (Dutton, Worline, et al., 2002). Rather, it is the multiplicative effect that is important for explaining the speed and intensity of caring behaviors. Thus, one promising direction for understanding how contexts enable life-giving papers focuses on the elements that compose social architecture of a unit or organization and the role they play in enabling life.

Direction 2: Look for emergent processes that enable life.

The enabling of social life in a context is not just due to the social architecture. We think there are emergent processes that further galvanize attention and interest in particular directions that shape patterns of life-giving behavior. For example, new roles emerge that are specific to the incident that has activated individuals' actions, and emergent leaders' behaviors shape actions in particular directions through instrumental and symbolic means (Dutton, Worline, et al., 2002).

The emergence process has some of the same qualities seen in the galvanization of interests that social movement theorists describe (e.g., McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996). It also has some of the same qualities of dynamic adjustment and competence that Gittell (2001) talked about when she discussed relational coordination. Both social movement theorists and Gittell's theory of coordination suggest that social behaviors that arise in context cannot be fully specified at the outset by identifying initial contextual conditions. Rather, the pattern of behavior (in this case, the form and magnitude of caring that takes place) are partially due to the emergence of new players, new ways of understanding (what social movement theorists call frames; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986), and the activation of new interests that push and pull patterns of behavior in new directions.

To make this explanatory argument more concrete, let's see how it works in the case of Midwest Billing. In Midwest Billing there was a clear emergence dynamic that contributed to the magnitude and form of caring in the unit. Although there were specified roles of coordinating care for pod leaders, people who had special insight into a person's life circumstance would often step into customized coordination roles that they themselves would shape and execute. These emergent role makers would assemble resources, buffer the person who was in pain, or help to coordinate the offerings of others, all in an effort to provide

more effective care for the person in need. The form that these emergent roles and coordination activities took varied for each incident of caring. However, this improvised, emergent part of the caring process of the unit was present for every caring episode. Thus, to understand the presence and quality of compassion and caring as life signs in Midwest Billing, we need to consider emergent roles and emergent coordination activities as processes that enable patterns of life.

Direction 3: Look for nonlinear, positive dynamics that both evidence and enable life in organizational contexts. An explanation of the aliveness in a social context also benefits by seriously considering virtuous, positive feedback processes that create exponential as opposed to linear effects that enable life in units or life in organizations as a whole. Nonlinearity assumes that the results from activating a variable (e.g., respectful treatment of another person) feed back and increase the initial condition (respectful treatment) as well as affecting other system variables. The interaction effects of variables in the system can magnify or depress effects in a multiplicative fashion. Some examples of these kinds of dynamics should help envision what I mean.

Losada has completed impressive observational studies of business teams to understand the dynamics of high performance for intact work groups (Losada, 1998; Morchio & Losada, 2002). Using the lens of nonlinear dynamics, he finds clear patterns of dynamics that account for the extraordinary performance of about a third of the teams. In the high-performing teams, members interact using mutual influence processes marked by a balanced display of speech acts that evidence both inquiry and advocacy and self-versus-other references. High-performance teams also use a 5-to-1 ratio of speech acts that are positive (e.g., expressing support encouragement or appreciation) versus negative (showing disapproval, sarcasm, or cynicism). Losada (1998) argued that the key dynamic involves the positive-to-negative-dimension team talk, which creates what he calls expansive emotional space. In an expansive emotional space (where there are many more positive than negative speech acts), there is more possibility for action, whereas in a restrictive emotional space there is what they call restricted space of action. High-performing teams have a level of connectivity between members that when fueled by patterns of interaction, creates a much more rapid rate of change in the emotional space avail-

able to the team (what they call an expansive emotional space), associated with a broader learning landscape, which in turn increases connectivity, fueling patterns of interaction that create even more energy, emotional space, flexibility, and learning.

In a very different domain, Fredrickson (1998, 2002) has been doing research on how positive emotions affect human flourishing in a variety of contexts. Her work suggests that positive emotions contribute to what she calls upward spirals of human functioning. She has developed and tested a broaden-and-build theory of positive emotion that shows that positive emotions broaden people's visual attention, thought-action repertoires, and self-conceptions to include others (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2002; Fredrickson, Johnson, & Waugh, 2002; Waugh & Fredrickson, in press). This broadening effect and the simultaneous building of what she calls durable personal and social resources, when coupled with how positive emotions reduce negative emotional arousal (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998), sets the foundation for a nonlinear, positive dynamic between positive emotions and human flourishing. As individuals experience more positive emotions, the effects just described produce outcomes (broadened thinking, building of resources) that fuel behavior that in turn makes the experience of positive emotion more likely in the future. She calls this upward spiral a dynamic of continually growing toward optimal functioning (Fredrickson, in press).

When applied to the explanation for why a unit like Midwest Billing is so caring, the underlying logics in both theories of nonlinear, positive dynamics are helpful. The study of high-performance teams suggests that the level of connectivity between members (in this case of Midwest Billing) creates a way of dialoguing that favors positive to negative talk, which creates emotional space in which people feel freer to share information, take risks, and offer new ideas. This dynamic then contributes to Midwest Billing's very rapid acknowledgement and response to the suffering of members and permits customization of the caring to the particular person in need. These same features of Midwest Billing's members' interactions also contribute to the experience of positive emotion on a regular basis, which, through the Frederickson dynamic, creates resources that can be used to provide care and cultivate a positive meaning about the way the unit cares for its members, which further fuels positive emotion. This nonlinear, positive dynamic helps to explain how the caring behaviors (as evidence of life in

the unit) become more pervasive and more competent as the unit (as a system) learns to do this form of interpersonal responding better over time.

CONCLUSION: A MOVE TOWARD LIFE

Writing this article (and giving the talk on which it was based) has changed how I see my scholarly journey as well as where I see promise in our field of organizational studies. It has awakened me to the transformative potential of our professional practices—how we DO research, how we DO teaching, and how we DO service work. It has reminded me of the power of contexts (e.g., departmental, organizational, and professional) as venues that enable or disable vitality and life-giving processes (Bartunek, in press). One implication: Choose your practices and your contexts carefully, as they breathe or extract life from your scholarly pursuits.

Beyond the contexts we live in affecting the aliveness of our scholarly pursuits, the research contexts we study imprint us deeply. The brief description of Midwest Billing does not do full justice to how being in this unit even for just 2 weeks changed us. As each of us has moved on to study other contexts, we find ourselves returning to this example for new ideas, for inspiration, and as a vivid reminder of the playfulness, affection, and courage evident in the everyday conduct of the people working there. In this case, the life in this unit subjected us, in the best sense of the word, to a life lesson. Breathing life into organizational studies means treating these life lessons seriously.

The purpose of this article, however, is to go beyond reflection on our own practices. Like those who have paved the way before me (Follett, 1937; Sandelands, 1998, 2001, 2002), I encourage the pursuit of new questions by organizational scholars that will uncover new patterns of life in and of organizations at the same time that it invites new ways of explaining these patterns. The urgency of these pursuits comes partially from a deep faith that organizational studies more generally and organizational theory more specifically have much to offer to help scholars and practitioners understand and move toward improvement of the human condition. The urgency also arises from the strong sense that today's society needs better understanding of processes of revitalization, rebuilding,

and retransformation. However, without understanding life in and of organizations, such understanding is limited. It never taps into or explains the generative dynamics that enable human communities (like organizations) to thrive, flourish, and grow.

NOTES

1. I had never considered this connection between my scholarly practice and my zest as organizational scholar until Ralph Stablein and Peter Frost (in press) asked me to write a piece for their book on journeys of renewal. I thank them for the opportunity to make sense of this transformation in terms of a renewal journey.

2. I borrow the word *zest* from Jean Baker Miller and Irene Stiver (1997) and their work on how people experience growth-enhancing connections.

3. "That's interesting test" refers to Murray Davis's (1971) classic essay on what makes research particularly interesting.

4. For more information on the community of scholars, research papers, and related Web sites, go to <http://www.bus.umich.edu/positiveorganizational scholarship/>

5. For example, see the special issue dedicated to this topic in the January 2000 issue of *American Psychologist* or the newly published *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Snyder & Lopez, 2002). For applications to organizational studies see the Web site <http://www.bus.umich.edu/positiveorganizational scholarship/>

6. This idea of "dropping one's tools to save your life" comes from Karl Weick's (1993) puzzle about why firefighters in the Mann Gulch disaster did not drop their firefighting tools, which, in his analysis, would have allowed them to escape and save their lives. Part of his conclusion was that the tools were intimately connected to their identity as firefighters, which ironically and sadly made them unwilling to make this key life-saving move.

7. The feeling of life or death in the analytical practices is a very individualistic experience. Some I know see life in organizations and in their work by using very different methods than what I am saying are helpful to me. The key is to pay attention to this embodied knowing and be aware of how your research tools enable or disable this knowing.

8. This insight came from working seriously with the ideas from the Stone Center on growth in connection (see Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Miller & Stiver, 1997).

9. For a review of the different ways that the quality of connections between people at work is consequential, see Dutton and Heaphy (2002).

10. The CompassionLab members include Peter Frost and Sally Maitlis from the University of British Columbia (both faculty members), and myself, Monica Worline, Jacoba Lilius, and Jason Kanov from the University of Michigan Department of Psychology (all Ph.D. students but me). We have a Web site at <http://www.compassionlab.org>

11. We have written specifically about resilience and its organizing dynamics from a focused study of the physician billing department in Worline et al. (2002).

12. For example, billing department members put together what Deb called a "spare-time basket" filled with crossword puzzles and books that her colleagues knew she loved, hard candies, and a Shell gas card—customized to Deb's tastes and what they anticipated her needs to be while spending so much time traveling to and being in the hospital.

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