



# Come Alive!

*Arne Carlsen and Jane E. Dutton*

There can be no difference anywhere that doesn't make a difference elsewhere –  
no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference  
in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact,  
imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and somewhen.

*William James (1906/1977: 379), What Pragmatism Means*

When James summarized a key principle of pragmatism as searching for the difference that makes a difference, he continued in a tradition where Peirce had laid down pivotal words in his essay *How to make our ideas clear* (Peirce, 1878/1958). According to Peirce, the highest level of clarity of ideas is tied to their practical bearings, not their definitions or universal recognition. Both thinkers held that the real test of whether differences in thinking matter is achieved by looking at consequences for future practice. Following in these footsteps, we shall end this book by trying to provide *some* of the answers to the simple question: What implications for actions follow from the insights in the 40 stories of this book? We emphasize “some of the answers” since no summation of implications can do justice to the many potential teachings from the 40 stories. Each story is self-contained in that it implies new possibilities for acting and developing as researchers. Nevertheless, looking towards clarity of ideas, we think it a fruitful intellectual endeavor to try to distill some of the differences in practice that differences in insights across stories reveal.

We shall go about our task of distillation in a straightforward manner without much hesitation or reservation. For each of the 40 stories, we have taken the liberty of summarizing one imperative paragraph of advice for how qualitative researchers can make their practice generative: “If I were to act on the insights from this story, what could I actually *do*?” The para-

graphs are not meant as recipes for action or as a testable hypothesis for excellence in research. Rather, and it is debatable whether or not this means a softening of the pragmatist ideals of finding clarity in practice, we have tried to write them as extended “wise sayings” or “maxims” (Schwarz & Power, 2000); condensations of practical wisdom that transcend the contexts in which they are presented<sup>1</sup>. In this, we recognize that each of the 40 stories points to principles of research practice that have imperatives for acting as well as a certain motivational power.

We have grouped the summary paragraphs into seven overall themes that can be thought of as seven pathways for research conduct that we, as qualitative researchers, may follow in order to come alive in our work. Here, to “come alive” means something other than pursuing well-defined courses of action. We have noted that generative moments are received as much as they are actively pursued. Researchers speak of being possessed, being moved by the ideas of others, being fortified in their struggle through the love of tales from the field, and of being recipients, even channels, of the voices of the field and the intellectual traditions they are part of. Thus, rather than a controlled-for activity of pursuing advice in a step-by-step manner, we think of the process of coming alive in terms of cultivating habits that favor aesthetic receptivity, openness and even submission. Paraphrasing the wonderful insights of Farzad Rafi Khan (this volume), the seven pathways of coming alive in research, that we suggest, should be thought of as seven ways to prepare for receiving the grace of a generative moment.

## 1. Come alive through exploring tensions and liminal space

*Accept emotional tension and dare to explore it* (Kjersti Bjørkeng): Seek out emotionally-laden frustrations and tensions in your research and dare to explore them, preferably with others. A tension represents potential breaks in ways of seeing, or clashes in expectations that may enlist your fully embodied, emotive intuitive capabilities. They should be treasured as engines of new understanding and explored with people you trust and who offer different perspectives.

*Pack your bags for alternative journeys* (Georg Von Krogh): Do not think of tensions between your data and your theorizing as uncomfortable problems that are best avoided, but encounter them and make them sources of new ideas and entirely new scientific journeys. Keep alternative theoretical vistas ready and open, then play around with theories and data in order to see and be prepared for several journeys.

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<sup>1</sup> We thank Tyrone Pitsis for pointing us to this source.

*Look for insight in small moments of interaction* (Karen Golden-Biddle): Research insights do not always come as large aha's. Blink and you could miss them. Mind small cues of doubt, unease and resistance, by sensing how embodied feelings such as discomfort, joy, boredom and frustrations act on you. Follow the cues into unknown territories to establish new lines of sight.

*Feel surprise and let it guide* (Marlys Christianson): Feel surprise and follow it as it helps you articulate that which you know but cannot say. Moments of surprise simultaneously confirm and disconfirm. Moments of confirmation occur when half-baked ideas are firmed up and given shape. Use surprise as a signal of what to pay attention to. Surprises cannot be planned, but you can cultivate conditions where they are more likely to occur.

*Find a nerve in the field and ask why* (Aina Landsverk Hagen): When you enter the field, let it also enter you. Let it creep into your bones, cells, flesh and heart, not only your brain, so that you are ready to find a nerve in the field as it finds and intrigues you. Follow that nerve – a broken pattern, an oddity, unusual emotional intensity, some vibration – to a *why*, then another one and another one. Keep questioning to confront the crowded silences of habitual understandings.

*Feel the shocks of perspective-taking* (Nardia Haigh): If you discover perspectives in the field that seem abhorrent and shock you, use those metaphorical slaps in the face as means to become more reflexive. Let moments of shock deliver clarity about your personal position. Use them also as cues to delve deeper into the various perspectives of the people in the field. As you proceed, take care to learn about people before you interview them so you can more fully imagine and appreciate their worlds.

## 2. Come alive through facilitating play

*Let ideas possess you, and laugh!* (Liisa Välikangas): From time to time, abandon your rehearsed and detached self and let yourself become possessed by a question or an idea. Submit to the master idea's command. Keep looking around for anything connected to it. Keep senses alert and poised for discovery and suspend all normal operating rules under playful experimentation. Forget publishing. Fall in love. Laugh. Be Don Quixote. Be the Fool. It is the jester within us that is eternal.

*Keep moving to allow co-creation* (Jane Dutton): Play with new tools and re-mind your conversation to overcome a standstill. Enable the co-creation of insights and the visual tracking of movement when thinking through interactive and shared tools, also when engaged in distributed working. Collaborative technology represents welcomed distraction that suspends

doubt and facilitates movement. Start with what is good, build on each other, and visualize this progress. Savor the moments of movement!

***Touch data & allow outsiders in*** (Jane Lê and Paula Jarzabkowski): Touch your research data to bring the story alive by co-creating napkins, sketches and models, and moving around codes, markers and quotes in shared physical space. Get physical also by standing, walking, hiking or moving while discussing. Have outside collaborators join in these efforts to probe thinking and query findings. Repeatedly challenge, revise, probe and reflect with others to create a viable story.

***Explore with new map-making*** (Natalie Cotton): Be willing to drop anchor and spend time reimagining the voyage of your research. If you are stuck in coding, make new maps. You can, for example, try to create a map of your study site, with various contextual information, then adding codes on post-its or the likes. Make it physical, visual and flexible. Keep playing around with the artifacts of your representations to see new wholes and relationships in your data. Each voyage is unique. Next time, feel free to try a different set of tools.

***Bi-sociate!*** (Barbara Czarniawska): Metaphors pull together words and images from two different domains. When using metaphors to explore your field observations, it does not matter whether your empirical data or some outside model or explanation comes first. What matters is that you manage to associate ideas in two seemingly independent and mutually exclusive mental fields; that you manage to *bi-sociate*. In science as in comedy creative ideas serve two masters simultaneously. Let incompatible streams of thought collide and see what happens.

### 3. Come alive by seeking participatory modes of engagement

***Seize your unique possibilities for building partnerships in the field*** (Julia Balogun): Dare to create and follow your own pathway in relating to the people in the field, in terms of the particular tools you use to collect data, how you report data back to people, and the roles you can play in their work. Each researcher's unique history and capabilities enable possibilities for relating. Use them. Dare to believe you can be of value in the field as well as in your research.

***Engage by receiving help*** (Julka Almquist): When struggling with fear doing your fieldwork, let others help, guide and support you. Let go of your assumptions, fear and judgment and open up in order to show your vulnerability, receive generosity and make connections. Use those connections to immerse yourself further in the field and understand the life worlds of the people you are studying. Return caring when the opportunity emerges. Seek and grasp possibilities of deep humanity during interactions in the field.

*Save people's butts, but avoid taking sides* (Stephen Barley): Pick your engagements. The giving and receiving that produces generative relationships in the field needs to be selective. Sometimes, when a crisis emerges in the field, researchers have the opportunity to drop their notebooks and wade in to help the people they are studying. At other times, when people call on us to take sides in internal strife, we are better off remaining detached.

*Let tales from the field move your heart and charge your struggle* (Farzad Rafi Khan): Sometimes you need to put everything on the line in order to forge a deep and intimate relationship with your tales from the field. Thrust your life and your being into your field stories and refuse to walk away from them no matter how rough the going gets. If you let your stories move your heart and convince yourself they need to be told, you have what the Sufis call *Ishq*, a burning all-consuming love that stiffens your intention, erases self-doubt and awakens your intuition's eye.

*Dare to care in the field* (Tyrone Pitsis): Realize the impossibility of being detached from what you are studying. Instead of being a quiet observer, approach both the processes and the people you research in an engaged way by, for example, offering interpretations, posing questions for joint reflection, and making small contributions to the issues and questions that pop up. Seek engaged reciprocity with those whom you are studying to build trusting relationships and to open up opportunities. Sometimes, a simple hug can make all the difference.

#### 4. Come alive through co-discovery

*Convey what you see in the data to help others understand* (Martha Feldman): Writing up data means presenting tips of icebergs to readers. Ensure that what you are presenting speaks to readers in a meaningful way. What do readers need to know in order to see what you are seeing? Test write-ups of data on colleagues who are not familiar with your empirical setting. Use analytical techniques that enable you to recognize and question the implicit context of your presentation of the data.

*Watch your ideas in use by others* (Karl Weick): Put yourself in conversational situations where you witness how people in the field are using your theory. Be open to how such use uncovers hidden assumptions and gaps in your theorizing. See the process of sensemaking unfold in real time across four layers: "I see what I say, I see what they say, they see what they say and they see what I say." Navigate with practitioners across these layers to co-generate common ground for understanding and more subtle theory.

*Let practitioners mark and make sense of meaningful moments* (Tord Mortensen): When analyzing large amounts of complex data, like hours of videotaped interactions, engage the people you are studying as active research partners. Ask the practitioners *a priori* to notice peak moments in

their interactions. Then have them mark moments on a time line. Look at all the markings and facilitate joint reflection on what they could mean. Go on to engage outsiders in further interpretation. You may find that peak moments tip insights in the direction of new peaks.

*Let the questions ripple* (Elena Antonacopoulou): Interacting with practitioners in research feedback meetings represents an opportunity to make new waves of ideas. So does that odd time-space of feeling simultaneously inside and outside a conversation. Dwell in it. Do not be afraid of posing questions that may fundamentally change the conversation and send you on another journey. Search for such questions when they are missing. Notice the sparks of interest that questions create and the new connections they invite. Then follow their ripples and waves.

*Compare! Compare!* (Beth Bechky): Seize the opportunity to present parallel research projects to interested others, sometimes even at 7AM. Let such events inspire your constant comparison of key ideas across different contexts of use, like approaching one case with the lens from another to search for similarities and differences. Pay particular attention to questions that come from outside the ivory tower or the organizational settings you are investigating. Unplanned comparisons prompted by outsiders may have just the right spark of unbounded curiosity to enliven your research.

*Share explorations of “what ifs?”* (Leslie Perlow): “What would happen if we were to ...?” If your key contact in the organizations you are studying poses questions like this, you have a window to form a true partnership in your research. Use the question to stage sessions of discussing not only what to do, but how to do it. Explore how strong interests and engagement from the organization may overlap with your needs to deepen access, expand your basis for interaction, and see anew. Keep the answers to “what ifs?” open as you move forward collaboratively. Cherish the pride you feel that your research can make an impact.

*Open up to embodying insights* (Laura Morgan Roberts): Even after you have generated a plausible and publishable theoretical account of how things work, reach deeper in order to embody those insights. Continue searching for personal, lived exemplifications of general insights. Start with yourself. How do *you* embody the insights? Share the questions and the answers with cared-for-others as you continue to learn together from your own exemplifying stories. Let the harvesting of your insights transform who you are: Learn while teaching, comprehend while translating, discover while presenting, and care while explaining.

## 5. Come alive by preparing, persisting and perspective-taking

*Describe “the bug” in your data* (Saku Mantere): Learn from the emancipatory power of a carefully selected metaphor when confronting seemingly insurmountable masses of interview data: Imagine that you’re an entomologist and describe “the bug in” your data. What is the one phenomenon you can really focus on under the microscope? Try focusing on overall themes as units of analysis. Summarize stories of themes and pay attention to which stories people tell about themselves. If this does not work, ask your mentor for another metaphor.

*Tolerate sledging, then return* (Stewart Clegg): Seek out situations and live interactions where you allow others to re-tell and then criticize your ideas without the self-projection involved in presenting the ideas yourself. Conversations sustain your writing, and hearing your ideas through the words of others helps you see anew. Accept the inevitable sledging, take the learning and keep going. Having the right instincts and a stylish serve does not get you to match point. Hard yakka does.

*Spiral towards hope* (Michael Pratt): Qualitative research is like travelling along a spiral. When you think you are out on a loop and lost, you might actually be just around the bend from where you need to be. Do your homework, know your data, tolerate many iterations of input and ideas, and keep hope alive. This will allow you to be receptive to a moment of clarity when it arrives. Such clarity may feel like an alignment of ideas, frames, and data. You’ll need to endure ambivalence and uncertainty before you get there. Know that these moments may be individually felt, but they are often group achievements.

*Prepare to cross-pollinate* (Kim Elsbach): To break out of dead-end thinking when explaining variance in data, prepare yourself for cross-pollination. Three steps are useful: 1) immerse yourself in the variance of your data to be able to recognize conceptual explanations 2) investigate and rule out obvious explanations, 3) reach for stimuli outside your comfort zone. The third step requires the openness and persistence of going through steps that seem like dead ends. Beyond the abstract and strange appearances meeting your first glance, you may find just what you need.

*See collaborators across divides* (Robin Ely): Tensions in research collaboration and questions of authorship sometimes require persistent efforts to see and be seen by the other. When co-creating across divides of gender and race, take particular care to imagine the view of the other while trusting his/her best intentions. Resist your fear of being let down. Pause when you are in a negative spiral and ask yourself who the other truly is and what might be best for him/her. Your seed of faith may grow a harvest far beyond the dispute and into a lifelong friendship.

*Tack between theory and data to keep sailing* (Victoria Johnson): When confronting vast oceans of data, tack back and forth between theory and data as a way to deal with complexity and provide movement in your thinking. Start with the data that seems most important. Then, as the wind goes out of your empirical sails, catch the theoretical winds. Let each tacking inspire and guide the next turn. Keep a research journal and reorganize your data from time to time according to the directions taken, preferably in a tactile and visual manner that helps you keep track of the course.

## 6. Come alive by embracing a sense of wonder

*Experience excitement from glimpses into others' worlds* (Michelle Barton): Step away from your own assumptions and opinions and cherish the breathless excitement and wonder of learning about other people's lives. Look through tiny doors into another person's reality and believe it is real. Try to feel what they felt and saw and heard and did. Let their worlds speak for themselves. Empathy requires engaging who you are when understanding someone else. Step into Wonderland with your eyes and mind wide open, ready to engage in the experience of being human.

*Heed seeds of wonder* (Arne Carlsen): Feel challenges when engaging others. Use challenges to heighten your attention and expand your receptivity. Celebrate the wisdom of people in the field when you think you see it and listen to your own sensations of deep interest. Both speak to how you can selectively sort data to find seeds of wonder. Heed these seeds to explore your interpretive deficit. Dwell in them. Share them with your favored conversational partners. Let them guide your search and enchant your mysteries.

*Look for beauty in unsightly places* (Katherine DeCelles): The brightest spots may be enveloped in the darkest places. Try speaking with employees who work in your research context and inquire about what people usually ask them about regarding their work. Then stay away from those questions. Look for countertypical questions that challenge the stereotypes you may inherit as a researcher. Take particular care to look for bright spots considered "dirty", "dull", or otherwise of lesser value. Then receive the engagement and wisdoms and beauties of those unsightly places.

*Bring to life others' worlds* (Mary Ann Glynn): As qualitative researchers, we wade into worlds not of our own making, engaging them through narratives, symbols, and relationships. Generativity is ultimately the act of bringing such worlds to life, leveraging their insights to propagate others and generalize beyond their boundaries. Take the plunge; submerge yourself in these worlds. Embrace times that feel strange, unknown and unknowable. Live in the world while reflecting on it; appreciate the world through others' eyes and acts. Then tell their stories.

*Follow your passion now* (Sally Maitlis): When feeling empty and flat about not having enough passion and music in your research, take the time to ask yourself: “what do I really care about?” Engage in authentic conversations with trusted colleagues and friends around topics you love in order to come alive again. Pursue the need to find questions and life worlds you are passionate about. Research tends to be path dependent. Do not put off following your path of passion until tomorrow.

*Receive your writing as a gift from the world* (Carl Rhodes): To write qualitative research is to respond to the world and, in doing so, to be responsible to that world. We play small parts. Methodologies are borrowed, theories are appropriated, scholarly traditions are inherited. The lives we investigate are other people’s lives. Our best work arrives to us from the outside as much as we create it from the inside. Your task is to participate and respond to the world in its fecundity and unpredictability.

## 7. Come alive by making conversations sparkle

*Ensure conversations are undisturbed and flowing* (Libby Hemphill): Open safe discursive spaces for your interviews. Talk about everyday life and frame interviews as conversations. Engage conversations as among friends. Engage others when they have minimal distractions. Help participants distance themselves from all the other things they could or should be doing. Get away to invite conversation and to listen.

*Invite others to draw what they know* (Maria Farkas): Research interviews are occasions for letting people tell detailed, coherent stories of experiences that matter to them. Not everyone does that best through interactive sensemaking using words alone. Take time to have interviewees draw timelines, models or any type of wholes pertaining to the subject of the interview, at the start of the interview. Drawing helps people place experiences in the context of wholes. When that whole is a person’s life, a little mark may lead you to a rich story.

*Remain open to the possibilities in others* (John Paul Stephens): Trust your intuitions for turning interviews into enlivening conversations. Try the mindful pairing of people. Encourage building on each other. Use your own experiences and respond to people as fellow participants rather than outside researchers. Explore disagreement. Mind all sources of energizing behavior. Each new encounter in our work presents an opportunity for renewal and advancement. One need only remain open to the possibilities in others.

*Cultivate “third person” conversations* (Grete Håkonsen Coldevin): Initiate and maintain a type of conversation in your research that involves not only a steady partner in the organization you are studying, but also has a recognizable style and format that produces novel insights. Cultivate this conversational “personae” as a space wherein you make repeated visits

to experiences of recent past and near future, allow great tolerance for the honest and mutual challenging of views, as well as liberating laughter. To set it up, you'll need to be direct, to negotiate expectations, and to build trust.

*Engage in sparkling conversations* (Haridimos Tsoukas): Good conversations, whether induced by the presence of another or prompted by a text, are the ones we want to continue. Make conversations sparkle by keeping them open-ended, vivid, puzzling, undetermined, recursive and expansive, simultaneously affirmative and skeptical, bold and reflexive. Seek conversational partners that inspire and move you. Read to prepare yourself for future conversations so that you'll recognize answers to questions you are only dimly aware of now. Start conversations others want to give back to.

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