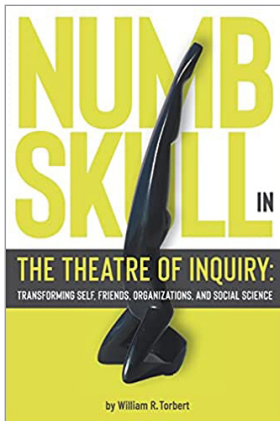


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BOOK REVIEW

Who Is That Man and Why Is He Standing on His Head?

Numbskull in the Theatre of Inquiry: Transforming Self, Friends, Organizations, and Social Science

by William R. Torbert

Waterside Productions (March, 2021). English. Paperback. 498 pages.

Review by Halim Dunsky

Bill Torbert's *Numbskull in the Theatre of Inquiry* is a delightful and thought-provoking volume. More than an engaging memoir, it offers a concise summary and practical illustration of the major models comprising Torbert's life work at Yale, SMU, Harvard, Boston College, and the many organizations to which he consulted.

The book is itself a work of praxis. Torbert has dedicated his life to the discovery and unfoldment of the kind of truth that not only reveals valid theoretical generalizations but also can generate timely action in unique circumstances—both within his individuated self and within the communities of the world that he has touched, contributed to, and in some cases created. In *Numbskull* he not only reviews that history, but continues to enact it, and with a disarming tone of serious playfulness. It's suggested that the reader feel free to dip into the text initially at random, turning the reading itself into an action inquiry process.

Torbert is rare among academics in recognizing a continuity—or perhaps identity—between the work of practical mind, the work of scientific mind, and the work of spiritual mind. (This is a natural connection, as all three are in fact social activities that depend upon engaging a community of inquiry in the exploration of reality. One wonders why this is not more broadly recognized.) Bill has been a life-long student of the teachings of G.I. Gurdjieff, and is, of course, a prolific social scientist

in the realms of leadership development and organization development, as well as a senior co-founder of the field of adult development and of the social science paradigm he calls Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry, of which *Numbskull* is his most full-fledged exemplar.

Building from this orientation it emerges that Bill is not just a student but an activist focused on the transformational liberation of self and society in this co-arising, inter-independent world. In particular, he has long seen that survival and flourishing amid the challenges and threats of our complexifying times calls for increasing cognitive complexity and maturity, including the capacity to engage in collaboration to harvest the generative potential of collective intelligence. Bill's work has been foundational in establishing that the skills and inclination to do this are not merely stylistic but developmental in origin.

In *Numbskull* Torbert traces his own development through the action-logics as he recounts and considers impactful crises and passages in his own life. His long, up-and-down relationship with his Yale dissertation advisor and later Harvard colleague, Chris Argyris, is dramatically retold. In one appendix, he offers a stunning close-up portrait of a two-day consulting gig during which the consultant analyzes the personal developmental action-logics of the president and vice-president, as well as the organization's action logic, and creates scenarios that unleash the partners' and the

organization's transformation. In another appendix, he offers a close analysis of a quantitative study of ten organizations and their CEOs, showing just how powerfully, in organizations of 1,000 or fewer employees, the developmental action-logic of the CEO and the lead consultant determined whether the organization successfully transformed or not.

What may be Bill's signature contribution to the understanding of learning is expressed in the discipline he named Action Inquiry, the process through which we evolve through the action-logics (see his

In the late '70s, as also here retold, Bill and colleagues stepped briefly into the vibrant global community of experimental theatre. The Theatre of Inquiry offered a range of settings for individual and group discovery through role-playing, invention, and response, with participation blurring the distinction between actor and audience. In that setting and through the years, and on both sides of the footlights, as it were, Bill has often stepped into the role of clown or jester as a way of destabilizing what is stuck, or of making the unconscious conscious.

iconic 2004 book of that title [San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2004].) With Action Inquiry (AI), Torbert sets the inquirer squarely in the frame of action. This is more than "learning by doing" in the sense of practice. It is putting oneself and one's perspectives on the line, and submitting to the transformative potential of curiosity and experimentation. The act becomes the question; the question, an act perturbing the system. Where conventional research is biased in favor of assimilation (the incorporation of the results of hypothesis testing into existing cognitive frames), AI appears to have a bias toward accommodation, in which the structures of understanding themselves are allowed (indeed, invited) to shift under the influence of new experience. In this respect, AI foregrounds the fluidity underlying the continuous work of the evolution of consciousness. (Bill sometimes uses the term "human AI" or "real

AI" to distinguish Action Inquiry from Artificial Intelligence, the likely misnamed, if not oxymoronic, field whose initials it shares.)

Torbert has elaborated Action Inquiry in articulating the transdisciplinary social science research paradigm he calls Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry (CDAI). With CDAI, Torbert takes a further step outside the fantasy of the disinterested researcher, to explicitly bring participation into discovery. More than the opposite of "unobtrusive methods," this is deliberate engagement of researcher and com-

munity with subject. Further, it is expected that not only will understanding advance, but subject and researcher will mutually transform. And in what direction? In Torbert's orientation, the gradient is toward an increase of conscious awakening, love, sustainability, and social justice. A substantial appendix sets out CDAI within a fascinating developmental framing of a range of such paradigms: Behaviorism, Gestalt, Empirical Positivism, Multi-Method Pluralism, Post-Modern Critical Interpretivism, Action Science Praxis, Cooperative Ecological Inquiry, and Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry. The perspective offered across this set of approaches is remarkable.

Many authors have support communities who read and comment on an unfinished work; few invite them to contribute to an autobiography with chapter endnotes in their own words. Yet this is just what Torbert has done here. He has broadened

the parallax offered within his own writing by bringing in others' accounts and commentary—not always favorable—on passages in the book and in Torbert's life. Many of Bill's colleagues and former students have contributed in this way, notably in generating 1) the Preface and Introduction; 2) the fascinating Endnotes; 3) the Postscript, a set of first-person accounts illustrating development and action inquiry practice in the life and voice of a Middle Eastern, Millennial woman of color, Aftab Erfan; and 4) Appendix A, which summarizes Torbert's theories of personal, interpersonal, organizational, societal, and scientific learning and action.

Indeed, for a quick introduction or refresher on Bill's theoretical work, you may want to start with Appendix A. There you will find, for example, a summary of what he has called the "Four Territories of Experience." The model of the Four Territories advocates for inclusive consideration, in inquiry and in action, of 1) the outside world, 2) one's behavior as sensed from within, 3) one's internal cognitive-emotional-sensory structure, and 4) post-cognitive consciousness. Appendix A also reviews Bill's powerful case for triangulating the benefits of inquiry conducted in the three persons: first person subjective, second person intersubjective, and third person objective. And this Appendix introduces the cybernetic frame of single-, double-, and triple-loop learning, or learning from past and present experience and future possibilities.

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bronze “Man Standing on Head” that graces the cover of the book. (At my best, I never looked that good.) The figure alludes to one of the book’s more amusing stories.

Numbskull is a fascinating exploration of what love, inquiry, power, community, capacity, and purpose can look like as they evolve in richness along the lifelong developmental journey that is available to us all.

I encourage you to take the opportunity for a ride-along and meeting with this remarkable man as he unpacks his life experience for your contemplation and his own.

Halim Dunsky supports the development of individuals and organizations through Full Presence Coaching, which he founded, and where he is enterprise consultant and executive coach. Halim’s career has spanned more than 40 years in commercial software, consulting, corporate IT, education, and community organizations. He has held a wide variety of leadership and technical positions in large global corporations, small organizations, and startups, and has started a consultancy and a small non-profit and co-founded a graduate school in Green Business. Halim also has a lifetime of practice in inner work and spiritual traditions including Subud, hatha yoga, bhakti yoga, meditation, psychotherapy, Authentic Movement, Sufism, the Dances of Universal Peace, and the Diamond Approach.

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