Grain of Sand Award Acceptance Talk

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I’m touched and tickled to receive this award. To be honored for playfulness and imagination in a world where people take themselves all too seriously and admonish students to fit themselves into a framework of proven ideas—well, this is such a refreshing capstone for me, and such a warm welcome into a community of like-minded playmates.

I hope you don’t mind my reading my remarks. Given the name of the award and its celebration of the poetic, it seemed disrespectful to ad lib. Your description of the award moved me to do a little exegesis on Szymborska’s poem, “View with a Grain of Sand” as a statement of the interpretive approach. Both her poem and interpretive studies make us watch our own minds at work.

“We call it a grain of sand, but it calls itself neither grain nor sand…

Our glance, our touch mean nothing to it.”

Szymborska immediately calls our attention to our relation with the world, first to that primal experience of NAMING. Naming something, finding a word for it, is the way we begin to process our experience and incidentally, usually the way we begin to use our native language. “Mama.” “Papa.” Naming is also the primal act of social science: everybody’s got to make up a new name for their concept.

The poem goes on:

“The window has a wonderful view of a lake, but the view doesn’t view itself.”

Then Szymborska, through a series of examples about the natural world, tells us that the world doesn’t exist—lakes, shores, waves, splashes, pebbles, the sky, the sun—they are each and all only what we make of them. Well, of course lakes and pebbles exist as *matter*, but that sense of existence is not *what matters* to us as social animals. Szymborska says in a few lines what I have never managed to convey to skeptical readers of *Policy Paradox*.

The poem makes us question what the most ordinary everyday experiences mean. What is a “view”? It’s our experience of something, but how do we characterize it? And *why* do we *want* to characterize? I asked myself that question and my first thought was: To share the experience with others. But quickly I realized that no, I need to put words to an experience in order to appreciate it for myself before I can share it.

I’m an amateur naturalist. I can sit for an hour or two on the edge of a bog seeing what a carnivorous Pitcher Plant is eating for dinner; or on the edge of a marsh, watching how a Great Blue Heron stalks a fish; or on a beach trying to understand how a flock of Seagulls and a Bald Eagle work out their political accommodations. While I’m watching, I’m making up stories about what I think is happening, then later I find a place to make notes in my journal, then at home, I search through my nature library to see what others have said about my experience. Call it theories, call it science. The important thing to me is that I like to approach nature fresh, ignorant of what the scientists have had to say. And during all this back and forth between me, nature, and books, I’m already percolating an essay to share my wonder and amazement. That’s what life’s all about.

This kind of nature observation is exactly what I like to do as a social scientist: Observe, puzzle about what I’m seeing and feeling, make up stories to explain it all to myself, and then take my stories public. Only now my stories get dignified with labels like “explanation,” “hypothesis,” and “theory.”

So here’s what I specially treasure about you, the interpretive community who could come up with such a joyful, playful award: While objectivity and science are rampaging through our profession, sucking the fun out of it, the interpretive approach puts our selves, our precious humanity, back at the center.

Thank you