

Autobiographical Memories as Islands of Certainty in an Ocean of Complexity: A Cooperative Enquiry on the Effects of the COVID-19 Emergency on Some Disability Services in Northern Italy

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Abstract

In a historical moment characterised by uncertainty and concern about the future, autobiographical memories can be a source of inspiration for orientation and learning to change. In social work, this possibility becomes a necessity that cannot be postponed, especially where the usual patterns of action prove inadequate to deal with the problems generated by the crisis. Within the framework of a systemic epistemology and complexity, this article describes a cooperative inquiry involving some coordinators of disability services in Lombardy, northern Italy. The re-enactment of autobiographical memories was used as a basis to explore themes related to the professional practices of these coordinators. The memories, recalled and re-signified within the training device, facilitated the opening to a complex thought, in which certainty and uncertainty and different ways of knowledge are connected.

Keywords

social work, uncertainty, cooperative inquiry, transformative learning, autobiographical memories

Introduction

I am a PhD student and a social worker. This research is part of a workplace doctorate I have undertaken – a particular form of doctorate that involves an

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agreement between a company and a university based on needs arising from the field in which the company operates. In my case, the company I work for is a social cooperative operating in Lombardy, a region in northern Italy, and the need is to rethink and transform the educational and social practices of the system of services for adults with disabilities which I am part of.

My return to the university came 15 years after graduating in Psychology and after 13 years of undertaking social work, and I had to learn how to combine the knowledge from my training with the experiential knowledge of my work practice. During the past 13 years I have had the opportunity to work in different services promoting the social inclusion of people with disabilities, first as an educator and then as a coordinator. For some years now, my role in the cooperative has been to manage the coordinators of the disability sector with regard to aspects related to social planning and organisation of services.

In Italy the COVID-19 pandemic arrived only a few months after I started my PhD. Right from the start, it created an upheaval in the regular organisation of services, leading to a need to suspend the usual activities and create new ways of providing services to people with disabilities and their families. The emergency, which continued over the following months without pause, also challenged some usual working patterns, such as the linear planning of activities based on predefined objectives year on year.

My own research pathway was also affected by the crisis generated by the pandemic. Before the crisis, by the end of the first year of my PhD I had attended most of the methodological lectures and pedagogical seminars, and I had managed to identify a research topic, carry out a scoping review, and create the first plan for my upcoming research project. However, the subsequent closure of the service sites, their reorganisation, and the continuation of the emergency over the following months were all factors that forced me to abandon the linear planning of the research pathway in order to explore new possibilities.

The prolonged health emergency exacerbated a deep sense of uncertainty about the origin of the virus, its uneven spread, its mutations, and, beyond that, about individual and collective futures. As Morin (2020) states in “Changeons de voie. Les leçons du coronavirus”, the pandemic pushed people to recognise the uncertainty that accompanies the great adventure of humanity, every personal story and every normal life. Uncertainty is the pattern that has connected (Bateson, 1972) my experience as a researcher with the experience of the coordinators of these services. What path will this research take? What path will the services take in the next months? What is the possible project to undertake in both cases?

A project (from the Latin *pro*, forward, and *jacere*, to throw) involves the organisation of actions over time in order to achieve objectives in the future. It involves a linear, direct, predetermined procedure. But what kind of project is possible in an uncertain scenario? Morin (1999) mentions the ability to cope with uncertainty as one of the seven areas of knowledge required for future education. In particular, he compares life to an ocean of uncertainties that can be navigated through islands of certainty. Crossing is an oblique, undirected proceeding within a dense space, a complex that binds the landscape and those who cross it. It is an adventure of thought (Morin, 2017) that requires courage and a method to deal with uncertainty and to foster the unfolding of complex thinking (*ibid.*).

Complex thinking is a systemic emergence that renounces pre-constituted knowledge and habitual explanatory schemes in favour of an ecological (Bateson, 1972) and aesthetic consciousness (Morin, 1977; Bateson, 1979). Complexity is an invitation to act out one's autopoietic capacities (Maturana & Varela, 1980), decomposing and recomposing one's narratives (Formenti, 2017), in a recursive procedure, at once linear and circular, which is best symbolised through the form of a spiral (Formenti, 2009). In this learning to unlearn (Bateson, 1972; Baumann, 2000) and learning to relearn there is the possibility of learning to transform (Mezirow, 1991) in a recursive dance of stability and instability.

Within this dance, autobiographical memories can play a significant part. They provide a sense of continuity of self over time and contribute to the creation of an "autobiographical self" (Damasio, 1999; 2003). From a lifelong-learning perspective, what characterises adulthood is the ability to look back and redefine one's life journey, learning reflectively from it. Within a training setting, the re-enactment of an autobiographical episode can promote the flowering of complex thinking (Formenti, 2017). The autobiographical episode, in fact, chosen on the basis of a theme or a research question, allows the knowledge process to be based on something concrete, on a radical memory (Heron, 1996). It calls into question corporeal thought, stimulates the enactive experience of the body (Varela, 1984), and allows thought to be set in motion. The re-enactment and narration of an autobiographical episode offers the possibility of constructing a theory of lived experience, of connecting the inside and the outside, the past and the present, making implicit theories visible.

In the following paragraphs, I will narrate the research-training process which involved myself and the coordinators of the disability services of my cooperative. The account has attempted to articulate the feeling of uncertainty and disorientation caused by the pandemic emergency, and to draw on the embodied, situated, and

aesthetic knowledge of autobiographical memories. The aim of this path was to create an intermediate space for reflexivity and action in which to redefine the theme of planning and the function of coordination within a context of uncertainty. After explaining and describing the methodological aspects, I will share with readers the reflections that emerged, and finally I shall try to draw some conclusions about the role of autobiographical memories in promoting complex thinking.

Methodology

From the outset, I had to recognise my compromised position as a researcher (from the Latin *compromissus*, obliged together), bound up with my professional history, the fact of being part of the culture under investigation, and of being someone who is also interacting with the crisis generated by the pandemic. The first methodological step was therefore to contextualise the research path, recognising that I was part of the game, with a perspective that was necessarily “observer dependent” (Von Foester, 1982) and passionate (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). This made it necessary to take methodological care to declare, make explicit, and document not only the different stages of the research process but also any hypotheses, images, and passages of thought, through an attitude of epistemological modesty (Brown, 2012).

I used an ethnographic and autoethnographic approach that could help me integrate my voice with that of the coordinators (Jessor, Colby, & Shweder, 1996; Chang, 2008). The recollection of autobiographical memories helped me to situate myself within the story, and connect with the experience narrated by the coordinators and the scientific literature related to my research topic. Looking inwardly (my identity, thoughts, feelings, memories) and outwardly (my relationships, the context, and culture I belong to) allowed me to place my autoethnographic voice in context (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015).

Consistent with the recognition and acceptance of my engaged, situated, and entangled position, the involvement of the coordinators also involved not only the practical dimension of research-training but also the interpretative one, connoting itself as research with people (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001). Central to this is the development of a “critical subjectivity” that does not deny personal, lived knowledge in favour of a hypothetical objectivity, but cultivates a high quality and valid individual perspective in collaboration with others who do the same (*ibid.*, p. 15).

Being guided by a systemic and complexity epistemology (Formenti & West, 2018), I have internalised a situated and contextualised conception of learning

(Formenti, 2018) that involves a constant adaptation and co-evolution in/with the context. The context is the result of a coordinated construction of knowledge by means of interaction: the focus is no longer only on the individual mind but on the whole learning situation that is created from participation in community/culture (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Cooperative inquiry is an action-research methodology that goes beyond data collection and analysis. Its distinctive feature is to consider the wide range of human sensitivities and capabilities as an instrument of inquiry.

Specifically, for this research, I proposed to employ the research-training method (Formenti, 2017) to the coordinators. It is based on a systemic epistemology that trusts the process and opens up possibilities. It proposes narrative, compositional, cooperative practices and aims at complex, layered, situated, relational, transformative learning and the development of a satisfactory theory, starting from the participants' lived experience, narrated, analysed, and re-signified together. The method is inspired by Heron's (1992) model of knowledge pathways. In the variant proposed by Formenti (2009), it proposes a phased process involving different forms of knowledge: authentic experience (embodied bodily-sensory knowledge), aesthetic representation (the metaphorical symbolic plane), intelligent understanding (the collective mind), and deliberate action.

Participants, Data Collection, Analysis, and Interpretation

Firstly, I proposed and described the research-training methodology inspired by the knowledge spiral model (Formenti, 2009) to the nine coordinators of disability services in the social cooperative where I work. Some of them asked me how much commitment this process would require from them. In particular, they were concerned about the work overload that this situation of prolonged uncertainty was already demanding of them. Their questions were also my concerns. I am a colleague of theirs and, at the same time, I started my PhD in order to bring research skills to my work context that would be useful in enhancing our local knowledge and connecting it with scientific knowledge. In one of my autoethnographic writings I find these doubts:

After years I returned to the University but I am the one who is profoundly different: I have a long work experience, I am a mother of two children. (...) At the beginning I wondered how all this novelty could relate to my professional world. There are times, even today, that I worry about taking time away from my work to study and carry out research. It is not easy to find the right balance. It is a tangled feeling, where personal aspirations are involved, the desire to be useful to my colleagues, the fear of not having

enough time to pursue my studies, the sense of guilt for the time I take away from my family.

The concerns of some coordinators became an opportunity to explore the cooperative inquiry methodology with them. This made it possible to create a climate of trust in which to recognise, express, and welcome the emotional states linked to the process and in which to establish authentic collaboration and participatory decision-making (Heron & Reason, 2001). The coordinators all agreed to take part in the process by reading and signing the informed consent form.

The value of cooperative inquiry lies in the possibility of inhabiting the often insurmountable boundary between practice and research. In it, practitioners jointly assume the responsibility of becoming co-researchers, examining their own experience and action carefully, in collaboration with others who share similar interests and issues. Connecting the memory of the beginning of the doctoral journey with the doubts expressed by the coordinators helped all of them find their own positioning within the research.

The question identified by the group and which guided this research-training pathway was: How is it possible to learn to transform the implicit theories that guide one's professional practice, in a situation characterised by high uncertainty?

The course took place between October 2020 and March 2021 and included monthly meetings held remotely through the use of a digital communication platform. In the days leading up to each meeting, an exchange of e-mails or phone calls was made to collect questions or issues to reflect on together. My role in each meeting was that of a facilitator of the process, within a "generative, risky, open, uncertain relationship between co-responsible subjects, authentically engaged in the search for a not entirely predictable knowledge" (Formenti, 2017, p. 225).

Biographical memories have been used as proposals to ground the cognitive process on something concrete, on an authentic experience, activating a "radical memory" (Heron, 1996). The aim of this re-enactment was to set thought in motion, transform the gaze, seek new words to describe the coordinators' experience of uncertainty, and bring to light certain preconceptions that guide habitual action. Each meeting aimed at deconstructing and reconstructing the theories that usually guide one's professional actions, starting from the coordinators' lived experience, recounted, analysed, and re-signified together (Formenti, 2017). The meetings ended with the identification of a deliberate action that would try to bring some changes or reflections into the professional action, to be shared and contextualised within one's work teams.

The use of a digital communication platform made it possible to record the meetings, which I listened to, transcribed, and sent by e-mail to the coordinators between meetings. This operation provided a useful element of triangulation that allowed us to go over the process we had lived several times and to bring out new reflections, questions, and insights. The latter often acted as a stimulus for subsequent meetings.

The transcripts of the meetings and my own participant observations, field notes, and autoethnographic writings formed the material for analysis and interpretation. In accordance with Maxwell (2005), the process of analysis and interpretation began early on and continued throughout the research. In particular, I followed a scissor-like process for interpretation: on the one hand, I fed on the connections with certain theoretical and methodological constructs and, on the other hand, I relied on the close interaction and co-construction of meaning with the coordinators who, together with me, were involved in the research.

Discussion

During the first meetings, the topic of service design, activities, and individual pathways during these months of the crisis was the most critical one for the coordinators. Before the arrival of the pandemic emergency, the services used to design individual educational plans for one year, with objectives that were verified at the end of the year. The individual education plans were followed by the programming of service activities, which were also carried out continuously throughout the year. The pandemic emergency initially led to the closure of the service centres and then forced the services to reshape their interventions to reduce the risk of contagion and to meet the different needs of people with disabilities and their families. This situation of displacement and uncertainty generated in the coordinators some initial reflections and questions:

How can we embark on an educational and social project when we don't know what will happen next week? How long can projects made in this way last?

How do we plan if families don't want to send their child to the service because they are afraid?

In June 2020, after the first national lockdown, services had reopened but everything still looked very unstable. Some families had chosen not to have their children attend the centres, and people were scared about the likely arrival of

a second wave of the pandemic. After the summer, it was no longer clear whether we were coming out of the emergency or whether this would become the new normal we had to adapt to. In some parts of my autoethnographic writings, I find this feeling of uncertainty as in the following excerpt, which is linked to the memory of a recurring dream from the past:

During the lockdown we closed the doors and windows. Then they were timidly reopened, but it is as if the pressure of all that was left out is so strong that it leaves us, once again, unprepared. This feeling reminds me of a recurring dream where I am at home and suddenly the lake in my town² is flooding. The water rushes in through the windows and everything is flooded. I then realise that the only thing I can do to survive is to open the windows, to let myself be carried away by the force of the water, without trying to resist. Now that I think about it, water was also the metaphor most often used by the coordinators during the first exploratory research: the tsunami, the storm, the stormy sea.³ Seven months have passed since those interviews, and I smile bitterly at the thought that we were convinced that that mishap would change our lives, perhaps even for the better.

A sense of disillusionment and concern accompanied the period following the first wave of the pandemic. Uncertainty was to be present for a long time to come in the everyday life of the services. The questions and doubts of the coordinators challenged the perspectives of meaning that had guided their planning until then. They can be seen as “disorienting dilemmas” (Mezirow, 1991), which interrupt action and require critical reflection on the premise and meanings implicit in their professional practice.

Linear planning and structuring by fixed objectives are elements that give a definite direction to action, within a time conceived as entirely predictable and organisable. However, the situation of uncertainty has shifted the focus from the action to the context within which that action takes place. The need to give direction can become a challenge when there is a large amount of information and multiple possible future scenarios (Formenti, 2016).

The need to explore alternative ways to linear design was behind the coordinators’ choice to reflect and act on their usual way of designing. The first

² I live in Lecco, a town on Lake Como.

³ Between March and May 2020, during the first national lockdown, I conducted a first exploratory research, in which I interviewed some of these coordinators. In the dialogic interviews, I asked the interviewees to tell me what was happening in their work, also through the use of metaphors.

way to access knowledge based on something concrete can be the re-enactment of an authentic experience (Formenti, 2017). Recounting a lived experience in words can allow relevant differences to be identified (Bateson, 1979), offering a theory of experience that fosters connections between the inside and the outside, making visible the preconceptions that guide it.

For this reason, one of the proposals I made to the coordinators was to recall an episode from their personal lives in which they found themselves designing in an uncertain situation. Without being asked to do so, they all recalled an episode that had occurred during the pandemic: planning a lunch with friends, a trip, a routine activity such as shopping. Here are some excerpts as an example:

I had to go to lunch with friends, that was our plan. First I created a WhatsApp group, then we decided how, when, where, why. Imagine the difficulties: children, one macrobiotic, one vegan, one omnivore. We found the place, we decided on the time, I made a reservation, and out came a new ordinance forcing restaurants and bars to close. So I contacted all my friends again and in the end we all decided to meet on Zoom.

I want to tell you about the trip I planned this year. My family and I love travelling. I always take care of the organisation, I proceed by steps, well in advance, giving myself a goal. Last year, after deciding on the destination together, we started to study the route. We chose Brittany. First of all, we signed up on "Home-link", a virtual platform for home exchange. Then we sent requests to people who lived in that area to organise the home exchange and waited for the answers. Meanwhile, I bought a travel guide and studied the itinerary. We were in mid-November 2019. In February 2020, COVID-19 arrived. The thing that amazed me is that I usually pursue my goals anyway, no matter what happens. Instead, we put the travel arrangements on hold and never thought about it again. We thought to ourselves: "We'll do it another time." Then we came out of the first pandemic wave. At that point travelling abroad was allowed. We weren't thinking about it anymore but our home-linkers contacted us because they wanted to come to Italy. The situation allowed it and so we reactivated the whole process and planned what we wanted to go and see. I realised that organisation is important but so is being flexible.

In September I organised a surprise holiday for my husband. I wanted to surprise him for our wedding anniversary. The terrible period of COVID-19 (he is a nurse), had not allowed us to have our holidays together. First I chose the destination, bearing in mind that we had different wishes: I wanted to visit

a city of art, he wanted to be in nature. I chose to go to Mantua and then cycle to Sabbioneta, a nearby town, so that he would be happy too. Then I had to think of a place for my children to stay and chose the date. After solving this problem too, I organised the itinerary, chose a place to sleep, made a call, made a reservation. I took two guidebooks: I like to take a more narrative one that tells what's special about the city and a more traditional one. Finally, I looked for some nice restaurants, I made a note of the names but without booking. The fact is that everything we had planned to do didn't happen because we did something else entirely. We followed the flow with these wonderful bicycles that were our travelling companions and we constantly changed our plans.

After recalling and writing down these experiences, the coordinators were invited to choose an image-symbol of the episode narrated, from those proposed by Fabbri and Munari (2010). These are images that stimulate abductive thinking (Bateson, 1972), that try to generate small awareness and that investigate the crucial operations carried out by people from a cognitive point of view, to formulate theories and define action strategies (Fabbri & Munari, 2005). Metaphors belong to the area of "presentational knowledge" (Heron, 1992; Yorks & Kasl, 2006), intuitive and imaginative, capable of bridging experiential and propositional knowledge.

The coordinators chose different images to represent the type of planning connected with their autobiographical episodes. In some cases it was a grid, in other cases a boat in the ocean or an open encyclopaedia: images that could then be traced back to different operational epistemologies. During the meetings, the comparison between the participants favoured the emergence and recognition of the cognitive operations at the basis of some habitual action schemes.

Thinking together, in groups, is generative because it sets in motion an ecology of ideas (Formenti, 2017). According to Mezirow (2012), thinking like an adult means becoming aware of one's own theories of meaning, seeing them, naming them, and also being able to challenge them. Consciously, I chose to keep a risky positioning (*ibid.*), sharing with the coordinators also my emotions in listening to these stories:

I enjoyed listening to your stories. The simple act of shopping sounded like an adventure. At a certain point I was wondering: "Will our heroes succeed in their plans?"

The process, generated in the phase of intelligent understanding, evokes new memories in the co-ordinators that set new reflections in motion. Some of them say:

It reminds me of adventure books. When I was a child, I liked stories that made me hold my breath. I was curious to find out how the adventure would end. Now it scares us, we want to have the road paved but in reality we miss out a lot. Now the desire for adventure has returned to me.

In my opinion what is missing in our plans is where we are going. We can tell ourselves that some actions will be stopped or not done because of the emergency. However, if we only do what can be done, we risk losing a lot.

What is missing in our projects is the desire of the people. The heart is missing.

In the coordinators' quotations, the aspects of time, orientation, and meaning associated with planning return. However, unlike the disorienting dilemmas of the beginning, they reveal new possible trajectories that challenge the idea of a linear and predetermined design.

Following this questioning of the implicit theories guiding their idea of planning, the coordinators wanted to go into depth on other aspects linked to this theme, including the challenge of bringing together different points of view and connecting people's biographies with the organisational life of the services. Below is a narrative excerpt by a coordinator, produced from the proposal to tell "That time I had to change my mind":

The boiler broke down, panic! Cold in the house, no time to get going, no desire. No trusted plumber. No relatives to advise me. I decide to talk to a plumber whom I had contacted some time ago about air conditioning units that I wanted to put in the community but had not installed. I contacted him and told him that my first objective was to spend little money. He explained to me what he intended to do, what brand he could install and the possible costs. I trusted him! My ex-husband arrived, I had asked him for a document I needed, and he raised the doubt that the plumber might be cheating me, telling me to check the prices. Eventually, doubt crept up on me. The boiler installation didn't go very well, there were a few problems but then they were resolved. I was left with a feeling of mistrust and once the invoice arrived, I checked the prices on the internet, forgetting about the additional costs that the plumber had told me about. I decided to tell the plumber about my doubts, he answered them again and I realised that my distrust and fear of being cheated (probably influenced by my husband) had made me see things in a blurred way.

In this case, after the re-enactment of the autobiographical episode, the coordinators were invited to re-enact a professional episode in which they had to reconsider something. I then proposed that they rewrite these episodes in reverse, imagining different reactions, emotions, and outcomes. These exercises, then

re-signified in the group, allowed the coordinators to become aware not only of the multiplicity of possible points of view on what is happening, but also of the possibility of being able to experiment with more flexible positions on the issues.

Also for these topics, the use of autobiographical memories made the coordinators aware of how certainty, conceived as “the state of being definite or of having no doubts at all about something” (from www.collindictionary.com) was not very close to their personal and professional life experiences.

In attributing a liquid quality to modernity, Baumann (2000) argues that in this state of perpetual change, uncertainty is in fact the only certainty. Here, I propose the possibility of seeing certainty and uncertainty as two sides of the same coin. In systemics, two polarities that are not opposed but connected to each other are called “cybernetic complementarities” (Keeney, 1983). Certainty, in its etymological meaning, refers to the idea of separateness and distinction (from the Latin *cèrtus*; *cèrnere* = to separate, to distinguish). If, on the one hand, disjoining allows one to grasp differences, on the other hand, connecting these differences is what can foster the emergence of new organisations and comprehensions (from the Latin *com-prehendere*, to learn together).

The autobiographical memories, recalled and narrated within the training space, enriched the coordinators’ view on some aspects of their professional practice with new meanings. Orienting one’s own professional action towards a horizon of meaning (while being aware of a path that cannot be defined a priori), giving a heart to the projects (starting from the desire of people with disabilities) and equipping oneself with disorienting moves (to try and change positioning and points of view) are some of the deliberate actions that the coordinators chose to bring into their professional practice.

Conclusion

According to Morin (1999), the only way to navigate complexity lies in the possibility of finding islands of certainty to orient oneself while navigating. If, on the one hand, complexity can be recognised by the negative traits of uncertainty and insufficiency of logic, on the other hand, situational and contextual approaches to adult learning (Formenti, 2018) can constitute the positive trait of complexity, capable of linking the one and the multiple, the singular and the universal, order and disorder.

According to this perspective, even if modernity can be described as a liquid age of great uncertainties (Bauman, 1999), everyone’s existence rests on biographies that, day by day, confront and co-evolve with the complexity of becoming. Autobiographical memories, while drawing on the radical memory

of embodied knowledge (Heron, 1992), can at the same time be continually recalled, re-read, and re-signified in the light of present time. Like Morin's islands of certainty, they allow reflection to be rooted in an authentic experience that is brought to light through narration. Moreover, they allow us to regain possession of forgotten words and sensations that can become tools to cross with courage (from the Latin *cor habeo*, to have heart) the ocean of complexity, rediscovering its positive side that allows us to celebrate connections.

Even if the uncertainty generated by the pandemic has brought out the limits of an educational and social design based exclusively on linear logic, it has also allowed the exploration of new possibilities and meanings that are calling into question the implicit theories that had hitherto accompanied the professional practices of these coordinators.

The research-training was proposed as a pedagogical device in which the micro (individual), meso (group), and macro (referring to the culture underlying the organisation of these services) aspects could be connected. This may constitute a good lever for the promotion of transformative learning (Shapiro, Wasserman, Gallegos, 2012) that will be interesting to monitor over time, starting from the developments that this field research will take. It provided good leverage for promoting transformative learning (Shapiro, Wasserman, & Gallegos, 2012). From the coordinators' point of view, exploring some aspects related to their work, drawing on and connecting their biographical memories, allowed them to transform the experience of the crisis into an opportunity for critical reflexivity and change. For example, the professional practice of designing, alongside the autobiographical experience of designing, broadened the perspectives of meaning and generated changes in the way services are designed. In addition, from an organisational point of view, this path has created a basis for initiating a process of organisational redesign of these services, currently underway, and which is involving social workers, coordinators, institutional referents, and volunteers. From a personal point of view, the research-training path has allowed me to become aware of the generative potential of the crisis in terms of its uncertainty and evolutionary possibilities.

Even if there is an increasingly widespread awareness of having entered an era of great uncertainty (Morin, 2020), the implementation of shared processes of questioning and construction of meanings from autobiographical memories may be a valid attempt to grow "oases of fraternity" (Morin, 2019), at the same time rearguards and vanguards of humanity, from which to draw the resources and tools necessary to resume, with confidence, navigation of the ocean of complexity.

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