

DRINKING FROM THE WATERS OF LETHE: A TALE OF ORGANIZATIONAL OBLIVION¹

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Abstract

This article is a reflection on organizational oblivion, viewed as an archetypical antonym of learning. The consequences of this kind of forgetting for the organizational identity construction are described as a narrative project. We refer to the image of Lethe, an archetype of forgetting, to depict how forgetting directly affects the process of identity narrative construction. In this perspective, drinking from the waters of Lethe implies not just the loss of knowledge or memories of how things are done, but the loss of identity so that the individuals do not know who they are anymore. In this context, forgetting disrupts organizational narrative which ceases to be a coherent story and results in organizational identity loss.

Key words: archetypes, organizational forgetting, double-loop forgetting, oblivion, identity, narrative, ethnography

They were all required to drink a measure of the water, and those who were not saved by their good sense, drank more than

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the measure, and each one as he drank forgot all things. (Plato,
The Republic: 10.618a)

Ways of forgetting

This article is a reflection on the interrelationship of organizational learning and forgetting and the construction of identity understood as a narrative project. We understand learning in its broadest sense as building up of wisdom by persevering awareness (de Mello, 2004). The article is based on an ethnographic study of a Polish company but it carries a wider message, as it touches upon archetypical chords. The archetype of Lethe is our chosen metaphor of oblivion, and we use it to show the dynamics of forgetting that lead to organizational identity loss. What emerges under such circumstances is a fragmented narrative project, consisting of bits and pieces that have lost their meaning, perpetrating oblivion in place of identity. This is the antonym of learning, or what we present in this text as double-loop forgetting.

* * *

Obscure figures drift aimlessly among eternal mists, as if oblivious of each other and their surroundings. Who are they and why are they here? No one seems to remember. Shades of heroes wander among those of commoners. The lesser souls cluster around the greater ones, once charismatic shining heroes, now shades among shades. Addressed by Odysseus, who is said to have ventured into the Underworld, the great Achilles exclaimed that he would rather be an underling in life than the lord of the dead. The winners are as lost as the losers. Nothing touches, no one is moved.

The darkness is all pervasive but not necessarily evil; this is not hell. The vast domains of Hades are not devoid of riches and exude a mysterious beauty. But how does one embrace beauty, how does one conquer pain, when one has drunk from the waters of Lethe, the river of

forgetfulness, that separate the light from the darkness? Whoever drinks from them attains a perpetual drowsiness, a spiritual sleepiness. They are a miracle anesthetic, a cure for life.

Douglas (1986) portrays forgetting as loss of cultural inheritance and knowledge; however, institutionalization consists of both remembering and forgetting. Argyris and Schön (1978) focus on different kinds of learning and its organizational uses. The authors generally perceive negative learning (forgetting) as a decrease in knowledge which often results in serious problems. However, sometimes remembering is harmful as it acts as reinforcement in the uncreative single-loop learning. Walsh (1995) stresses that even though learning presumes forgetting, the consequences of the latter, such as resistance to change and inertia, may outweigh the benefits. Other authors writing about organizational learning, such as Dodgson (1993), point out that unlearning is equally important for the creation of learning organization as positive learning itself. Learning is seen to take place among contradictory factors (Dodgson, 1993; on the implications of Argyris' research see Easterby-Smith, Antonacopoulou, Simm and Lyles, 2004).

Some authors view forgetting as a strategy, enabling and supporting management's aims, beneficial or harmful for the development of organizational knowledge. de Holan and Philips (2004) depict organizational forgetting to be as important as learning for competitiveness.

Managers need to consciously manage forgetting to challenge established knowledge.

Forgetting is the key to a systematic knowledge management practice and complementary to organizational learning. de Holan, Philips and Lawrence (2004) emphasize that knowledge management is in equal parts about learning and forgetting. Accidental forgetting is often a problem, as it implies a loss of knowledge. When managed and planned, it is indeed a prerequisite for successful organizational learning. It is crucial to understand when forgetting is to be appreciated and when it should be circumvented—this is a part of the skill of managing the dynamics of knowledge (de Holan and Philips, 2004). Bowker (1997) describes

the construction of processes of classification in organizations and shows how they depend on forgetting; there are good reasons for organizations to forget. Harris and Wegg-Prosser (2007) describe forgetting as bringing discontinuity to the organization. The loss of memory was intended and a result of managerialist ideology—an “utopian politics of forgetting” (p. 299) aimed at delegitimizing the past and (re)establishing managerial control over the company. The cited authors look at forgetting in relation to the object, forgetting *what*? The answer to this question involves knowledge. Forgetting of knowledge may be a strategy supporting learning or can be harmful to it.

Forgetting is sometimes considered as a means to enable organizational renewal. Johannisson (1991) sees entrepreneurial energy as dependent on experience and social skills. Traditional education does not support it and should be forgotten for the sake of an entrepreneurial learning effort. Hjorth and Johannisson (1997) explain that children have an innate experience of entrepreneurship. The adult entrepreneur can retrieve that state of mind through an educational program that involves the forgetting of experiences and attitudes that hinder creativity. These authors consider attitudes, *how to*, as the object of forgetting. Forgetting of attitudes can work for the benefit of organizational learning, when these hinder the realization of passions and talents inherent to all. However, just as with the forgetting of knowledge, forgetting of attitudes can also work against learning if people are discouraged from developing their entrepreneurial skills. Organizational forgetting in regard to an object (knowledge or attitude) can thus be either beneficial or harmful to organizational learning based on usage and context.

In Feldman's and Feldman's (2006) account, organizational remembering is seen as a cultural practice, crucial for the creation of knowledge. It is predominantly a tacit process, but can also be conscious training. Forgetting is a prerequisite for learning, especially in relation to elements that do not fit the social order. It can also have negative consequences for the

organization, because it ruptures the links between the past and the present. Along similar lines, Gioia, Corley and Fabbri (2002) point out that “to change history is to tamper with the foundations of identity” (p. 632). These texts take up a broader cultural perspective and regard forgetting in relation to the subject, or to the question *who* is forgetting. Such forgetfulness is negative: it impoverishes the repertoire of cultural responses. Yet it is a fact of organizational life; organizations change, especially if they learn.

[Insert Tab. 1 about here]

The way we propose to look at forgetting is similar to the last category but our emphasis is different (Tab. 1). We reflect upon oblivion—*forgetting one has forgotten*, or, to paraphrase Argyris and Schön's (1978) concept, a double-loop forgetting. In contrast to the approach that focusses on the ideological implications and the consequences for cultural change management via deprivation of knowledge, we propose to concentrate on forgetting as such, using the image of Lethe as an archetype. We regard this kind of forgetting to be the archetypal antonym of learning, also understood archetypically as the gathering of wisdom, or persevering awareness (de Mello, 2004).

Lethe as an archetype of forgetting

According to Jung (1968), archetypes are universal phenomena located in the collective unconscious. They can be described as hidden images of human motivations that provide the substance that myths and symbols are constructed of and because of their universality, they have the capacity of turning individuals into a group. Thus they can be seen as the underpinning of culture and society (Kostera, 2007, p. 67).

According to Jung, archetypes are like riverbeds, ready to hold images or narratives. The content that fills them can vary in time or across space, it can change or develop, but only a

certain kind of image or narrative fits into a certain archetype. The stories that enter such a track have a certain narrative gravity; they become tales with an irresistible desire to unravel. Myths are such stories with a special relevance for all cultures (Bowles, 1991; Kostera, 2008).

Archetypes are deeply rooted in human culture and psyche. They touch profound strings of the human consciousness and inspire creativity. They use deep cultural images to evoke new and unexpected ideas and experiences and open the mind. Archetypes can be used as a conceptual framework to understand and interpret symbolically sensemaking processes (Weick, 1995) in organizations that have a deep cultural significance, profoundly rooted in a wide cultural context (Kostera, 2008).

The Greek word *lethe* means oblivion or suppression. Lethe was the Greek deity of forgetfulness, the daughter of the frightful Eris. Much more famously, Lethe was also the name of a river flowing through the domain of the dead, Hades. After human beings died, their shades gathered at the bank of another well-known river of the Underworld, Styx or Acheron. They had to pay Charon, the ferryman, to carry them to the other side in his boat. Then the dead drank from the waters of Lethe and lost all of their memories, forgot everything, including who they were.

We use Lethe as the archetype of forgetting, the ultimate oblivion. Drinking from the waters of Lethe implies not only the loss of knowledge, but the loss of identity. It also underplays the political sense, making people passive and sedated, as resistance presupposes certain awareness. The subjects do not know who they are anymore, they do not know that they have forgotten, and, indeed, that they have forgotten anything at all...

The construction of identity as a narrative project

Originally the idea of identity was used in relation to individuals. With regard to organizations, identity is often spoken of as a constructed concept (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Dutton and Dukerich, 1991, Whetten, 2006), an outcome of repeated interactions with others (Cooley, 1902; Weick, 1985). Even though the term suggests stability, it is usually conceptualized in the current literature as being dynamic. This article will not present a complete overview of identity literature here as it has been done by other authors (see e.g., Hatch and Schultz, 2002), and will instead discuss the relationship between identity, learning and forgetting.

Some authors focus on how identity plays a role in the adaptation of the organization to its environment. Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000), as well as Dutton and Dukerich (1991) believe that the interplay between image and identity make adaptation possible. Pratt and Foreman (2000), as well as Corley (2004) explore the issue of multiple organizational identities that, in some cases, might lead to conflict or facilitate organizational adaptation. Fiol (2002), on the other hand, saw purposeful identity transformations as a prerequisite for maintaining competitive advantage and ensuring better fit to the changing environment. Identity can be seen as a continuity of experience, a relative consistence of roles as well as a sense of agency (Alvesson, 1994). The accumulated experience allows the organization to adapt.

Another group of authors stresses the innovative potential of identity. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) show how ambiguity by design can lead to making sense anew of central and distinctive organizational attributes and thus enable strategic change. Corley and Gioia (2004) describe the process of organizational identity change as involving a passage through a state of ambiguity with characteristic temporal identity discrepancies, which enables innovative

learning. Hatch and Schultz (1997; 2002) depict organizational identity as a dynamic process, where culture and environment take part in its constant co-creation. The process can be repetitive, but it has also considerable potential for innovative learning, when new impulses are brought into the exchange.

Both these perspectives share a common view on the relationship between identity and forgetting: some forgetting is inevitable. It may be harmful or useful depending on whether it is linked to the learning process. We refer to this as “single-loop forgetting”, i.e., when the organization modifies its actions according to the difference between something (image, environmental expectation) and its identity, in the sense that it gets rid of some of its qualities such as knowledge or traditions.

The current text takes a step further. We adopt Hatch and Schultz's (1997; 2002) model of identity construction, together with its emphasis on creativity. However, we look at what happens to the results of the process when oblivion is present, that is, the organization forgets that it has forgotten (“double-loop forgetting”). The latter kind of forgetting involves a questioning of important values and goals, while at the same time it means dropping them (see Tab.2).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Following Czarniawska (1997), we choose to regard organizational identity as a narrative project. The genre of this narrative is that of the autobiography, recited before an audience, real or imaginary. The intention with the organizational autobiography is the same as that of any autobiography—to appear acceptable and be accepted, to present the organization's actions as reasonable, justified and rational. The tale is spun and re-spun anew constantly in order to correspond with current audiences. It is, however, a rather consistent kind of narrative, often referring to the same episodes, but, most significantly, seeking to convince the audience about its coherence.

The dynamic model of organizational identity by Hatch and Schultz (1997; 2002) presents the phases of process of organizational identity construction. Identity is a product of the interaction between the internal culture and the external image. The component processes are the following: *reflecting*, or the way values are rooted in culture through assumptions; *expressing*, the way culture communicates itself; *mirroring*, the ways in which identity is affected by the images of others; and *impressing*, the processes by which identity expressions impress the images of others. All these processes can, for our purposes, be translated into narrative terms.

[Insert Fig. 1 about here]

We have changed the names of the processes to emphasize the narrative character of our reading of the model (see Fig. 1). Apart from this modification, we have retained its original contents. Reflecting is, in our version of the model, the *revising* of the cultural tale, the way that the identity narrative influences the culture of the organization. Expressing becomes *reciting*, the actual telling of the tale to communicate what the culture stands for. Mirroring is called *reviewing* of the narrative, and it is based on how the readers react, or how the organization expects them to react. Impressing is the *reading* of the narrative, whereupon the audience influenced by the story and is ready to react. We emphasize the narrative dimension of the identity construction process in this text and at the same time, we play down the broader cultural significance, such as the role played by traditions, rituals, etc. We use the term culture in the singular and by that we mean the symbolic narrative potential containing possible plots and not a unified “shared” corporate culture. The main “biography” of an organization is linked to its “culture” seen as a kind of symbolic dictionary—and the manifold narratives and ante-narratives are constantly spun by the social actors and various groups. This works similarly to how players engaging in a role-playing game session develop a collective narrative potential. A role-playing game involves mutual storytelling with a leading

narrator, known as the game master or the storyteller. Kociatkiewicz (2000) shows an example of how this process may work. He presents role-playing sessions where different players tried to co-create new realities. Every time they set out with no previous assumptions or rules, and their task consisted of constructing both their character and their context together with other players. The construction of identities took place simultaneously with the process of reality creation. Indeed, the characters took shape through their contributions and reactions to the common reality construction process. The more they interacted, the more their identities materialized. This experiment illustrates Czarniawska-Joerges' (1994) point that every time identity is constructed, it happens anew and is contextual. The actors may use cues addressed to them by others, or develop their own ideas, and translate them into the identity narrative. As a result of this unpredictable process the effects sometimes seem to be quite coherent. A tale constantly in progress seems to be completed every time it is told. The successful spinning of identity narratives presupposes memory. The actors participating in Kociatkiewicz's role-playing sessions (2000), as well as the organizations described by Czarniawska (1997) about dramas of organizational identity rely on crucial elements being remembered by key participants of the creation processes: actors must know who they are and what key elements of their shared reality are. We will now describe about an organization where this memory was warped.

Method

The empirical material presented in this article is part of a larger longitudinal ethnographic study (Czarniawska, 2008; Van Maanen, 1988) Ethnography is a method enabling gaining insights about local knowledge and processes (Watson, 1994/1997; Yanow, 2000). It is based on a prolonged and intensive immersion in the field, presupposing a cognitively intensive engagement (Rosen, 2000). Anthropology is a mindset: a constant need to identify the

problem and a reluctance to take anything for granted, and a symmetrical project involving the study of others life and work which in turn becomes a part of the observer's life and work (Czarniawska, 2008). It enables explorations beyond surfaces and insights about the world and ourselves (Pader, 2006).

This study was carried out in the field by one the authors, under the other author's supervision. The study lasted between January 2003 and January 2008 and was carried out in three phases, each lasting 1-4 months, of intensive presence in the field. In between these instances, we held email and phone contact with the actors. Initially, we studied the culture of two Polish subsidiaries of American pharmaceutical multinationals in times of a market downturn. Then we chose one organization only and narrowed down our focus. The main methods used were in-depth interviews and direct observations (Rosen, 2000), as well as text analysis (Czarniawska, 2004; Ginger, 2006)². In 2005, we observed a traumatic period in the company's history, which led to a period of rapid decline. Subsequently, in 2006 a new general manager was introduced to the company and a planned change was initiated. A consulting company was hired to carry out the project, and we were allowed to observe its actions. In 2007 we introduced a retrospective focus in our study and began asking the interlocutors about historical events. In 2008 we shifted focus to a review of the change management process. Most of the material used in this paper was collected between 2006 and 2007. Table 3 portrays the hallmarks of the study, according to Yanow's (2006) typology.

[Insert Table 3 here]

In all, 85 interviews were carried out, lasting from 40 minutes to three hours, which were recorded and transcribed. We adopted a narrative perspective during the gathering of data as well as in the process of interpretation (Czarniawska, 2004). Stories that abound in organizations can be collected by the researcher (Gabriel, 2000)—something we actively

² We also carried out an innovative study we called organizational collages; however, we do not use the material collected in this way in the present paper.

sought to do. The material can then be interpreted through a narrative lens, i.e., through narrative thinking in the process of theorizing (Czarniawska, 2008). Narratives are a mode of knowing and a mode of communication (ibid.). A story is a special kind of narrative, equipped with a plot and characters (Gabriel, 2000). The archetypical tale which we chose as our main interpretive tool is another kind of narrative—it has a profound cultural resonance. We present it closer in the section on archetypes.

The story of Erebus

Erebus³, as we will refer to the organization, is a Polish subsidiary of an American pharmaceutical concern. It has been on the Polish market for more than ten years. From its beginnings it has always been managed by nationals of various origins who stayed on for two years, used the Polish subsidiary as springboard for success and then left. Each of them had a different managerial style; they set themselves other priorities and responded to market changes drawing on their experiences gathered in various places all over the world. They were not regarded as permanently tied to the organization:

Everybody knew that they would come here for two years. They learnt for the first year and secured themselves better jobs during the second one. This is how people saw it and this is how it was really like. (Oscar, top manager)

By and large, the informants spoke of the past and of the different managers in a very laconic manner. Some of them seemed surprised with questions related to the past and at times questioned their rationale, as in the following example where the interviewer asks for more specific information and the interviewee gets impatient:

³ Erebus was part of Hades, the underworld of Greek mythology and means “shadow.”

Ricky, the interviewee: No, I try to forget about it, I try not to remember about it. This does not exist any longer. Why should I come back to it?

Similarly, for a big group of interlocutors, the past did not matter and had no relevance here and now. We did not get the impression the past was a taboo, rather that it was gone; at best, it was a blurred image. As the interviews progressed, and not necessarily in connection to questions about the past, some respondents started to recall the most recent past. Dark stories of management trauma started to emerge and escalate. The previous general manager was an authoritarian figure in favor of micro-management and management by fear.

He was the best boss, the best product manager, the best sales representative, the best unit manager, etc. He wanted to do and decide about everything himself. So what followed was a total incapacitation of people. Consequently people came to a conclusion that it was pointless to do things right, because they knew that it would be changed anyway. [...] Even the simplest decision had to get his approval. (Oscar, top manager)

The boss focused on tightening internal procedures. Overgrown bureaucracy hampered any action, killed initiative and aggravated the economic problems leading to distrust. Waves of redundancies plagued the company. As a result of insufficient communication, disempowerment and intimidation, the company grew deserted. Its output and public profile were seriously damaged even as market share took a tumble. Some employees confessed to being embarrassed to work there, and many expressed fear and uncertainty.

Generally, he evoked very negative emotions. [...] In the company there was this fear and I felt this fear, too. There were a lot of meetings organized and at the end of every such meeting we had to talk. I was absolutely terrified that I was to talk about the results that I was not satisfied with. I had the feeling that I couldn't do anything about it

because I had no tools and no means and that I would be forced again to talk about it, that I would be forced to talk about something that was most important for the company and I had nothing to be proud of. And this was also terror that the company was heading to a beautiful disaster and that everything was about to fall apart and that we would all be fired. (Otis, Area Sales Manager)

Employees felt that their work was worthless:

We couldn't say anything, we couldn't do anything. And it's us perceived as criminals [...] We constantly had to confess [our sins] to him [...] These were abnormal times and the company was abnormal as well. Everything we did could go to the shredder. We mainly dug in papers. (Ericka, Area Sales Manager)

These controls were to justify all these procedures as if we were some criminals. This was his favourite saying: Unchain your brain. Such sayings and their visualizations tired people. He asked us to think creatively but he killed this creativity himself. (Earl, Sales Force)

Finally, after two years when the boss was transferred to a different location, an overwhelming majority of his staff celebrated the moment. The new general manager was welcomed with a relief, the more so that he was the first Polish head of this subsidiary. However, the damage had already been done.

We stopped fighting; we started to treat this sick reality as normal. [...] Now there is the new general manager and Doris who came with him. She has this attitude of somebody who came from the outside and thinks that we can fight, we can try. She often comes up against a wall and bangs her head against this wall and [people tell her] that things can't be changed. But at least she is trying and this is something that we have lost. (Nina, Area Sales Manager)

The new General Manager defined his goal to be improving financial results by culture management:

One of our key projects for this year is corporate culture. We would like to make progress. (Ted, General Manager II)

All the newly undertaken activities such as simplification of procedures, introduction of a new corporate structure, redefining responsibilities of various departments, creation and implementation of new bonus and career path system were labeled as “building from scratch.” Employees with longer tenure were sometimes skeptical of “all this newness”:

My new boss has a fairly light-hearted attitude to all the admin and paperwork. [...] I sometimes get the impression that he thinks that we can arrange things spontaneously but we come up against some procedures. [...] I reckon he should be more aware of all these regulations. (Emily, Assistant)

The language used by the new management suggested a radical shift: “building a new culture”, “putting things in order”, “redefining priorities”, “starting everything from scratch”. It was visible during the interviews and observations that the new management was drawing a clear line between the bad old days and the present which was an antithesis of what had happened before. The “before” was understood as the last two problematic years. Then the emphasis was placed on the past aspect of the “used to” form. It implied that now things were done differently:

It was really interesting when I came here that there was this lack of accepted standards of behavior, starting already from the reception. [...] or I was taken to the car park where I was given a dirty car; it was absolutely filthy inside. And it was sort of normal. [...] I don't know if there were no norms here before or what. (Doris, Top Manager)

Interestingly, the diminishing of the past was at odds with the corporate values the General Manager was aiming to re-launch along with his management team. One of the values of the company was endurance, which meant “Respect for the history of the company and strive for the future”. However, this alleged respect and pride were hardly detectable in everyday activities of the company. It remained an empty declaration, which surprisingly was confirmed by both old and new employees and even the management itself:

Respect for the past? I don't think so. We talk a little about it but generally, we don't look back much. So this is neither respect nor lack of respect. (Iris, Top Manager)

We are leaving the past behind. Respect for the past means that we are looking positively at something, e.g., at what happened in the company. But I'd rather remember about these negative things only in the context of not repeating the same mistakes. (Ian, Sales Manager)

A story told by one of the employees captures the feelings of older employees well about the new management's attitude towards the past:

There was a situation once that we came to a big meeting in a beautiful castle. Everything was great till we reached our room and everybody found a little box on their pillow with a letter. In the box there was this little pin badge [corporate logo]. It seems like a nice gesture, don't you think? But for many years this badge symbolized something and I don't know if it still does. It was given to employees who had worked with the company for five years. These badges were made of gold. For ten years, you would get the same badge but with a little diamond. [...] They used to give such badges. If you came to meetings with this badge you felt that you were a senior employee. You felt appreciated. [...] Precisely there, at that meeting [in the castle], someone said: “I don't know some people, they are all coming with the pin badge on their lapels, so they

must have been working here for some time and I should know them.” And then I told him: “No, they have given this badge to everyone.” He took the badge off and put it to his pocket. (Warren, Administrator)

The past became trivialized through the belittling of one of the symbols. By putting the badge in the pocket, the older employee, in turn, trivialized the power of the present. He expressed his lack of awe for such a degraded symbol.

All that mattered now was how the investors judged the company based on the company’s results:

We are now concentrating more on the results than on what was before. I get the feeling that we are trying not to look back at what used to be. (Warren, Administrator)

And in fact the sales results did improve significantly since the change of management.

Commercial success served as legitimization for the new ideas:

[The new General Manager] poured enthusiasm into people’s hearts that it is possible to achieve good results. Results confirm [...] what he had said. [...] Now I believe one can see that the level of motivation in the team has risen due to the fact that the promises of a good result lead to a good result. (Jeff, Top Manager)

The reaction to the changes was initially positive. Both the new and old employees looked at the new times with relief and anticipation:

Right now there is something new, its new quality. (Lois, Financial Officer)

[W]e are starting anew, because the past negative changes ruined our public profile. [...]

I wonder what is going to happen next. (Emily, Assistant)

However, it soon turned out that the anticipated changes failed to meet the expectations of many employees. In subsequent interviews, it became clear that the collective had dissipated

and a set of small groups began to crystallize along the lines of (dis)satisfaction with the changes. By and large, the sales force was rather content:

By implementing a new beginning of the company [the new general manager] planted a small tree, which when properly looked after has a chance of becoming a beautiful and formidable tree. It's a symbol of durability and good direction. (Richard, Marketing Specialist)

However, they refrained from addressing the past or the shared present, in the sense of Erebus-as-a-collective. Their stories focused on their satisfaction with themselves and with management. Office employees not involved in sales felt deeply disappointed and regarded the changes as a letdown. Many of them had been with the company for many years and now felt pushed to the slow track where they remained feeling unappreciated:

I have the impression that our department is not appreciated enough. [...] I guess that we are seen as people who come to work to drink coffee while in fact we have more work than we can handle. [...] We are not noticed. [...]. People see only our mistakes and not the things that we do right. (Irena, Administrator)

The current disjointed events and practices at the Erebus tended to support their view that the company should not be trusted. On one occasion the employees were promised an incentive trip to California if certain targets were met. However, when the targets were achieved, only the sales and marketing people went on the trip along with the management. Management acted as if no promises had ever been made. This was regarded as deceptive behavior by the office personnel, who clearly remembered that they were all promised such a voyage:

Everybody understood that there was going to be an incentive trip to California. The more so that it was announced during a meeting where the bonus system was explained to the support departments so to people who are not going. [...] It is important that this

was announced as a reward for the company. And everybody commented that this was going to be an incentive trip like in [the really old times] when everybody was going.

(Irena, Administrator)

Employees with a long tenure at the company were the most dissatisfied group with little hope for the future. They often pointed at the instrumental treatment of employees and a total focus on sales results:

There is pressure from all sides. It's a passionate chase. [...] Some people can't put up with it. There's no chance of diverting from the chosen path. There's some hope but there's also this haste that the results must be met. [...] It sometimes looks like a tornado that may go in any direction, you never know where. [...] People are treated anonymously. [...] People are not treated as talents, they exist in the minds of the management as potential digits. (Ian, Sales Manager)

In the view of the new management none of this was a problem since the financial results looked promising and the organization was like a baby who had the whole life ahead of itself and very little behind:

I guess that the [corporate] values and their promotion are to help us so that the employees are more skilled in behaviors [that show certain standards]. [...] We changed the employees, improved the structure and introduced new business systems. But we can say that [the organization] is still a baby. It's only sitting now, but can't walk yet. It has only been six months [since I and other managers joined the company and started to introduce the changes]. It is going to start walking in the next six months and we still need some time before it starts running. (Ted, Top Manager)

Discussion

Erebus suffers from a special kind of memory loss. It is not the loss of knowledge, or a case of forgetting *what*. Some loss of knowledge had occurred while the previous general manager was in office and when many experienced employees had left the company. Currently the company does not, however, experience any major knowledge deficiency. It takes pride in having professional staff that is able to deliver results, which is reflected in the bottom-line. As for attempts at strategic forgetting, it is probably the intent of the current management. Yet fragments of the past, and especially the parts of it that would have been the most beneficial to forget, would trouble the organization, as can be observed in statements of the new management team when they emphasize the dichotomy between the “bad past” and the “good present.” Neither is it a story about the forgetting of attitudes, or forgetting *how to*. Employees and management repeatedly refer to old attitudes and procedures that are much alive, obstructing change or making it meaningless. However, the individuals’ memories are not used in collective remembrance. “The old Erebus” instead becomes an organizational shadow, insisting on the old ways of doing things, often epitomizing a dejected attitude when the “new Erebus” refuses to do so. Neither is the tale of Erebus a story of “who is forgetting,” nor is it about cultural eradication of traditions. Many traditions have been lost, and some are redefined in ways that make them meaningless to the employees. The past is invented and depicted as another management novelty, not a lived experience that becomes a collection of fragmentated phantoms, a mythical “old Erebus” living on and laughing in the face of renewal an indefinite “antithesis” of the now. The people of Erebus are restrained by some mystical “force” that makes them unable to endeavor changing things, whereas the new managers, coming from the outside, are not and thus at least can try. No one seems to remember why this is so, or, indeed, remember that there is something to *be* remembered. As we see it, Erebus is

experiencing a case of archetypal forgetting. The organization has gone into a mode of identity construction that involves oblivion as its focal point, in the place of the narrative process where the narrated identity should have been emerging (see Fig. 2).

[Insert Fig. 2 about here]

The identity narrative of the organization undergoes several crucial distortions, as illustrated by the model. The *reciting* of the story springs from a ruptured culture, where the links between the past, present and future are cut off. The reciting is made up of accidentally associated elements; for example, the traditional emblem for long-time service being handed out to employees regardless of their tenure, or when the employees refuse to talk about the past and instead invoke their private feelings when expected to describe the organization's cultural values. They talk about feelings of joy but also confusion, sadness and frustration when talking about what the company stands for and about its present shape and future. These feelings change, and not infrequently. The *revising* of the autobiography, normally intended to embed identity in culture, implants a fragmented tale instead of a coherent one. The accidental elements put together in the story enforce the appearance that this is indeed normal. Individuals and groups may remember past events, but the organization does not make use of the memories to build a coherent identity narrative. Instead, they "float" in the narrative texture and management picks up this and that, whenever they find a piece useful for their purposes, without much regard to what Jung (1968) would call "the collective unconscious" or even to the conscious the sense of collective being. For example, the new management speaks of "respect for tradition" even though it is evident that the tradition they refer to is a simulacrum or has perhaps not been established yet. This causes a strange sense of confused identity as cultural norm. The employees bemoan the drive to change things, they complain about an "old Erebus" that seems to be perpetually looming, a mystical force no one can really adequately describe. This is, we believe, the obliterated past that haunts the

organization and thus reinforces the fragmentation of the narrative, it becomes part of the everyday sensemaking while at the same time its origins remain completely obscure. The *reading* of the narrative by the audiences is marked by attempts at seduction. The company, particularly in the voice of the new management and some new employees, expresses ideas aimed to charm and to enchant, such as stories about “building everything from scratch,” “redefining the work” of various organizational actors and at the same time, about the “promotion of long existing values,” etc. These words are obviously meant to ring well for the readers. If the readers take an active part in the reading process and let themselves be seduced by them, a successful façade is constructed in the place of the organization’s image. Among the audiences toward whom these seductive readings are directed are stakeholders, who are expected to read the statements and approve the results in the form of engagement, such as investments, as well as employees, whose approval is sought in the form of enthusiasm. The narration process is enforcing and perpetuating oblivion in the place of identity. The elements hang together, even if they lack a plot and are incoherent as long as the three elements culture, image and identity, deficient as they are, engage in the interplay and react to the processes as if they were a part of a coherent identity narrative. The story spins on as if written automatically by ghosts—and so all is well.

Conclusion: Organization losing its religion

Organizational oblivion affects the process of identity narrative construction. The narrative ceases to be a coherent story, which needs to have at least three elements: the initial equilibrium, an action or an event that disrupts it and the final equilibrium. The means by which the final equilibrium is reached, i.e., the manner in which the three elements are brought together to make sense is the plot of the story (Czarniawska, 2004). Stories entertain and inspire, they intensely engage the imagination of the storyteller, as well as of the audience

(Gabriel, 2000). All these elements lack in the autobiographic account of the organization marked by oblivion. This account may also lose the characteristics of a retrospective narrative, i.e., the beginning, middle and end get cut loose and mixed up. The autobiography then becomes a “non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and pre-narrative speculation, a bet” (Boje, 2001, p. 1). However, unlike Boje’s ante-narratives, it is not necessarily forward-looking, as the drive and desire to recite are lost. Neither is it retrospective, but instead, it drifts in a temporal and spatial limbo. Oblivion deprives the narrative of organizational identity and makes them *liquid* autobiographies, in Bauman’s terminology (2000), or one characterized by the evocation of uncertainty, chaotic symbolic order and an inherent ambivalence as how it is to be made sense of socially. In fact, both the sensemaking and the ambivalence thereof become privatized: each reader struggles with the task anew and due to a lack of collective pool of traditions, no experiences are accumulated for the use of others. These qualities, fragmentation and liquidity, mark what we term “double-loop forgetting,” a forgetting that questions its own rationale and becomes forgotten.

What makes organizations forget themselves? How does one recognize the organizational Lethe? We are not entitled to any definitive conclusions, but would like to share some of our ideas, warning that they are but tentative suppositions. Oblivion is, most likely, as overdetermined as most social and organizational phenomena (Weick, 1969/1979). However, our material points most explicitly to the trauma of destructive leadership as the culprit. We also believe that the short-term orientation of the company could have had an impact, the fact that managers seemed to come and go not much caring about continuity, other than paying it lip-service. Each such change included a transition phase when the new executive tried to make sense of the culture they were suddenly thrown into. Their concern was about the next quarter: parameters that would be used in their evaluation. They had no time and need to refer

to the past. For them the only time-reference that mattered was the starting and finishing point of their tenure.

The consequences of organizational drinking from the waters of Lethe are potentially serious. As our material also shows, they may kill inspiration and the desire for learning. Höpfl (2000) talks about the actor's ability to move the audience with meaningful transformational metaphors. Likewise, organizations can move and inspire when they are ready to abandon the static for the dangerously flowing. Being moved is about the weight of experience and the surge of enthusiasm, the carrying of the past by the power of the stream of passion and hope. Such inspiration offers liberation from past experience while depending on the past experience at the same time by transporting it along a trajectory towards the future. It gives people hope and the desire to learn.

Oblivion not only fragmentates the identity narrative, but also ruptures the plot. It also makes one lose one's sense of purpose, as the weight of experience is dropped and the past no longer exercises its gravity. Inspiration vanishes, and with it the enthusiasm and lust for learning and for life itself. Lethe deprives organizational cultures of a sense of shared continuity, joy, and joint responsibility. They become dispirited, as in the poem *Spleen* by Charles Baudelaire:

I'm like some king in whose corrupted veins
Flows aged blood; who rules a land of rains;
Who, young in years, is old in all distress;
Who flees good counsel to find weariness
[...]
The sage who takes his gold essays in vain
To purge away the old corrupted strain,
His baths of blood, that in the days of old
The Romans used when their hot blood grew cold,

Will never warm this dead man's bloodless pains,
For green Lethean water fills his veins.

Charles Baudelaire (Huneker, 1919)

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Understandings of forgetting	Attributes of forgetting	Selected authors
Forgetting what? – role of forgetting in organizational knowledge / forgetting as strategy/ideology literature	+ supports organizational learning	Argyris and Schön, 1978; Douglas, 1986; Walsh, 1995; Dodgson, 1993; Bowker, 1997; Easterby-Smith, Antonacopoulou, Simm and Lyles, 2004; de Holan and Philips, 2004; de Holan, Philips and Lawrence, 2004; de Holan and Philips, 2004; Harris and Weg-Prosser, 2007
	– loss of knowledge	
Forgetting how to? – forgetting of attitudes	+ enables organizational renewal / entrepreneurship	Johannisson, 1991; Hjorth and Johannisson, 1997
	– unlearning of attitudes stimulating learning	
Who is forgetting? – forgetting as a cultural practice	+ related to organizational dynamics	Feldman and Feldman, 2006; Gioia, Corley and Fabbi (2002)
	– rupture of link between past and present	
Forgetting one has forgotten – forgetting as archetype or “double-loop forgetting”	– identity loss; antonym of learning	Current text

Table 1: Different understandings of organizational forgetting

	Single-loop learning	Double-loop learning
Forgetting (“single-loop forgetting”)	Adaptation: e.g., Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000); Dutton and Dukerich (1991); Alvesson (1994); Pratt and Foreman (2000); Corley (2004); Fiol (2002)	Innovation: e.g., Corley and Gioia (2004); Hatch and Schultz (1997; 2002); Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991)
Oblivion (“double-loop forgetting”)	–	Innovation or Fragmentation: Current text

Table 2: Relationships between identity, learning and forgetting

Hallmarks of interpretive research	Description	Justification
Time	October 2003—January 2008, in 3 intensive phases of data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interesting period • Key moments of change: natural and managed
Duration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 months: ca 3 times a week • 3 months: daily presence in the field first half the time; visits second half • 1 month: intensive daily presence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependent on access
Space: research settings	Polish subsidiary of an American pharmaceutical company, all departments of one division	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access and research interest
Exposure	Observation and communication; contact with employees with varying tenure, seniority and departmental affiliation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Story-collection from various levels and perspectives
Silences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One manager and one employee refused interview • Several refused to answer or avoided questions about past 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transferred • Disapproval of question
Researcher's role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A: ethnographer, story collector; • B: supervisor, storyteller 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One author physically present in the field; other interpretively
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gatekeeper • Acceptance • Presentation of findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friend in the field • The field wants to “learn” from research
Being there	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience • Tapes and Transcriptions • Material 	Symmetric storytelling; collecting stories to write story

Table 3: Hallmarks of study (based on Yanow, 2006)