

No Excuses

by Daniel J. Bressler, MD



THE TERM “qualia” is used in philosophy and neuroscience to denote the internal and personal experience of a labeled fact about the world. When you say, “Throw me that blue beach ball,” one might assume that the “blueness” of the ball is the same for you and for the friend who you hope will pick it up and toss it your way. But we have no way of knowing whether her blue is the same as your blue. For normally sighted (and cooperative) people, we can come up with reliable designations (she picks up the blue beach ball and not the red one when requested), but that is not the same as equality of private experience. Perhaps, in her head, what looks blue to me “in fact” looks red to her. We have no precise way of knowing, even with sophisticated fMRI or EEG correlation tests. It seems there is a feature of irreducible ambiguity when one makes the journey from objective materiality to subjective consciousness.

In taking a history from a patient, I am trying to get them to describe both external events (“I was hospitalized for a head injury when I was 16”) and internal experiences (“My headaches are typically preceded by waving lights and a vague sense of déjà vu”). Sometimes the gap between what they are trying to explain and what I can understand (and, moreover, put into a coherent narrative of a disease process) is maddeningly yawning. I ask, tell me the story again. Are there any pieces

you’ve left out? Even after 30 years of practice, I shake my head sometimes at the sheer incomprehensibility of another person’s inner experience. Most of the time, I think I “get it,” but even then doubts persist.

Perhaps this doubt is a good thing. Perhaps this is simply me brushing up against that irrefutable inexactitude of language, of inter-subjectivity, of communication. It doesn’t relieve me of trying to understand a patient’s strange set of symptoms any more than it exonerates me from the responsibility of communicating back to the patient what I know. It does, however, provide a kind of humbling reassurance that I’ll never get it just right. Try as we may (and try we must), there remains a bedrock mystery to what I can know.

This poem, *No Excuses*, is an attempt to cheer myself on when the “yawning gap” seems daunting. Other than taking a vow of silence — an option not widely available — it seems that we have no excuses and, in fact, no choice. **SDP**

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No Excuses

*Not just poetry
But all language is an
Assault on the inexpressible
A coarse and comical pantomime
Performed in dim light across a Grand Canyon
You standing on the North Rim of your experience
And me on the South Rim of mine.*

*Given the folly of conveying even one dull thing,
 (“chipped red brick,” or “one cup of coffee, regular”)
How dare we attempt the task of saying,
 “God in heaven” or “I love you?”*

*And yet we laugh at the same jokes (fooled again!)
And cry at the same sad news of loss.
We imagine precise empathy in a way we might conclude
Synchronous swimmers are all thinking one yoked thought.*

*But as with hard science, so with soft syllables:
The art is knowing how and how much
To trust the approximation; each article of speech bounded
By confidence intervals, each with its own standard deviation.*

*And then, informed humility aside, to go for it:
To attempt the impossible task of saying
Exactly what you mean, what you see and feel,
And worry later (like now) whether anyone can really understand.*

*So don’t try to tell me “there are no words for it.”
There are no words for anything. Invent the metaphor.
Create the simile. Construct the illustration.
Stuff the scribbled message in the bottle
Already, and toss it out to sea.*