

A large, white, stylized number '9' is positioned on the left side of the image. The background is a vast, flat, snow-covered landscape under a clear blue sky. A trail of footprints leads from the bottom right towards the horizon. The overall scene is bright and serene.

9

The Snowflake Moment

Presenting the Future Today

Scott Schwertly

Individuality is almost universally celebrated in Western culture.

If you disagree, then you, Lady Gaga's meat-suit, and I will just have to respectfully go our separate ways. Celebrities, especially musicians, can seem to represent the lunatic fringe of this culture of the individual, but they are far from original in their pursuits; they're simply the most adept at manifesting the yearning externally. Inherent in the concept of individuality is the notion that we are meant to effect change on our world. The presenters I know and counsel strive to do so every time they step on stage, but one of the most difficult challenges comes out of a very simple question: do I change current reality today, or do I cast a vision for a better tomorrow?

To answer, we have to unpack this idea of individuality. From fingertips to snowflakes, we're a society that adores uniqueness. There's something soothing about the belief that we are meant to be different because, so often, we feel so apart from our fellow humans. In acknowledging our differences, we're capable of deeper relationships with others. It's counterintuitive, but accepting ourselves for who we are makes it easier to mingle with the people around us. Being different helps us stick together.

One of the first craft projects I remember from being a child was the making of paper snowflakes. We folded the white construction paper into symmetric shapes and used shoddy plastic scissors to cut the variations. The end result was a mathematical replica of a snowflake, and everyone's was basically the same. Of course, an adept teacher can always carry the lesson forward into the realm of individuality, as mine did. We learned that no two snowflakes are alike. Not just per snow, but per season, per history. It's a confounding thought, one that challenges even our adult conceptions of randomness. In fact, it applies the tenets of originality to an uncomfortably large sample size: we like to feel unique, but even the tingly feeling of differentiation has its limits. Loneliness can await the wanderer: just ask any presenter who has pushed the limits of social norms on stage and met the soul-crushing sound of a silent and wincing audience.

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But there's more to this story of individualism than just end results, especially of late. Reflecting a resurgent interest in the truth about snowflakes, Wilson Bentley, the famed snowflake photographer, has been popping up in various information outlets: The New Yorker, Donald Miller's *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*, on YouTube, etc. His photographic work revolutionized our understanding of frozen precipitation. In fact, revolutionize is a misnomer; he took a previously insignificant meteorological occurrence and introduced it to the archives of human metaphor. No two snowflakes are alike, and every winter scores of children learn to celebrate being different through this frozen (or should I say sublime) medium.

Sublimity, it turns out, is actually a vital and undervalued trait in a snowflake's life, one that modifies the tried-and-true anecdotes we often hear about snowflakes. Technically speaking, sublimity refers to matter that changes directly from vapor to solid states (and vice versa). Snowflakes, it seems, are very tenuously snowflakes. And yet, considering the relative fragility of their existence, they do fall thousands of feet to blanket the terrestrial landscape, and it is only in the final 4-5 feet that Wilson Bentley took his iconic photographs. In other words, we celebrate just a fraction of an extraordinary lifespan when we examine snow at ground level.

By contrast, when elderly people die, we spend days, weeks, and even years recounting their lives. It seems that with humans we understand the importance of process, but with snowflakes we are principally results-oriented. The disparity is not reserved for snow, however.

This tendency to focus on present-tense occurrences is evident in relationships and in business—in every facet of life, for that matter. Business experts and life coaches call it a focus on current reality: it's an obsession with the way things are without the ability to consider how they could be, and how to get from here to there.

The lion's share of a snowflake's existence is spent airborne. Sublimation occurs, and vapor turns directly into the solid, crystalline form of a snowflake. (Without sublimation, we get sleet: water vapor to water to ice.) Countless variables are at work even at the outset of a snowflake's life: barometric pressure, wind speed, temperature, cloud density, and more play a part in the initial formation of the snowflake's design. From the human perspective, as we wait on the ground at what is undeniably the end of the snowflake's life, these variables are fairly irrelevant. Sure, they impact the result, but they are random and fleeting.

Fleeting, of course, because even as the snowflake is formed the circumstances that governed its composition are shifting. The snowflake is colliding with other snowflakes, traveling through pockets of air that vary in every possible way, traveling at speeds from 1.5 mph to 9 mph and, even still, changing every step of the way. When a snowflake lands in the palm of a hand or on a child's tongue, it is but the final iteration of a relatively brief lifespan spent in constant transition. That no two snowflakes are alike is the fairly expected result; the wonder is in the journey.

As a metaphor for human individuality, the snowflake as it is understood in popular thought is simply unjust. We are teleological creatures capable of envisioning endings and making steps in the near-term to influence what sort of end we experience, often hoped to be the perfect culmination of our own personal set of ideals. Presentations illustrate this tendency perfectly, with the buildup of psychological pressure followed by earnest rhetoric and high hopes of discovering a new world at the end.

“ We’ve built a world where it’s possible to fly higher than ever, and the tragedy is that we’ve been seduced into believing that we ought to fly ever lower instead.”

But, as humans, we’re also stuck in chronological time: the only way to get to tomorrow is to live today. The only way to change anything is to do something right now. The dichotomous reality—this competition between *carpe diem* and *teles*—is difficult to navigate, and yet in many ways reflects the truest complication of the human experience: though we live, we know one day we won’t.

The snowflake moment we idolize, that final and glorious crystalline state which Bentley captured on black velvet time and time again, does provide justification for everything else. It is the end, and so must mean something, must make a bold statement about the substance and quality of our existence. But the snowflake moment is just one of a countless million moments, an isolated still shot of an existence that is predominantly defined by its very motion. We are what we do every day. Nothing more.

Scientists have proved the value of diversity in so many different ways that they almost seem to disprove the fundamental concept. Darwin thought the variety among finches on Galapagos derived from absolute necessity: adapt or die. And yet other scientists have found that diversity among species is greatest in times of relative ease and abundance: hard times keep the genetic nose to the grindstone, but when survival is easily achieved DNA begins to flex and bend.

Again, the discrepancy seems insurmountable, and this seems true in relationships, business, and presentation styles, too: some branch out as a last-ditch effort when everything else has gone wrong; others push the envelope of convention at the beginning of each day. This is not a discrepancy. It is a paradox.

In life, be it in presentations, business, relationships, religion, or even sport, we have to balance so-called current reality with the ultimate goal. In the New Testament, Paul counsels certain members of the founding Christian church not to merely sit on hilltops and await Jesus's return. There is life to be lived while we wait for conclusions. By the same token, in a football game an interception can have negative value for the team if an incomplete pass on fourth down would have resulted in better field position for the offense. The current moment must be lived, and future moments must be planned for.

In my work in presentation design and training, I encounter this time and again. Presentations can make grand promises about the future while sending the audience away without a thing to do about it. And, over the years I've witnessed countless speakers so obsessed with long-term vision that they never seemed to get around to outlining the short-term tasks that were essential to realize the dream. And, of course, we're all familiar with those who bore us to death with tedious explanations of day-to-day tasks. Few presenters build a balance of the current and the future into their messages. Without vision, presentations cannot thrill and, thus, cannot seal the deal. Without short-term assignments, even audiences that agree can walk away uncommitted.

As is so often the case, balance is the way forward in life, in business, and in presentations. We are right to believe that endings matter: the snowflake's final shape (before sublimation occurs and it returns, once more, to vapor) represents an entire life of exposure to the forces

of nature. Wilson Bentley's photographs are striking not because of the message of individuality but because of the story of individualization. There is power and understanding in balancing process and vision, but each without the other is meaningless.

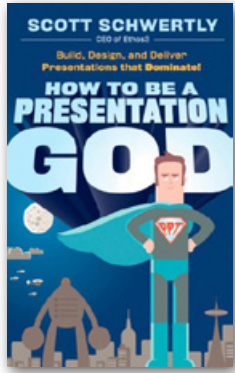
“Art is not a gene or a specific talent. Art is an attitude, culturally driven and available to anyone who chooses to adopt it.”

At the end of the day, we are not inanimate snowflakes governed by an unfeeling physical world. We are subjected to similar randomness, but we are also a force unto ourselves. We make decisions through various combinations of emotions, reason, and energy, and these in turn affect our final snowflake moments. Some of us live life trying to mimic the people around us, but these efforts are futile at best. We, too, are sublime. We are formed in fragility and subjected to personal experience: we can observe and we can learn, but we will never succeed in attaining any life other than our own. Thus, the only way to improve the snowflake moment is to change our vision and change what we do each day. The same is true with presentations: paint the pretty picture, but put them to task, too.

All results stem from behavior. Together, vision and short-term responsibilities create a powerful message that moves people to act, and moves them in a specific direction. To lead in any respect is to accept the burden of accountability today and to defend a vision of tomorrow.

Like snowflakes, we are both heading toward a very definite future and shaped and molded by today. If you give audiences direction for both, your next presentation will shine. If you can do so in business, your company should thrive. **And if you can do so in your everyday life, you will be truly sublime.** 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Besides working full time as the CEO of Ethos3, a leader in presentation design and training, Scott Schwertly is also the co-creator of Tortoise—a life planning iPad app releasing Winter 2012/2013. He has also had the great privilege of working with some of America’s most admired brands, including providing design work or training for companies like Google, Cisco, USA Today, NBC Universal, NewsCorp, Carnival Cruise Lines, and many more.

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