

TOWARDS A LARGER INTEGRITY

SHINING A DIFFERENT LIGHT ON THE ELUSIVE NOTION OF CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

*A (rather elaborate) Invitation to Intrepid Development Practitioners
(and their Organisations) to Engage in a Capacity Development
Adventure*

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Prelude

I'm working with a large group of feisty individuals, a network of social practitioners they call themselves, fifty-six people in a huge circle within the confines of a huge room. It's a group of people who believe that they practise out of a common understanding, but choose to work often on their own, or with other colleagues not part of this network. They want to work out of, and contribute to, the common understanding which forms the inspiration for their work, but they want too to be free individuals working as and when and with whom they will. And they have come together to have a two-day conversation about the strengths and challenges that the network is facing

They had asked me to help them understand what it really takes to work as an effective network, to delve into the mechanics of the thing. I'm not sure that I know the answers to those questions, I said; and I'm not sure they are the right questions. Instead, how would it be to hold a conversation amongst all the members, a real conversation that may enable individuals and the group as a whole to look at sources of inspiration as well as the challenges that have arisen in the wake of such inspiration – as they inevitably do – to try to uncover the beating heart of the impulse, and see what emerges from there.

Not easy to hold a real conversation amongst so large a group. There are times when I ask them to break up into smaller groups to process certain elements of the conversation – so they spend some time looking at their own inspirations, at their own challenges, at stories of practice and functioning and relationship, hoping to lift observations out of the obscurity of everyday happening into connecting threads of meaning and light. Most of the time, though, is spent in conversation amongst the whole group, and here the work is both edged and centred.

Because it turns on a question of boundaries. Each person must be allowed to speak, yet encouraged to listen at the same time. We must find the places of agreement and consensus, but be very aware that these can also lead to presumption, cliché, and the sleep-inducing effects of a common discourse. We must search for places of difference and disagreement, because these places will sharpen and focus the underlying intent; but beware in case disagreement leads to an abrasive fragmentation which disrupts listening. So – work on that knife-edge between periphery and centre all the time.

Each participant is an individual, yet forms the group and is formed by the group. The group does not exist if the individuals find that they are too distant from each other; at the same time the group loses its edge if the centre gets too strong, it falls into a cloying congruence that renders it opaque rather than transparent. The process needs vehemence and passion and a choleric determination that differentiates one thing from another and thrives on individual precision, and at the same time it needs silence, an open withholding, a listening for the murmuring voice of the group itself beyond any individual contribution.

As the conversation progresses the wisdom of the group begins to waft through the circle, as invisible and yet as real as the moisture rising from the leaves of a transpiring tree. It turns out that the genius of this 'network' turns on this question of boundary; the very struggle to maintain individual freedom yet for these individuals to form and be held by a larger grouping makes for a situation in which constantly shifting boundaries must be regarded as the ideal rather than the problem. And in such a case 'being awake' is, as the poet Rilke noted, something that must be done, intended, not just experienced.

An Unwelcome Question

Many years ago, when I was Director of the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA), we wrote – as a reflection on practice – what turned out to be a seminal paper on capacity building. And this year marks an interesting moment. Two edited volumes centred on capacity development are being launched around the very middle of the year. The one is titled *Capacity Development in Practice*¹ and the other *Capacity – Reflecting Collectively on Capacities for Change*². Both these volumes feature strong references back to my and CDRA's original paper *The Developing of Capacity* – first aired in 1993, then improved upon and disseminated in various forms through 1997 – the first in the opening chapter and the second in the closing chapter³. In both instances it is remarked that that paper led us into new ways of thinking about capacity development, and that such thinking is still relevant today and in fact forms part of the basis for the more complex readings of capacity development that are now being articulated.

Yet by and large I think that the real point of that paper was missed, being too outrageous to contemplate; too radical. I think I missed it too, despite having been responsible for it. Somehow, in the effort to *explain*, often what happens is that what you actually *see* gets reduced to a kind of formula (which you never in fact saw because you can't see formulas). Too many readers (and writers) in search of formulas turn mystery into dogma. And the thing itself, *that which you're working with and trying to describe*, gets lost. There are some things that get more and more difficult to say, the more you understand them. (Or to put that differently, the more you seem to understand, the less you realise you know.) Not so strange perhaps; if the mystery is taken out of development practice then we are left with a technology and not a practice at all.

Things have changed since I was writing about capacity building. On the one hand, they've gotten worse than they were, with interventionist, more moneyed, more centralised organisations – who claim to be concerned with, in the forefront of, capacity building – constructing ever more stringent and standardised instruments of bureaucracy in the hope of being able to analyse, predict, plan and control the inputs needed to achieve outputs. On the other hand, those actually working in the field, free of bureaucratic blinkers, and those researching the practitioners in the attempt to find out what really is going on, have developed sophisticated and subtle arguments around capacity development that can make our original work at CDRA appear a little naïve, like a brown paper-covered schoolbook with lined pages and margins down the side of each page.

¹ *Capacity Development in Practice*, Eds Jan Ubels, Naa-Aku Acquaye-Baddoo and Aland Fowler, Earthscan 2010

² *Reflecting Collectively on Capacities for Change*, IDS Bulletin, Volume 41 Number 3 May 2010

³ This paper first emerged through work done by Mzwai Msoki, Sue Soal and myself, on an evaluation of Oxfam Canada's South African Capacity Building Programme, and formed the basis for a UN NGO Liaison publication in 1997.

And yet, and yet, in the mix of the debate between theory and regulation, between responsive practice and technical manual, still it seems that something is being missed, something central and necessary; something is not yet being said, or seen, something radical. I want to have another shot at something, another search for a key; and I want to invite others to research further as well (which is what this invitation is all about).

In *Capacity Development in Practice*, that old CDRA paper is used, I think, because, for the editors, it provided one point of departure for all that follows. A point of departure emphasising the complex nature of capacity and capacity development – that capacity is a layered phenomenon and all layers interpenetrate each other (put differently, there is an *integrity* which speaks of the organisation not merely as system but as organism). That if there is any hierarchy in the layers then that hierarchy is headed by conceptual and attitudinal considerations, where material and technical resources feature lower down, and less importantly. That, and concomitantly, intangible and invisible features of capacity – the ability to conceptualise and to imagine, the adaptability to let go and move on – are more seminal than visible and tangible aspects. That ‘soft’ features of capacity – and of capacity development efforts – are more significant than hard (attitude rather than competency or skill, development facilitation rather than training):

“In short, the elements at the top of the hierarchy of elements of organizational life are ephemeral, transitory, not easily assessed or weighed. They are to a large degree observable only through the effects they have. And they are largely invisible to the organization itself as well as to those practitioners who would intervene to build organizational capacity.”⁴

This point of departure emphasizes the openness, uncertainty and ambiguity of complex systems in which every aspect or element not only interweaves with every other but is entirely dependent on every other for its own functioning and even definition; in other words, it is impossible to separate things out, to find clear boundaries, over space or time or function, and either inside the social organism or between it and its environment – everything is in flux and everything is in relationship. And, as we have seen, in the midst of these complexities the ‘soft’, less tangible and visible, more conceptual and attitudinal aspects of the system will dominate its capacity.

Apart from anything else, this places a great emphasis on qualitative aspects of capacity rather than quantitative. On the ability to ‘read’ and make meaning of what is happening at any given moment. On the ability to respond, in the moment, towards an ever new configuration of circumstances (or reality). On *how* we respond (the manner of our responding). And on the extent to which we are able to reflect critically on our response and how this response jostles with other factors in the emergent (emerging) configuration of the situation.

In all of this we are talking about the seemingly intangible, invisible, ‘soft’ qualities which go to make up the ‘ability to respond’ (responsibility) – the creative, thoughtful

⁴ *Capacity Development in Practice*, p15

and iterative abilities to embrace and differentiate between confidence and vulnerability, between the ability to ‘let go’ yet ‘hold on’ to what is important, between action and reflection, between supporting and challenging, between implementing and facilitating, between outcome and intention. In short, capacity seems to imply an intelligently nuanced approach to the world. Or at least, this aspect of capacity is implicitly up there in the upper echelons of the hierarchy of elements of capacity that that old paper on capacity building refers to.

Such thinking has been taken much farther in the intervening years, and the two books referred to above bear witness to this. And as thinking has moved further into the realm of the ‘invisible, intangible and soft’, so the ambiguities of practice have come to the fore. I reference now two papers from *Reflecting Collectively on Capacities for Change*.

“The core ‘worry’ mentioned earlier is that development practitioners will take complexity to just be another challenge that now needs to be mastered, and will look to try to engineer even better ‘solutions’ than before, missing the fundamental message ... I agree with the Land *et al*’s⁵ assertion that capacity development ‘cannot be managed in a conventional sense ...’, but that much about capacity development ‘can be understood and influenced’. But I believe that influence should be purposeful ... that continually takes complexity into account before, during and after acting. This will favour iterative, emergent approaches ... “⁶

“Capacity development interventions, often called capacity building, are activities, programmes, or inputs which are aimed at changing the state of capacity for an organization, person, network, society or context ... Effective capacity development is most likely to result from a range of interventions at different levels that happen over a long period of time. The most familiar type of capacity development intervention is training, which is likely to play a part in any capacity development programme.”⁷

All of this is differentiated, nuanced and strategic in response to the complex and multi-dimensional reality being addressed; practice must move between the lower and higher echelons in the layered hierarchy of capacity, and as such must also move between training, input, management and programmes on the one hand and more ‘iterative and emergent approaches ...’ on the other. A more sophisticated and intelligent reading of capacity development than existed those years ago. At the same time a reading that raises new questions even as it raises new possibilities, pointing the way – or opening the way – towards the question that lies at the heart of this particular call to adventure, the question that lies underneath my earlier assertion that, still and in spite of all that has changed, there is something missing, some understanding, some approach.

⁵ See the reference in the piece

⁶ *A Case for Surfacing Theories of Change for Purposeful Organisational Capacity Building* by Alfredo Ortiz Aragon, in *Reflecting Collectively on Capacities for Change*.

⁷ *Between Pragmatism and Idealism: Implementing a Systemic Approach to Capacity Development*, by Catherine Fisher, in *Reflecting Collectively on Capacities for Change*.

When it comes to the upper echelons of the hierarchy of capacity, where management and training and input and bounded projects and programmes are not as effective and a more iterative and emergent approach is called for, what specifically characterises the approach that we now turn to using? Management and input and training imply the ‘building’ of capacity, whilst the term has shifted subtly, over the years, to capacity development, implying, correctly I believe, that capacity cannot be built, its not an artefact, not an external thing, rather an inner, an approach to something. But ‘capacity development’ still implies a ‘doing to’, while what we really seem to be grappling for, what we seem to be saying, is that a radical reversal in approach and method is called for, because capacity cannot be built or developed from the outside ... it emerges . . . yes ... but how, specifically? How do we help it to emerge if we cannot do anything to it? The radical nature of the shift has not yet been grasped.

Back of Intentionality

Let me approach this from another angle. That old paper, as I’m calling it, features in the final essay of the second book mentioned above. This is an essay by Sue Soal called *The More Things Change the More they Stay the Same*.⁸ Soal, being one of the original researchers and thinkers behind that capacity building theory, observes that the old paper remains as relevant and necessary today as ever, not only for the work that CDRA – the generative source of the theory – does with others, but even more specifically in regard to its own capacity. She writes: “... the article is itself an expression of capacity – of CDRA’s capacity at the time and, given that the organisation has continued to grow and produce, an expression of enduring capacity. It is clear that it is written out of an organisational context that is thoughtful, engaging, purposeful and able to act on its intentions.”⁹ So, she asks, how did CDRA establish and maintain such capacity?

She attributes this to an organisational practice that was established by CDRA in the early years of its existence, the practice of monthly ‘home-weeks’ during which staff meet in an atmosphere of reflection, collegiality, thoughtful observation and accountability to deeply consider themselves, the organisation, their practice and their context. Various methods are employed during these homeweeks, various ways of meeting, observing and processing. Homeweeks took awhile to establish when they were first mooted, but they gradually took hold and have become the heart and life-blood of CDRA’s enduring capacity over the years.

Soal wonders how homeweeks have managed to sustain CDRA’s capacity in this way. She notes that the visible aspects are easy to see – the agenda, the space marked out on the calendar, the people present, the outcomes of their activities – but believes that these alone are not enough to account for the value and achievement of homeweeks, and so postulates five features of the elements underlying this ‘particular form of our approach to learning’. These are the more invisible, intangible, qualitative features: *space* – learning only happens with dedicated space; *rhythm* – a continuity, a steady

⁸ *The More Things Change, the More they Stay the Same?* By Sue Soal, in *Reflecting Collectively on Capacities for Change*.

⁹ *ibid.*

presence that keeps a certain balance and pace between practice and reflection; *a champion* – to ensure practice, persistence, adaptation and a locus of responsibility; *a particular approach* – a clear way of working with learning; and *collegiality* – working with our colleagues in a considered relationship of trust to mediate our relationship to our practice.

I have no doubt that Soal is right, and it's interesting to note how long-term this approach to capacity development is, and what an iterative and emergent approach it is, the opposite end of the scale from time-bound projects and training courses and management interventions. And yet, I don't think this ends the story; it points to something but does not quite reach it. There is something that underlies all this, something yet more radical and oblique that still eludes. I'll try to get at it by looking at a specific moment, or process, that took place – and perhaps still takes place – during those homeweeks.

Monday mornings. First morning of the week, some members of staff had not been around much since the previous homework a month earlier. In the very relaxed meeting space a breakfast had been laid out, a simple breakfast of fruit and rolls and cheese and jam and honey and sometimes egg mayonnaise, and coffee of course, always coffee. People would wander in and take some food and sit around the common, or boardroom, table, and start to talk, to share their month, what had happened to or for or with them, highs and lows, the building towards a question, the sudden onset of an answer, the uncertainty of an intervention, the linking of circumstance to personal action. Stories about work, about life, about our journeys. There was no facilitator and no facilitation, no agenda, no articulated goal or objective or outcome for these sessions, only the occurrence of a real conversation.

And a real conversation did not always occur. Sometimes talk was trivial, anecdotal in the worst sense, inconsequential, irrelevant, arbitrary. What is a 'real' conversation anyway? I think we never knew, didn't talk about it much, often people were scarcely able to discern the difference. Yet something always emerged from a real conversation, and that something, that elusive something, was not always, or even predominantly, content or insight or observation (or question). Mostly it was a sense of leaving that table vibrating ever so slightly, tuned in to the universe, resonating with each other and with a certain mood of inquiry, curiosity, interest, a renewed sense of attention, a palpable sensibility for nuance and meaning; feeling alert and upright and capable and *capacitated* (there is simply no other word for it). When the conversations were this real, we entered the rest of the week with a sense of *intention* that carried through every other meeting, interaction, consideration, and made of homework the wonder that it was (and hopefully still is).

There was, as I say, no stated objective or outcome, no facilitation; and yes, there was sometimes a lapse into mediocrity. This lapse into mediocrity tells us something, by way of contrast, of what a real conversation is all about. Mediocrity could sometimes go on for some time without being observed or remarked upon. It took awhile to realize that real conversation had turned mediocre because what had to be observed was an *absence*, an absence of *holding* of the conversation, the lack of an invisible chalice or container that might *charge* the conversation, the absence of that most intangible of things – *intention*. As though the holding of intention leads to a

continuing intention to hold. Running through every other necessary aspect of homework, this holding of intention was, at least for me, the active formative energy that kept homeworks and learning and the organisation and ourselves *whole and alive*, quivering like hunting hounds with heads back and nostrils wide as we sniffed for the scent of meaning in the air.

So the most capacitating moment, or process, of the week was the moment which could not be mentioned in any fundraising proposal or project planning document, which could barely be thought about, much less talked about, because rendering it too visible made it too self-conscious, too forced and contrived, distorting the resultant conversation into a parody of the real thing. Yet when it was too invisible, too unmentioned and too little thought about it disappeared completely and there was no holding, no intention, at all.

No input, and an unquantifiable outcome that depended, in a sense, on itself, hidden and embedded in everything that went before. We're in the midst of mystery here, and however much we might want to log-frame these observations, they will continue to elude. Does this come close to what Buddhism means by the way of non-action? Certainly it appears to be a counter-intuitive response to the urgency which now besets us on all sides, a sense of urgency that drives us to obsess about action to the exclusion of silence and reflection. Just as it may be the case that our driven sense of urgency is a symptom of the problem rather than a direction towards solution, so the insistent and driven nature of capacity building efforts may release a superficiality that hinders the emergence of capacity.

Radical Reversal

I want to tell you a recent story about my practice, as a way in to something that perhaps cannot be directly spoken about because its very invisibility is part of its power. It's the kind of story that I might have told during those CDRA breakfast meetings. Like, this is what happened to me last month – I think I found myself in the presence of a miracle.

I was facilitating a seven-day long session, part of a learning programme for development practitioners that stretches over six such sessions through the course of two years. My facilitation approach demands intensive preparation and design but equally the ability to let go of the design and move in different directions, depending on the needs and moment of the group. There were over twenty people, and by the end of day three it was clear that, while the design had worked up till that point, it was not going to continue to work. Something else was needed, the group was needing to engage in a different way, and I had to 'create' that way. I took my evening meal with the group, then went off to my room to think. These situations never cease to challenge and scare me; I have to create something new out of nothing. I thought back through the process thus far – perhaps I would be able to convince myself that in fact it was fine to continue with the original design. Nothing doing. I thought around old processes and exercises I have used in different situations before, hoping something would fit. Nothing doing.

I had broken my foot in various places some months before, in a motorbike accident, and so my walking had been limited for some time, I was just beginning to walk without crutches again. And I know that I think better, more creatively, when I'm walking. The place we were staying at had gates that were locked, so I couldn't get out onto the road to walk at night. Instead, I limped up to a grassy space on a slight hill where water tanks stood overlooking the complex, and there, in the unkempt night shadow of the concrete storage towers I started walking in a circle, round and round and round, limping my way to nowhere. I fought and wrestled inside myself to get a sufficiently clear picture of the situation so that I could work with it, I thought of different approaches to the design problem, I thought of the individuals in the group, my relationship with them, their relationships with each other and with the material and their practice. I built one possibility after another, only to have each crumble on further thought. I could definitely feel, through the walking, that my thinking was loosening, becoming more mobile ... but at the same time I felt that I was going round and round in circles, that the circle on the ground was becoming inscribed in my head, that I was getting nowhere. I began to despair, and when despair didn't bring me a posse of angels with solutions, I began to panic, to go cold inside ... what was I going to do, how was I going to sleep tonight, I was about to stumble into failure on the morrow. Eventually I calmed myself – yes, I was getting nowhere and I would fail, I had not succeeded in finding the goods, but perhaps I was still a nice enough guy that I would be able to find something different to do for the rest of my life, so let me give up and go to sleep and go on with the original design and what would happen would happen and I would just have to take the consequences.

And at that moment, truly at that very moment, an idea fluttered into sight, as if from around the corner of my vision, as though it had flown into my head, or into my mindspace, from somewhere entirely other. It was an idea that seemed to express itself in a few words – an articulate idea, though embryonic – and I could see the words strung together, like a little train of an idea (though fluttering in with wings) puffing its way into the station of my mind. I looked at the tiny train, askance, my head cocked to one side, quizzically. As an idea it seemed sound, surprisingly bright and fresh yet also wise, as though it had just been born yet had travelled a long way. I reached out to it, trying – from somewhere in the region of my heart – to feel it for soundness, roundness, reality; I was reeling with surprise. Becoming more familiar with it, I tested it as the solution it was clearly presuming itself to be, began to throw questions at it, challenge it. It responded adroitly, and gradually it grew – I could see it growing, like a plant, like a child – until it provided not only the design solution to the next day but to the rest of the week; more, it provided seeds for new exercises and processes that I had never thought of before. The idea seemed to have a touch of genius to it; I realised I was learning more about the content of the process I was facilitating than I ever knew before.

I stumbled back to my room, urgent to write all this down before it disappeared. As I limped a part of my mind was thinking – wow, what an idea, why had I not been able to think of it? A weird response, supposedly; where did I imagine it had come from, if not from me? But it seemed that this idea was born and come to me from elsewhere, was brought into being, as a new generator in the world, by creative energies that were so vast and infinite that I was really just a station where the idea could arrive, alight, come to rest like a spark from a great fire settling gently on the ground. I knew (and

know) at the same time, that I had prepared the ground, and that no-one else could have had that idea in that way, but this simply meant that I had been able to form a receptive relationship with something vaster by far than me; it does not mean that I built or created that idea myself. Because I know that I did not.

And if this was indeed homework, breakfast time, someone who was listening might have asked whether anyone knew the quote by JW von Goethe which seems to touch appositely on the same image, the quote that goes: “The worst is, that all the thinking in the world does not bring us to thought; we must be right by nature, so that good thoughts may come before us like free children of God, and cry 'Here we are!'.” I do not know what it means to be ‘right by nature’ – I suspect in fact that it requires the kind of disciplined intentionality that is not simply endowed (and I’m sure Goethe thought that too) – and I have no illusions about being spoken to by any god, but I do know that the idea that puffed into the station of my mind that night had precisely the feel about it that Goethe expresses, it felt like a free child of the universe crying hey, here I am (and madly waving)!

Perhaps Goethe would not have been quoted so readily at that fictitious breakfast meeting; I no longer work with CDRA but with a different organisation called The Proteus Initiative, where Goethe’s attempts to differentiate living thinking (appropriate for organic phenomena) from intellectual analysis (which is more suited to an instrumental grasp of inanimate things) form the *raison d’être* for all that we do in the realm of social practice. Nevertheless, there is an implication to this story that resonates with my portrayal of that radical something at the heart of CDRA’s approach to learning and capacity development, that radical something that we are all pointing towards but not quite acknowledging, finding it difficult to articulate or embrace.

We cannot build or develop capacity as we think we do, or wish to – by constructing, implementing, inputting in order to achieve an outcome. We can prepare ourselves, in disciplined fashion, through practices informed by a finely held intentionality, but that which lifts us comes towards us from the vast beyond, enters into our minds, is received as though our brains and our hearts were antennae, feelers sensitised to an intelligence which lives in the world itself. We become capable of perceiving, of receiving, of seeing, of understanding (different from producing). A reversal takes place; at some point the process turns and we find that we are not building anything, but being developed. We do not develop ourselves, or others. We can develop faculties with which to perceive, or receive, but this implies that there is an equal and opposite movement necessary, a letting go, an opening up, which alone will allow something greater to enter. Rilke, master of the poetics of transformation, expressed it thus: “What we choose to fight is so tiny!/What fights with us is so great!/If only we would let ourselves be dominated/ .../ we would become strong too .../Winning does not tempt that man/This is how he grows: by being defeated, decisively/by constantly greater beings.”¹⁰

The Elusive No-thing

We are in the presence of mystery; capacity is developed in a way that is diametrically opposite from the way we imagine. This is the radical reversal, a turning of the flow,

¹⁰ *The Man Watching* by RM Rilke, in *The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart*, ed Robert Bly ...

and (to use Goethe's phrase) an open secret. If you cannot 'make' capacity, you can develop yourself as the kind of home where capacity will want to come visiting, perhaps even reside.

Keats, the English poet, pointed to such a reversal when he ascribed poetic genius to a kind of anti-talent. "Negative Capability", he called it, and explained "that it is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".¹¹ It is not when we are certain, but when we are uncertain, and it is from out of the depths of intentional inquiry, that that which is larger than us, which comes from beyond, has the possibility of entering. (The advent of capacity *must* arrive at us from beyond, for it must always be larger than us, else, by definition, it would not, previously, have been beyond our capacity.)

We strive so much for answer and explanation, out of which to manage and produce, yet a responsive ability depends not in the first instance on a trained intellect but on an imaginative intelligence that alone allows the flexibility and fluidity out of which insight and *the next move forward* may arise (or emerge, precisely). A trained intellect is not intelligence; intelligence recognises that the hidden and the uncertain and the unspoken and the unanswered hold powers within them that form the very foundation of capacity. Poetry itself is one of the places in which these mysteries become most evident. A contemporary American poet, Jane Hirshfield, wrote two marvellous and very short essays that go to the heart of our enquiry here, concerning hiddenness and uncertainty as two generative energies of poetry.¹²

The better the poem, she observes, the more there is to it that cannot be parsed, or paraphrased. You can attempt to explain – or parse or paraphrase – a good poem, but the better it is, the less you will have plumbed of its real meaning, its depth, its resonances and subtleties; the essence of poetry lies in that aspect of it that remains hidden, that aspect that she calls the remainder after everything else has been explained, parsed, paraphrased. This is where the true intelligence of a poem lies.

The poet's use of metaphor and allusion – one observation hidden inside and (yet) thus illuminated by the other (and brought forth partly through choice of word and tone and rhythm and pitch) – mimic and amplify the complexity with which things and their meanings are not merely connected but penetrate each other through porous boundaries and insubstantial edges. "To plunge one thing into the shape or nature of another is a fundamental gesture of creative insight, part of how we make for ourselves a world more expansive, deft, fertile, and startling in richness".¹³ She describes a fifth-century Roman treasure dug up recently, the gold handle of a pouring vessel in the shape of a leaping tigress, heavy teats swelling down from the arc of the tigress's body:

"To see the tigress hiding within the handle, the handle waiting within the tigress, is to throw off the boundaries of the literal and recognize that even the

¹¹ As quoted by Jane Hirschfield, *Three Generative Energies of Poetry*, Newcastle/Bloodaxe Poetry Lectures, 2007, p27

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid* p12

simplest fragment of existence can carry multiple uses, possibilities, connections ... Art amplifies intelligence: to experience the tiger's gold-sculpted resonance is to join in the leap the mind must take towards a more sophisticated comprehension of the world."¹⁴

Poetry – as well as other forms of art – and particularly the *reaching after meaning* that they inspire, the intensive inner state of alert enquiry and attentiveness that they engender, lie at the heart of an intelligent response to the world. And such reaching after meaning is stimulated by the uncertainty, by what lies hidden and secret, yet accessible and available, inside the poem, inside the work of art.

"When the world is looked at from the condition of mind that questions, each thing is seen both for itself as it is and as the holder of the immeasurable secrets good questions unlatch. A world – or a book – felt to contain the hidden is inexhaustible to the imagination, yielding new possibilities to each moment that presents itself as question more than answer. It is their inability to be known completely that infuses aliveness into good poems – the way they are, as Donald Hall has said, a house with a secret room at its center, the place in which all that cannot be paraphrased is stored. The room can never be opened to ordinary habitation, yet its presence changes the house. And in truth, the unopenable room does not reside in the outward data of the world, or in the words of the poem: it resides in us."¹⁵

Once again, that tantalising reversal – it is not the revealed that capacitates, but that which is hidden. Not the answer, but the uncertainty and question. Not the resolution, but the striving and grappling for meaning. Not our mastery of content or information, but our inner gesture of striving and a kind of *disciplined openness, a bounded porosity*. I remember that years ago CDRA, at the start of the formal meetings that constituted homework, read aloud and contemplated (silently or collectively) a poem, *the same poem for over ten years*, and it never failed to move – find new depths, to lift to new heights – those who gave themselves over to its contemplation. Once again, intentionality begets intentionality, the very heart of capacity. Hiddenness and uncertainty are generative energies of poetry, and working with poetry generates intelligence, capacity and a richer world through that very hiddenness and uncertainty.

Does any of this illuminate anything at all? Let me try and pull some of these threads together.

I headed this section ‘the elusive no-thing’, because I am trying to describe the invisible and intangible aspects of capacity that lie in the upper reaches of a hierarchy of elements of capacity. I noted earlier that when I first wrote about this it seemed strange and controversial and yet alluring and sensible enough for that writing to inform various approaches to capacity building, yet both I as well as many who grappled with these ideas did not realise the radical demands that they make on our understanding and on our practice. I am only beginning to understand it myself now,

¹⁴ *ibid* p13

¹⁵ *ibid* p23

and its challenges for my understanding and *particularly for my practice* still elude; I'm in the midst of grappling myself.

At the heart of capacity is, as Keats put it, an 'anti-talent' (which we could equally call an *anti-capacity*). At the heart of art's power to enrich our world and our intelligence lies a 'hidden uncertainty', a question rather than an answer. At the heart of effective action lies non-action; at the heart of our outcomes lies an elusive intentionality which itself is the central outcome. At the heart of all our capacity building efforts lies an elusive 'no-thing'; but a no-thing that is not a nothing. On the contrary, it is everything – but it is not a 'thing', a discrete, physical, visible, tangible thing. It is the meaning and the energy and the intentionality that provokes, that infuses. A dedicated openness; a hunter's stance (with bow strung) but reversed – when the arrow is released, it flies towards the hunter's own heart, as a shaft of meaning, of light.

It comes to us from beyond ourselves and all our best efforts, yet we discover too that it comes from inside of us, in an act of co-creation. It is that which we do not create; yet, enigmatically, it emerges or is born within that chalice which we enable through forming a kind of 'holding emptiness' within. The elusive 'no-thing' is accessed, if at all, in that moment of reversal, when everything turns around, and we *absorb into ourselves* rather than produce out of ourselves¹⁶. Out of the absorbing will come the producing, but a focus on the producing, on the tangible thing, on the outcome, will never enable us to access that enigmatic, invisible and intangible energy which forms the essence of our capacity, out of which the future arises as free and different (as opposed to simply another repetition of all that we have repeated already).

The Active Absence – Seeing the Forest

There is a saying in English – 'you cannot see the wood for the trees'. There are two meanings to the word 'wood'. One is the stuff, the thing, the product that trees produce, that substantial physical thing that you can see and use – wood. The other is 'forest', and forest is the word, or name, for a collection of things (trees), for a coming together of many parts into one whole. And while 'forest' can in some senses be a thing, and visible and tangible and substantial, it is at the same time not a thing at all but an idea which brings a whole lot of things together into one 'moment'. Because equally one can say that a forest is not substantial, or physical, or visible – what you see immediately are trees, and you need imagination (or a concept) to be able to collect them all into one idea, the forest.

Again equally, though, the forest is not just a convention, a cultural agreement amongst people, a common idea; it has a power and reality of its own – forests are real entities which have huge influence on individual trees, on water resources and the surrounding ecosystems – but neither its energy nor it in itself can be *seen*; we see the trees, and when there are enough of these we *infer*, or *imagine*, forest. We make meaning of the individual parts, in exactly the same way we do with, for example, sentences. We would never say that the meaning of a sentence is a word; on the contrary, it is no-word. But this does not mean that it is nothing; the meaning of a

¹⁶ I am indebted to my partner Sue Davidoff's reading of Rudolf Steiner's *Spiritual Ecology* for this appreciation of the reversal.

sentence – which is invisible and insubstantial, *not on the page* – carries all of its energy and power and formative possibility, yet it *resides in us as much as it does in the sentence itself*.

Constant paradox, relentless complexity. We are talking here of the ‘whole’, that insubstantial and elusive and invisible ‘no-thing’ that carries and informs and influences and is influenced by all the parts, but is not another part, not a ‘super-part’; you cannot say – here is one part and there I see another part and over there on the other side of the road is the whole. The whole is not a thing, it is no-thing, but not nothing; the philosopher of science Henri Bortoft refers to it perhaps most helpfully and also most enigmatically as an *active absence* – it is not there (directly to our senses), yet it is the real energy behind, or between, or emerging out of, or informing, everything that is ‘there’¹⁷. There is no capacity without activating that absence; this active absence – which requires a reversal of consciousness to access, a turning inside out – this active absence is the invisible crux of capacity that we avoid, deny, simply miss either because we do not have the eyes to see or because the implications are too radical to accept. It is what comes to us from beyond, and which yet is accessed from deep within us, from an imagination able to form a ‘holding receptivity’ within.

Some years ago I had an ongoing debate with a close friend and colleague with whom I was working on a capacity building programme. He believed that my emphasis in the programme – which was specifically against training in particular technical subjects and techniques and in favour of this more open-ended reversal of an approach which took conversation, imagination and reflection on practice as its point of departure – demonstrated a kind of exclusivity, that my methods were suitable to those who already had sufficient training and skills in particular basic techniques and technologies that they would be sufficiently educated and privileged to be able to access my more ‘esoteric’ approach. He argued that, while he agreed ultimately with the points I was making about the finer nuances of capacity, programmes should get there via the training in more basic skills first, and then build from there. Anything else was presumption, elitism, perhaps even arrogance.

I thought (and think) the opposite. We do not get to the invisible via the building blocks of the visible. That elusive no-thing is not to be gained by adding one skill, one piece of information, one input and outcome, onto another. It comes through a reversal of thinking, an opening up of self, a disciplining of attention, intention and imagination towards the kind of intuition that may enable us to see into the heart of things, and into our own hearts, and thus become capacitated in a very particular way. Of course both ‘ways’ are necessary, but we do not reach the invisible via a training in the visible, we do not reach wisdom through information, we do not develop imagination and response-ability through the categorising of wholes into parts.

We know that capacity – the ability to work towards the future, to read accurately and to strategise continuously, to respond fluidly and appropriately to highly complex and constantly changing realities – that these capacities demand the kind of imagination, intentionality and attention that I am talking about here, yet we respond with bureaucratized and reductive programmes that separate everything out into such tiny component parts that the whole is constantly being lost, and everyone is left with

¹⁷ *The Wholeness of Nature*, Henri Bortoft, Floris Books, 1996, p15

“pieces of a broken wineglass”¹⁸. What we gain with these programmes, with our current approach, is a spurious and illusory sense of importance and purpose in the face of an inner void; what we lose is the (and our) larger integrity. The whole is, indeed, that larger integrity¹⁹.

In saying this, I am not pointing to anything esoteric. Every experienced facilitator has had the challenging experience of holding a group – or individuals for that matter – with such a balance of technical expertise and simple love, of listening and intervening, of maintaining boundary whilst encouraging open-endedness that the group becomes able to access its own speaking beyond its individuals attempts to produce the answer, as though it has accessed its own inner voice, speaking to and through it as an ‘active absence’. Imagine forming the ability to work within and towards any social situation in this way. Imagine one’s organisation approaching learning in this way. And imagine turning such facilitative intent towards oneself. Is it possible that this *sensibility* may lie at the heart of a social sensibility?

A Proposal

I have not written all this to propose particular answers to the capacity development issue, but really – out of the spirit in which it is written – to raise questions and to open possibilities. I do not know the answers. But I do have something in mind.

I write this from out of The Proteus Initiative, where, together with my partner Sue Davidoff, we have dedicated ourselves to bringing Goethe’s holistic approach, practices and methods of living or enlivened thinking into the realm of social action, towards a social ecology. It is Goethe’s approach which provides the most penetrating understanding and practices for accessing the ‘whole’, the elusive no-thing, and the kinds of reversals in thinking and advances in consciousness that may enable us to become attentive enough to enable the world to begin to speak to and through us, and not presume that we have to do all the talking and doing, all the time. At the same time, Goethe’s methods are not fixed and rigid, and they are not easy to understand and translate into different contexts. On the contrary, for his approach to gain any credence within the social as well as environmental sectors – where we believe it will be even more valuable than in the natural sciences – we will have to collaborate along many different lines and trajectories. We have been trying to expand this work by facilitating programmes that give people access to it, but we want to add another possibility to the mix of what we are doing.

I received an email a few months ago, from a director of an NGO. He wrote that he had been moved by a paragraph he read in a paper of mine on our website. The paragraph reads as follows:

“Are we then left in despair? The feeling amongst the group is neither of despair nor hope, but of alive engagement, a renewal of conscious intent. And this is enough. We are not here to release resolutions, to construct plans of

¹⁸ *The Alexandrian Quartet*, Laurence Durrell, I forget the page.

¹⁹ This phrase was first suggested to me by Rubens Gimaël of EcoSocial in Brazil.

action. These too would be a distraction. We are here to understand, to rekindle a living awareness. So that we can live our own response”²⁰.

Interesting how similar this observation is to the whole – I use the word intentionally – of what I have been writing above. But the thing that interested me the most was his own connection to this. He wrote: “Recently we have enabled a growing number of staff in our organization to engage more fully in story telling, deliberately devoid of any outcome or plan. What a gift that has become.”

At The Proteus Initiative, we have ideas about how to achieve the kind of reversal in thinking that might approach the kind of invisible whole or active absence that, in turn, might build the intuitive and perceptual faculties with which to access that wholeness, the kind of imaginative capabilities that will activate an intentionality that underlies all capacity and capacity development. For organisations as well as for individuals. Some ideas, practices to share, understandings to talk about. But we are very aware that none of us have yet begun to plumb the real possibilities, and we are also aware that many are working already, intuitively and out of their own sources and backgrounds and cultures of inspiration, with approaches similar to these. There may be a number of us who are experimenting, and there may be a number who wish to experiment.

We would like – and this is really the nub of this entire yarn – to host an exploration, or action research process, into this process or reversal as a way into accessing the elusive no-thing that lies at the heart of capacity development (but that is seldom considered, in all its radical implications, when thinking about capacity development).

We imagine organisations who are already experimenting around some of these possibilities, or who might like to, or who feel stimulated by this paper to begin. We imagine a group of 16 or 18 such organisations, from around the world, each having a ‘champion’ with the positional power and personal intent to lead their organisation at least so far as this exploration is concerned. We imagine these 16 or 18 people coming together every few months to share methods, practices and approaches, to challenge and support each other, to develop with and through each other. We imagine assisting such a process with a developing framework, facilitated sessions, one-on-one as well as organisational meetings, an action research protocol, guided sessions around understanding and practice, conversations around approaches to living thinking and to capacity building. We imagine that each person and organisation will benefit greatly from, and contribute hugely to, the process and its outcomes, and that beyond this resources in the form of readings and programmatic possibilities will arise. We imagine that the process could continue for about two years, enough time to really experiment, learn and have something to say.

We have no money to back this idea. If you are interested, perhaps your organisation will provide for your own. If you are a donor, you may want to engage with your own organisation but you may also want to fund some of your partners/grantees in this exploration. If there is simply sufficient interested response then perhaps we could put together a proposal for funding which could carry such a project.

²⁰ *Emerging out of Goethe: Conversation as a Form of Social Inquiry*, Allan Kaplan, in *Janus Head Journal*, Trivium Publications, Volume 8.1, 2005, p331

Please write, with whatever you want to say, to me at alkaplan@mweb.co.za, or to people@proteusinitiative.org, with the subject heading of "A Larger Integrity". I hope at least this may be the furtherance of a larger conversation.

Allan Kaplan
Cape Town, December 2010