

Proteus and Towerland

(A story of our time)

“We must learn many different movements so that we grow deft enough to follow the archetype in all its versatility, so that this Proteus never slips from our grasp”

JW von Goethe

Wilderness

There were about thirteen of us, younger and older, sitting and talking in the stone cottage of Towerland, up on a wild hillside of silence, on the edge of the mountains before they take their long strides to the summit ridge which thrusts prodigious and unfathomed into the towering blue sky. Of a sudden someone, gazing through the large window at a bush a few metres beyond the window, started up in excitement, pointing, exhorting us all to look. The quiet of our surrounds had been disturbed; two Cape bulbuls were fluttering, screaming in anguish and evident outrage, around the bush. Inside the bush a snake, invisible for awhile but becoming more apparent as we focused our attention on the spot, was entwined in the branches, its head hovering above the bulbul's tiny nest which, until then, we had not even known was there - though their home was so very close to our own - so consummately had they hidden it. Well, clearly not so far as the snake was concerned. Some of us went outside to get a closer look, others watched through the window. The snake ignored both birds and us as it sought its prey with a cool and elegant casualness which belied the intense discipline of its craft.

As we watched, and the bulbuls grew increasingly desperate, a Cape sunbird came to their assistance, darting in and out at the snake, the vibrancy of its colours cutting through the air like a decorated spear in the hands of an invisible angel of mercy. This in itself was enough to render us speechless; a bird of a different species, whose own family was not being threatened, coming to the aid of the bulbuls? But the angel of mercy was a figment of imagination only, even the sunbird could not shake the snake from its predatory intent. Swiftly its head moved into the nest, then withdrew, and it untwined itself from amongst the branches and extricated itself from the tree.

It moved off through low grasses, heading for an extensive patch of

undergrowth some metres from the bush. In the open for a few moments, it was easily identifiable as a Cape Cobra, one of the most venomous and vehement snakes in southern Africa. Its hood was spread, in its mouth the tiny fledgling from the nest; its head stood a metre from the ground as the rest of its body and tail 'walked' smoothly across the grass. A huge specimen, this, five metres at least, a Machiavellian prince of the wilderness. Within seconds it was out of sight in the undergrowth, the pair of bulbuls and the sunbird fluttering bereft for awhile before taking their leave, all of us feeling deeply touched, as though we had seen into another world. Closer inspection revealed one egg still left in the intricately lined nest which could fit into the palm of a hand - which had been, in truth, the palm of the parents' hand held out to their little ones as home. But home no more. That evening, after we had all been away from the cottage for some hours, we discovered that the remaining egg had also disappeared. The birds had merged with the others that lived so closely amongst us; the snake could have been anywhere.

And we, we felt inside us, all of us did, the grandeur of the snake, the power of it as it moved through its own world without regard for our presence. We felt the scattered destitution of the bulbuls, the inevitability of their failure. We marveled at the inexplicable intervention of the sunbird, as if a kind of glory had spoken through its actions. Most of all, we felt as if showered in grace, having for a moment had an entire world open up before us, ignorant of us, intelligible to itself. And that world had stretched us beyond ourselves; we had entered the various movements that had taken place, and they had entered us. And we felt immeasurably alive, vibrant and stretched, as though we were tuning forks struck by a master musician. Perhaps that angel of mercy was present after all.

The Legend of Proteus

According to Greek mythology, Proteus is a god, the son of Poseidon, God of the Sea. Proteus was charged with caring for Poseidon's creatures; as befitting a master of the watery element, Proteus is the God of Change, he can alter his shape and form at will. He is particularly responsible for the seals; these are his immediate flock, and he the shepherd.

Legend has it that Proteus can foresee the future, and is obliged to answer truthfully any questions put to him by one who is able to contain him long

enough to put the question. But containing him is the challenge, for he can change shape at will; the idea is that we have to grab hold of him and not let him go; if he can be subdued he will answer the questions we put to him. But he will struggle to remain free, and will change himself into any and all things in his efforts to get away; do we have it in us to follow these lightning swift changes and hold on till we have brought him to rest?

Legend has it that Odysseus, on his way home from Troy, wanting to know whether he would ever reach home - he had been absent for twelve long years - in his desperation was told about Proteus. He understood that, at noon each day, Proteus brought the seals up onto an island where they rested for some hours. On the beach of the island, as the seals fell asleep, Proteus would walk amongst them and count them, and would then assume the seals' shape and lay himself down to sleep in their midst. If Odysseus would hide and keep watch all this time, he would know which seal was Proteus, and could then lay hold of him. If he succeeded in subduing him, he could put his question to Proteus, who would be obliged to answer.

All this Odysseus did. On laying hold of Proteus he found that he had to take charge of a mercurial and fluid god who changed himself into anything and everything - fire, water, lion, snake, monster or mermaid at will. Odysseus overcame these changes, managed to subdue the god, put his question to him, received a truthful and accurate answer - a favourable though taxing one, as it turned out - and went on his way, leaving Proteus to tend to his responsibilities once more.

What do we make of this story today? Is it just an old myth no longer relevant? We think so far otherwise that we have taken the god Proteus as the essence of an initiative which we believe is fundamental to the kind of social transformation that all social activists are seeking.

Owen Barfield, in *History in English Words*, charts the development of consciousness through the development of language. One of the examples he uses involves another Greek god, the god Pan, protector of flocks and herds. The English word *panic* is derived from the god Pan. There was a time when no such word - signifying a state of consciousness - existed. "... the early Greeks could become conscious of this phenomenon, and thus name it, because they felt the presence of an invisible being who swayed the emotions

of flocks and herds". This being they recognised as the god Pan. Human consciousness was then derived from outside of humans themselves, from the gods. Over time, such consciousness has become internalised, so that now the gods exist within our own consciousness, and we have become more responsible, free to make our own choices. So the external god Pan has been internalised in the word *panic*: "... it would be impossible for us to think, feel or say such things as 'crowd-psychology' or 'herd-instinct' if the Greeks had not thought, felt, said 'Pan' - as impossible as it would be to have the leaf of a plant without first having a seed tucked into the warm earth".

As with Pan, so with the god Proteus. Odysseus was known as a canny strategist with remarkable mobility and agility of thought. These were the qualities which enabled him to keep hold of the god Proteus. Not to overcome through rigid and valiant strength, but to be able himself to change, move, shift, let go, change again, adapt, transform - yet all the while holding his intent clear and untarnished. Such a yielding and supple responsiveness enabled Odysseus to stay with Proteus until the god tired.

As the gods have been internalised within our own consciousness, so have the kinds of answers which Proteus was able (and obliged) to provide. The answers now lie within us, within our reach. We are able to read our world for ourselves. But only if we achieve the mobility and freedom of thought and feeling that Odysseus achieved; only if we are able to respond to situations with flexibility, subtlety, with the ability to yield, to let go, to *respond to a phenomenon rather than impose ourselves upon it*, without losing the focus and clarity of our intent. Only if we are able ourselves to change, to adapt, to transform, to understand rather than seek to be understood; without losing our integrity of purpose. Only if we turn our attention to the god within.

This requires the honing of new faculties, new thinking, a new understanding of ourselves. The task of social transformation is underwritten not by the achievement of projects and 'good works' but by the development of such faculties enfolded within entirely new ways of thinking. "Good works" - the changing of outer circumstances - follow such development with respect to our inner nature, rather than the converse; they depend on them. This, at least, is our understanding in founding the Proteus initiative.

Thus far we have created a world which corresponds to the logic of a particular way of thinking, which may perhaps be characterised as instrumental, manipulative in the sense of seeking to control, derived from our engineering of material reality, linear in the sense of our constant search for material cause of living effect. Such rigidity both derives from a particular logic and imposes that logic on the world around us. We know our world is increasingly untenable. It is with a new way of thinking, and the development of new faculties which correspond to a different logic, that this initiative of Proteus is concerned. Christopher Alexander notes that: "... we have in us a residue of a world-picture which is essentially mechanical in nature ... whether or not we believe that we are subscribing to this picture, whether or not we are aware of its residue in us, even when we consider ourselves moved by spiritual and ecological concerns, most of us are still ... to a greater or lesser extent in the grip of some residue of this mechanical world-picture ... like an infection it has entered us, it affects our actions, it affects our morals ... we carry forward a blithe and rather simple mental assurance that it is all created by the pushing and pulling of events, very much the way we also understood the pushing and pulling of 19th-century atoms". The initiative of Proteus, as a contribution towards social transformation, is concerned with understanding and developing new ways of thinking and responding to the living situations we meet.

If we want to change our world, we have to change ourselves.

Our World and Ourselves (part one)

Speaking first ecologically. If we are honest with ourselves, can we doubt that our world is fragmenting, disintegrating, even dying. We struggle to understand what 'sustainable development' might mean, how to navigate the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the concept. And as we do, applying ourselves to the problem with the same logic that we apply to production, to business, to government, to social engineering, our world grows more impoverished every day. Less and less 'sustainable'; while 'development' remains more something we do to others, less something we apply to ourselves. We try to find 'solutions' without sufficient cognisance that our own thinking is the problem.

Up on the mountain at Towerland, a day arrived last year when the European

Swallow returned from the north for its summer sojourn. Such a blessing that we happened to be there when it arrived, because it brings something special into our environment, something which we barely notice the absence of when it is not there but which surprises us into a new place by its simple presence. It is a proud bird, an aerial acrobat, cheeky, geared and wired, highly strung, arrogant, swift as thought. The local birds - not the predators, but those which hang around the cottage and dam - are beautiful and uniquely themselves, but none matches the European Swallow for its unbridled accuracy in flight. Already, in the few years that we have joined forces with this wilderness, there are fewer and fewer Swallows each summer; it seems, and reports confirm this, that their northern habitat is no longer conducive. They are dying out. The thought is unbearable - what if one year they do not arrive at all? What if they become extinct? And we know that if they disappear, our very thinking will be impoverished; *there are thoughts that we will no longer be able to think!* Some of our own mobility will be gone forever. Such contemplation is terrible in the most extreme sense of the word.

What if the Cape cobra were no longer there, or the bulbuls or sunbirds? What if the *waboom* tree dies out, and its uniquely unfolding spiral dance between order and chaos no longer graces our world? These thoughts are no longer some farfetched nightmare, but an ever present reality; no longer just a distant threat, but a daily occurrence. Poverty is not just a social phenomenon, and certainly not just an economic one; our very world is losing its song(s). The concept 'loss of biodiversity' ascribes to the phenomenon a technical and scientific aura, seeming to put the problem 'out there', but the reality is far more subtle, far more insidious, far more personal. Every plant, every animal, every insect, every element of our world is a part of ourselves, a part of our very consciousness. To be human is to be able to incorporate this world within ourselves. Our very imagination, our very consciousness, the bare bones of mobility of thought, of freedom of expression, of creativity, of development, of emergence into new possibilities, depends on every aspect of the world which gives us sustenance. As aspects of our world die, so we die too.

And the opposite is also true: as we die to ourselves and our possibilities, as our consciousness becomes impoverished, as we lose the ability to think certain thoughts, as our freedom becomes more curtailed through increasing

uniformity, so the very world around us begins to lose its vibrancy, its endurance, its ability to replenish itself. We are all members of one whole. If we do not develop new faculties of thought and perception, if we do not develop a thinking which is imaginative, versatile and responsive, then our best scientific and programmatic efforts at 'conserving' our world are doomed to failure. If we cannot penetrate the beings who populate our world now, if we cannot get inside them, understand them, and incorporate their movements into the very fibres of our consciousness, then they will continue to perish, and we will become more impoverished still.

The very concepts of 'conservation' and 'sustainability' may themselves be part of the problem rather than an answer to anything; it is our *way of thinking* that, complexly speaking, is both cause and effect of increasing poverty. And also our way through the impasse.

Our World and Ourselves (part two)

A similar picture arises when we consider our world from a social perspective. The founders of Proteus have spent many years working as social development practitioners in many parts of the world, assisting organisations and individuals whose concerns are the marginalised, poverty, education, human rights issues, social and ecological fragmentation, unacceptable political and economic hegemonies; in short, issues of social transformation. We have worked to assist these organisations and individuals both in the way they function as well as with respect to what they do.

We notice two related phenomena. One is that many of us in the field of social transformation are experiencing a certain and increasing despair; despite all the effort, there is little to show in terms of genuine transformation. Our world continues to fracture along the old lines of social exclusion. Something appears to hold us captive. The other is that, despite much that has been written to the contrary, both organisations and individuals increasingly act within the constraints of limited and instrumental ways of thinking. The hegemony here consists of piecemeal thinking and action, the tendency towards prediction and control through cause and effect analyses, material inputs masquerading as quality of life issues, immediate 'products' taking precedence over living process, fragmented projects being

more important than community or individual capacity, delivery of resources dominating the emergence of resourcefulness. The world of social development increasingly reduces itself to that which may be accommodated within increasingly narrow bureaucratic requirements and inconsistent cost-benefit analyses. In brief, the tendency is to solve the immediate problem with a corporate cleanliness, rather than enable a new (and unpredictable) dispensation to emerge through the complexity of interaction, participation and engagement.

In all of this there is a tendency, in organising for social transformation, for our efforts and our organisations to follow corporate dictates and norms; creativity and imagination is held hostage to a chilling uniformity of practice. All across the world we find the same discourse, the same terminology, the same 'project-mindset', the same quantitative evaluative indicators being applied. An insidious global hegemony begins to assert itself. As in the world of ecology where the term 'sustainable development' has become more a catch-phrase than a spur to radical thinking, so in the world of social transformation the term 'civil society' (previously 'capacity building') has now become the catch-phrase, the banner under which we all labour, and the possibilities of intelligent conversation with respect to particular social situations are reduced to the collaborative swapping of vacuous jargon. And we are all complicit, even as we strive to present alternative perspectives.

John Humphrys notes that: "The English language is being destroyed by a deadly virus of management-speak. This clichéd, dumbed-down, inflated and bogus management-speak is deeply depressing. The whole essence of a good, lively democracy is that one has good, lively argument. But this kind of language kills real debate". The vacuum in our organisational practices towards social transformation, and the increasing paucity of our language, are mirrors of each other, dependent on each other. In both cases it is our very consciousness, the potential of the human project itself, which is at stake. In the name of social transformation and development we are becoming less conscious, with decreasing levels of diversity and possibility. Yet human development is a process of enlarging consciousness, not reducing it. Not so, it seems; in the name of poverty alleviation we are reducing our range of thought, our capacity for thinking. We are reducing our capacity for freedom; our very languages are dying. There is a subtle distraction taking place here: thinking that we are enabling something new to emerge, instead

we are unconsciously colluding with hegemonies which result in new and undreamt of forms of global poverty. Our organisations, our communities and our practices all suffer as a result.

Once again, it is our very consciousness which is at stake. As our organisations and communities and languages and practices get poorer, so our consciousness diminishes. As our consciousness diminishes, we are less able to imagine or to venture anything alternative, anything new. Once again, it is our *way of thinking* that, complexly speaking, is both cause and effect of increasing poverty. And also our way through the impasse.

Inner Nature and Outer Circumstance

Instead of trying - vainly - to manipulate social situations from the outside, how can we enter into the life of the phenomenon itself, the process of its becoming, in order to really engage with it, and assist it as it emerges?

Every living phenomenon - an individual, a group, an organisation, a community, a social situation - comprises two aspects. There is its outer, visible, physical reality - the circumstances we 'see', how it manifests in the world; and there is its inner, more invisible, *character* - the inner dynamics which activate the outer circumstances, its inner nature. Conventionally we tend to work with and on the outer circumstances; this is the domain of 'empirical' science and engineering, as well as most social development work. Yet these outer circumstances, that which is physically visible, emerge in concert with the organism's inner nature. In a sense, the outer circumstances can be seen as the product of the organism's inner nature (though the two emerge simultaneously). We have gained much skill in manipulating outer circumstances, though not in predicting or embracing consequences - because we know far less when it comes to accessing and intervening into inner nature, into the character of the organism. Yet, through rigorous observation of outer circumstance, inner nature may be observed, articulated, worked with. It is through working with the inner nature of phenomena - its evolving character, its dynamics and patterns and habits and possibilities - that real progress can be made. The art of social facilitation and transformation demands such intimate engagement, for this is where the phenomenon derives the power of its life, this is where the formative forces lie, which give rise to outer circumstance.

Every living phenomenon is in a state of constant change, constant metamorphosis; its character is evolving as an emergent dance between its inherent developmental movement and its context. When we work only with outer circumstance, only with the immediately observable parts, we may miss the essence of the issue, and resort to an instrumental or engineering mindset. When we work with the inner aspects, the developing character of the situation, we access the developing process of the phenomenon in a facilitative way, and are able to work with the life of the phenomenon, rather than only with its inert product. Many of our frustrations with organisational and community functioning, many of our frustrations with a world which is spiraling out of control, have their root in our lack of ability to see and work with the organic process of living phenomena.

The ability to see with accuracy into the inner nature of phenomena, to observe character and consciousness, demands an entirely different approach from the conventional. It demands the development of our own consciousness, the development of our own imaginative powers of thought; it demands a mobility and freedom of thought able to follow the character - or story, or narrative thread - of a phenomenon as it changes and evolves. It demands too a recognition that we are part of the phenomenon we intervene into; thus our own character, our own development process, must be taken into account - understood and worked with - as much as anything we may work on in our environment. The work of social development, of social transformation, is an act of co-creation; we both change and are changed by any social phenomenon that we work with intimately in this way.

Such work demands a new understanding of living phenomena, a rigorous methodology for reading and intervening into such phenomena, the building of new faculties to enable us to engage in this way, and an increasing understanding of self. In this sense, the work of social transformation requires our own transformation. If we are to enable the living aspects of our world to emerge, if we are to enable life - not just to conserve but to enhance - then nothing less than the development of our own consciousness is required. Yet this is so very fitting. As we work with the transformation of our world, so our consciousness should expand, rather than contract. And once again concomitantly: as our consciousness expands, so we will gain the

possibility of transforming our world.

The Proteus Initiative

The impulse of Proteus as a new social initiative, born out of years of working in the social sphere, has this understanding as its essence. Through the facilitation of real conversations, and through research and writing, to enable social situations to reveal themselves more consciously. Through programmes and courses, to enable a new understanding of living phenomena to emerge, and to cultivate the faculties necessary to a more conscious way of intervening into social situations. Through immersion in natural phenomena, in nature, in wilderness, to enable consciousness to attain the mobility and capacity for movement helpful to the development of faculties with which to read and intervene into social phenomena. Through creating space for silent contemplation (in an increasingly garrulous milieu), through an emphasis on listening and observing (in place of constant debate and doing) and on the quest for understanding (rather than being understood), new possibilities for enlarging our very way of thinking are facilitated. We will renew our world through renewing ourselves; without renewing ourselves, our world will continue to lose the creative energy to renew itself.

Social systems are not artefacts but organisms which are alive, with porous boundaries and complex interdependencies (including with the intervener). Development is the life process that keeps the infinitely complex web of relationships – which is the organism, which is the social situation – constantly unfolding and transforming. Becoming. This is what it means to be alive.

To approach such living phenomena, to get under the skin of the world, we need to develop new faculties of thinking. Rather than approaching the phenomena from the outside, an inner path of development is called for, to enable the kind of thinking to arise which may work from the inside, out. Rigorous practices in the development of these new faculties, and the conversations and processes within which they may be used, are what Proteus is about.

It is one thing to talk *about* the organic, the social and ecological; it is quite another to *think* organically, ecologically, socially. Proteus takes its departure

from the work of JW von Goethe, who developed a unique way of seeing and thinking into the living phenomena of the natural world. We learn from, and apply this way of thinking, both with respect to the world of the social as well as the natural world. Goethe developed specific practices and methods for reading the living, natural world from the inside, out. Through application of activities of thinking and understanding greatly at variance with the conventional, he was able to penetrate and shed light on the organic world in new and startling ways. Instead of seeing the world from the outside – as a world of discrete things with surfaces which hold them apart and separate, as a world of inert products, and as a world separate from ourselves – he managed to develop a form of observation which enabled him to get inside, and thus follow, the processes of becoming which underlie the emergence of complex phenomena. Through rigorous and particular practices he was able to build powers of observation, new faculties of perception and thinking, which provide us now with the alternative approach required, but not yet attained, by the developments heralded by the new sciences. These exercises, practices, insights and understandings, as well as developments which have taken place since – for example, in their application to the realm of conversation and dialogue – Proteus uses in order to achieve a new way of seeing and interacting with organic phenomena, be they social or ecological, or both.

There are three main thrusts to the work of Proteus. Developing an understanding of living phenomena, building the faculties for ‘reading’ such phenomena – particularly with respect to the social – and enhancing the ability to intervene into social situations in such a way as to facilitate consciousness, freedom with responsibility, and emergence.

Towerland - A Wilderness

To realise certain Proteus possibilities, a wilderness retreat is being created. At the outset, it was dedicated with the following meditation (given to us by an elder and teacher):

Think how, from your thought, one small corner of this world could grow and become a Garden of the Lord, or a ‘Bethany-Home’ for your master, a place to which I have a right to bring my friends, those needy ones, for rest and talk with Me, for truly humans can now commune with me, their Lord”.

Standing inside the belly of the rolling foothills of the Langeberg mountains gives you a sense of being held in the warmth and safety of Mother Earth's womb. The gentle vaulting roof of the Towerland Retreat, shaped like an inverted basket woven from arching poles and thatch, and resting on the curved rock walls half dug into the hillside, then covered with earth and plants, silences the sweeping winds as they billow the clouds across the towering mountain peaks.

Through nature we encounter ourselves in a very particular, unique and remarkable way. Building a relationship with nature through providing access into the wilderness opens up such spaces. It is a very delicate balance that needs to be created so that the wilderness is not intruded upon or unduly 'tamed'; yet at the same time that it becomes accessible in such a way that its intrinsic wildness, its pristine untrammelled essence, is not disturbed. With such intent we are in the process of developing- as sensitively and organically as possible - a wilderness retreat centre in the Langeberg Mountains. Our land, Towerland, in the Herbertsdale area (400km from Cape Town), is approximately 700 hectares, incorporates hillsides, ravines and mountain summits, all covered with the generosity of pristine mountain fynbos (the most diverse floral kingdom in the world). There is a generous river, two/three earth-dams, much wildlife: porcupines, otters, mongoose, rehbok, klipspringer, grysbok, bushbuck, aardvark, Cape fox, bushpig, baboon, and various wild cats, bats, wild beeswarms, snakes, as well as many birds, including resident black eagles and a black harrier which was nesting near one of the earth-dams last year.

Our aim is to create a space where people can meet together in a wilderness context - where through proximity to the living forces of nature, real meeting(s) can take place, real conversations can be held, and new thinking, appropriate to our collective future, can be nurtured.

Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff
Towerland
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