

The Practice of Struggle is the Struggle to Practise

(A Practitioner's Reading of an NGO on the Rack)

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Entry

I am often asked to evaluate organisations, and the work they do. This is, supposedly, part of my trade, embedded in the dialect of the development community. Good works, and the money used to fund them, must be held accountable. But of course, there are all kinds of pitfalls when parties set out to prove something as enigmatic as social movement. Nevertheless, the language is so habituated that even those genuinely wanting to reflect on, and improve, themselves (say, with the help of a speaking partner) use it. But the implication is of a consultant who remains outside of, and also unaffected by, the engagement. An expert, somehow objective - a professional - as judgement is delivered and recommendations made.

Now once again I am asked to do an evaluation. An NGO is in the midst of a three year strategic cycle and would like to reflect on how it is doing, in terms of its own functioning. This does not need an evaluation, but a conversation. If I can be of help, it is to talk with the organisation over a period of time, so that I can get to know it, and it can get to know me. To find my way around the organisation so that I can perhaps see things that 'insiders' can no longer easily discern, having lived with these things so long. To listen and ask questions and facilitate openness so that, gradually, the organisation reveals itself to itself, and a picture of the organisation emerges which may be helpful to these 'insiders' as they work towards improvement. To do this well, I have to get right inside the organisation, and be prepared to get inside of myself. If I am to engage authentically, I have to be prepared to be changed by the encounter too.

In this instance the organisation, when it approaches me, is in rapid movement towards crisis. This has clearly been coming for some time, but the momentum is increasing. The request to me is really a cry for help. But it is couched blandly, as a request for evaluation, for someone to advise on structures and systems that may help the organisation put in place practices that might set it on the right path once more. The request is to check the situation out and make recommendations. I respond by saying I will speak with the members of the organisation - not outsiders, this is not that kind of evaluation - and try to build a coherent and holistic picture of the situation, so that the organisation is able to see itself and all its issues and possibilities with precision and insight in such a picture. And on the basis of such a 'report', to facilitate a conversation within the organisation so that it might find its own way forward.

In the event, as the interviews progress, I hear stories that ruffle my mind, that prickle the hair on my arms. Stories that should not be told, that I wish had never happened. A human saga of pain and waning promise that reveals not only an organisation lost and confused but, through the lens of this organisation's story, also the trials of the world of social struggle, and the activists and NGOs who populate it.

And I am faced with a dilemma. I have to write a report, but I know that no report will remain confidential, and for these stories to become public may well destroy the organisation and ruin well-earned reputations and compromise important aspects of social and political struggle in the process. This is a perspective shared by many of the respondents. Yet a picture must be presented. So I decide, rather than to write a report on the organisation which will become public, to write a story of my engagement with this social formation, making name of organisation and all its players irrelevant. So that we may still arrive at the heart of affairs, and others may read the 'report' too, and be free to make their own associations; but the 'report' will not detail any names, and will change the names of projects and programmes as well, so that any evidence which may damn remains simply part of a story I am telling about an instance of my own practice.

Is the story true? My concern is to enable people to give voice to their own perceptions, through engaging in conversation, and to read these perceptions as one would a text, for meaning. And to present the meaning that arises for me. There are places of agreement between respondents, and places of disagreement. There is clarity and confusion, conflict and coherence, an embracing of others' situations and an inability to let go of self. In the midst of all this, my intent is to find as exact an understanding as I can with respect to this central question: *If the organisation were to speak, what would it say about itself?* If organisational members can hear this, the way forward will not depend on an outsider's recommendations, but will emerge from out of the very situation itself.

I arrive at the organisation, which I am going to call Plenty, knowing something of its standing in the world, having had passing acquaintance in the past. Plenty is ten years old, having been formed a couple years after the South African transition to democracy and an ANC-led government. It is an NGO which occupies a position on what is

variously called the far left, or possibly the ultra left, depending on respondents' own positioning. In any case, far to the left of the ANC, to the left of the unions and further left than the South African Communist Party. It has been set up - if I may be brief and perhaps therefore somewhat crude here - to challenge the ascendancy of neoliberalism in the processes of globalisation which affect South Africa and every other country in the world. It has achieved a certain status and standing amongst the community of the radical left, not only locally but globally. It has a reputation for being brave, outspoken, tenacious, committed, acutely intelligent with respect to the politics and economics of globalisation. Also adversarial, oppositional, tough as a street fighter, no quarter given and none asked. Its reputation on the left itself is not without controversy, yet it manages to pull together activists of many different persuasions.

I am happy to be engaging with Plenty; I come from too many encounters with the ravages of neoliberalism, many of them insidious indications of the impact of neoliberalism on the very forces of civil society and the development community themselves. It feels like a relief to work with an organisation which, by all accounts, brooks no compromise.

Plenty is located in a small house in a working class street of an increasingly trendy suburb. When I arrive, I notice peeling paintwork outside; there is a feel of dilapidation and weariness about the place. The name of the organisation - painted on an outside wall - is faded, scuffed and scruffy, looking as if about to disappear into the wall on which it clings. *Plenty may care for others, I thought, but does it care for itself?* Inside, walls are festooned with 'struggle' posters, and posters of old Plenty publications and organised marches and events. They are congruent with the nature of the intent, but as I soak them all in I'm left with an overwhelming impression of raised fists, of being shouted at . . . and I wonder: *Plenty accuses and rallies, but is there any place here for reflection on itself and its own way of being?* And even as I think this a voice of self-doubt is raised within me: *Are these questions a bourgeois indulgence?* I am not interested in answers at this stage; the important thing is that I am alight with interest and curiosity.

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Engaging

I meet first with the Director and Deputy Director, M and P respectively. During this

meeting the terms of our engagement are set. These are subsequently ratified by the Board Executive. The emphasis on coming up with recommendations is shifted to the approach already outlined. I am to interview staff and Board, either as groups or individually, then write a report, then facilitate a conversation - in the form of a workshop of a couple days duration - amongst Plenty's Board and staff so that a way forward is identified. My own time is limited and my schedule already full, but I am impressed as to the urgency of the intervention. I agree to start the interviews a few weeks later, then to break for about six weeks during which I will find the time to write the report, and then to facilitate the conversation over a weekend some weeks later again. For Plenty this will only constitute the start of a long term process; as to my ongoing relationship with Plenty, any further engagement will develop out of this initial work - or not.

As it happens, when I arrive those few weeks later, Plenty is already in meltdown. Much was happening prior to my initial entry, and much has happened in the interim.

Some months earlier Plenty had hosted an important conference. The conference was highly successful by most accounts - though this is questioned by some - but it served to be a focal point for the emergence of simmering tensions between M and the rest of staff. As a result staff penned a collective memorandum of complaint and accusation, which was presented to M - who, by all accounts, both rejected the essence of the argument and threatened to resign - and to the Board. The Board then convened a special meeting and drafted a response (which angered staff further). This was done in the absence of the Chair of the Board, D, who was overseas at the time and who occupies a controversial position on the Board - aligned with staff on this issue, antagonistic to M, out of sync with many others on the Board. The Board accused D of collaborating with, and instigating, staff; he had known of these simmering tensions for a long time as he was close to many leading staff members, but had never informed the Board of these tensions (according to the Board). D then reacted to the Board's censure of him . . . and cut short his trip to Europe, concerned as he was at the upheavals taking place. He returned some way into the interviewing process.

I arrive to a full staff meeting - about 14 people, not quite everyone is present - with the exception of M, the Director. I am to meet with him later on that first day. But when

the meeting is over I am told that M has just sent an email to Plenty, informing it of his resignation. Chaos and confusion reign. M - who had taken the intervening weeks off - is severely depressed (according to all, including his doctor). He has placed himself beyond reach. The Board try to get him to change his mind, but the resignation holds. I am never to meet with him again in Plenty. Over the next few weeks, as interviews take place intermittently, I have a number of hard-won meetings with M cancelled at the last minute. I finally meet him at his home some weeks later, after all other interviews have been completed.

Throughout the time I am engaged with interviews, then, I am struck by the fact that there is no focused leadership within Plenty, no place where the organisation coheres, no uncontroversial authority, no-one and nowhere to turn to in search of some kind of holding, some kind of recognised power. P, the Deputy Director, is relatively new and himself confused and questioning of the twists and turns of many events. The staff, while in agreement on some things, are fragmented and in strong disagreement about many others. Some people and some departments seem to have a current hegemony with respect to strategy and links to the Board Chair, but this is tenuous, given the fact that strategy turns out to be highly contested terrain, and the Board itself is in the midst of an acrimonious exchange of emails. And I find myself stepping gingerly through a minefield. *Who am I 'working to' in this matter? In whom can I place my trust, what can I rely on, where will I find firm footing? My work is based on trust, but trust is a scarce commodity here, and I have to find my own centre to maintain a clear focus if I am to be there for the situation while it is imploding in a morass of confusion.*

My interviews take place with this cacophonous tapestry as backdrop. Gradually I make my way through all the staff (with the exception of interns). A few weeks later, I make my way through many on the Board - finally including both D, the Chair, and M, the resigned Director (both of whom had achieved near mythical status in my mind by the time I finally meet them). Most of the interviews are long and intense; I am learning as I go, both about Plenty itself as well as gaining deeper insight into other social formations on the left, and into the business of building social formations in a hostile context. All interviews are conducted with individuals, but they build on each other as they go, so that the conversation becomes more interesting the quicker we can move, each time, to the pith of the issues. And gradually more and more is revealed; when an issue is raised, or alluded to, in one interview, I take it up in the next, and slowly make my way towards the heart of the matter.

This is no easy task. Not only are the issues confusing and contentious, with the same individuals sometimes expressing contrary perspectives, but that nagging question of trust - or the lack of it - keeps surfacing. I am often unsure as to the agenda behind certain utterances, even as I become more and more convinced that - at least in the case of some respondents - there are indeed such agendas. Am I being told things because these are genuine perspectives, or because a point must be proved (or because calculated dissimulation has become a way of relating). My task, though, is myself to be so trustworthy that respondents begin to trust me with insights and observations that they themselves had sometimes not even realised that they had.

As the interviews progress I choose to talk with a speaking partner, to clarify doubts and emerging understanding, and to ensure that I am able to stand both outside and inside the situation at the same time. For there is no doubt that, as time goes on, I become a participant in the emerging story.

Once all interviews are complete, I am asked to facilitate a Board meeting (with staff in attendance) to deal with issues that are emerging and that cannot wait till the report has been digested - or even written - and the proposed conversation held. I am not comfortable with this request, as I am not ready to share what I have heard, and I know that without a common picture of the reality of their situation, such a meeting will achieve little, and may, in fact, make things far worse. But I am told that without such a meeting animosities may spill over into places of no return; I am informed, at the same time, that I have become the only person that everyone will trust to facilitate such a meeting. It seems it must be done, and I agree to do it.

The meeting is fraught and tense. There is little concession to social niceties here, not even to due process. People want their say, and they want it now. I must hold an open space tautly, encourage a conversation to flow while ensuring that it does not overflow its banks (so to speak). I refuse to be drawn on anything that I have heard or on any aspect of the overall picture which has begun to form in my mind. I am judicious and impartial, directing traffic, issuing warnings when people disobey basic protocol, encouraging some drivers to slow down so that others may take their turn. The meeting never loses its unnerving and jangling edge for a moment.

Gradually though, it enables many people to speak their mind and many issues to be

put on the table, and although it does not reach any substantial or consequential resolutions, it holds the organisation intact for awhile and clears the way for the conversation to take place on the back of this story. (*Sipping a whisky later that evening, my mind takes hold of that which my body had felt throughout the day: that without my presence the meeting would have turned irretrievably dark and ugly; the undertones and hints would have become sticks and stones. And I wonder at the very human capacity for 'presence', and how such an intimate and intangible quality relates to questions of structural 'transformation', of power and justice.*)

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Presenting Perceptions

At first, the problem appears to be the age-old issue of pioneer leadership. Plenty is 10 years old, and M, one of the founders, has been Director all this time. He is accused of micro-managing, of failing to capacitate staff (most of whom are relatively new, there having been a history of high staff turnover). There are no, or inadequate, organisational systems and structures and procedures in place. There are units (departments) and unit heads, but M overrides them all. The reigns of the organisation are held tightly by M, from administration through to funding through to strategy through to staff recruitment and placement. Job descriptions shift at M's whim; there are no appraisal systems set up, all work is assessed by M, seemingly on impulse. M is a brilliant strategist, a brilliant fundraiser, a dedicated networker, an obsessive worker, a star intellectual of the left. M is canny, savvy, streetwise, smart . . . and Plenty is his vehicle. Staff feel their lack of ownership, their lack of security, and the absence of appreciation for their efforts, keenly. The smallest detail must pass through the eye of M's needle before it can fly. At the same time, there is deep appreciation for much of what M brings, and some grudging individual acknowledgement of inattention to precisely those details which secure M's reputation for intellectual rigour.

Pioneer leadership is something I have had to deal with all too often, and it doesn't scare me. It's part of every organisation's path of development, painful and often debilitating, sometimes terminally so, but not new or strange. To be expected; par for the course. You roll up your sleeves and go to work on the issues.

But very quickly I realise that this situation is not so simple. A litany of complaint

reveals a disturbing angle on the case: M is abusive. That he is excessively hierarchical, arrogant, moody, petulant when crossed, impulsive and impetuous to an extreme, and unbearably erratic . . . all this can be seen as simply problematic. “He understands nothing about process”, I keep getting told, “He just wants what he wants immediately”. But he is also admired and followed, after all, for his genius, his intellectual prowess, his fundraising capacity; he can at times be generous and even warm hearted towards certain of his staff. He has two sides, and no-one knows, least of all himself, it appears, which one will be shown when. He puts no energy into building staff capacity, complaining that the intention is always there but Plenty’s intent keeps getting waylaid by external pressures. All of this can be seen as simply problematic, and many on the Board have known about these things for years, and have themselves been subjected to them. But there is, as I say, a more disturbing side to the story, and it is a side that has been well hidden from the Board through all of these years. When I relate some of these aspects of M’s leadership - as experienced by staff - to Board members, they tell me that I am talking of someone they do not know. Possibly. Yet the evidence is so painfully apparent.

M is more than the erratic and impetuous pioneer leader. As conveyed to me through staff observations, his abuses of staff make for horrific tales. And the stories are too frequent, too consistent, too repeated, to leave much room for doubt. Staff are brutalised and abused, sworn at, gestured at with one finger, railed and screamed at, lied to, even physically maltreated. These stories go on and on, one person corroborating another even when they have little love for each other. There is real fear here, real distress, amidst a kind of co-dependency that disables people from speaking out. Until matters came to a head over the organising of the conference, and staff came together to speak with one voice (with not a single member of staff disagreeing, let alone abstaining). The working environment, within this NGO fighting for justice, has become inhuman; *the stories stay in my mind, tainting my interactions as I go about the rest of my life, staining my mood, like blood under my fingernails that I cannot wash out.*

I had intended to tell some of these stories at this point, to prove the point, perhaps, but realise now that I do not want to, and that it is unnecessary. M has left and is no longer the problem. Although his legacy remains, and it is this legacy that points the way to the underlying nub of the story.

M has never acknowledged the validity of the claims against him. He continues to

believe in his own legitimacy, and the illegitimacy of staff complaints. It is this claim to innocence, openly and authentically made, that points towards the nub of this story. M may have been increasingly erratic and depressed, overworked and burned out, but his approach to his leadership remains rational; he felt he was doing the right thing. *What precisely was it, then, that he felt he was responsible for? What underlying assumptions informed his behaviour? Between the original promise and the final collapse, what happened to M?*

Lest we forget: This is an important, in many quarters highly regarded, internationally recognised and dedicated NGO struggling for its particular take on human rights. This is not some flea-bitten excuse for an NGO. *NGOs could be regarded as vital organs of a better world. At the very least the intention is to have influence beyond the size and financial resources of any individual NGO. But in the name of social transformation, what world is being born here?*

Because the problem of abuse reaches much further than the relationships between M and individual members of staff. As these things are wont to do, it has infiltrated the entire organisation, has become part of the organisational culture, so to speak. It is no longer only M who abuses staff, but staff members who abuse other staff members. Swearing, finger gestures, 'dissing' and dismissing of others, disregarding rational arguments in favour of the verbal assault, exploitation and victimisation - all have found their way into the relationships between people in Plenty. Even the Board has become a site of distasteful mudslinging. The word distaste is instructive; for many staff, the environment of Plenty has become distasteful, in the most penetrating sense of that word. This is not a question of structure or system or procedure - however much these may be lacking - neither is it simply a case of frustration with lack of capacity (though this is there too, but more to the point perhaps: "It's amazing how uncommitted and undedicated so many staff are to what they produce"). No, this is an embedded culture of a kind that no member of staff or Board would want in their own homes or communities. "At the root of everything is this disrespect". "This organisation is a poisoned chalice". And, until now, no-one has paid it much attention. "We run like rats on speed from early till late; maybe the thing that is missing most is time for reflection . . ."

“When I came here I came from a very upright organisation, also an organisation of the extreme left but a dignified and civil organisation, but on coming here I realised that something else was happening here, and I was horrified, then quickly you lose yourself without even knowing it, get abusive to others like he is, I abused E, then went to management committee to say look what’s happening to us, but it only gets worse. Also, I’ve become inefficient here, have never been so inefficient”. This statement stands for many that are made to me during the course of interviews with staff, a perfect description of relationships to others and to self that is repeated many times by different people. It is difficult to focus on issues of capacity or structure when these are so bound up with a pervading culture of this kind.

And this problem of abuse reaches even further than the internal organisational culture of Plenty. In Plenty’s dealings with the outside world, the same features of relationship are apparent. “Four letter words fly around in our meetings like water. I have never heard such stuff anywhere. At the very least, it’s so unprofessional. For example, if there is an academic out there whom someone might recommend, this language flies around, like: ‘They’re useless, their politics are wrong, fuck them.’; (Plenty) looks down on people all the time, rubbishes them all the time . . . then sometimes still uses them”. This statement too must stand for many other similar statements that are made. It expresses an attitude, an overarching gesture, of contempt . . . and this appears to have become the stance of Plenty in its dealings and relationships, not with regard to the ‘enemy’ but with regard to its fellow-travellers. This is the same internal culture turned outward. “M imposes, misleads, misrepresents, manipulates; slowly, everyone aligned with (Plenty) has distanced themselves”. “M fights dirty . . . and he’s gotten into fights many times; well, there’s no love lost in this game”. “(Fellow-travellers) are drifting away, not trusting; (Plenty) is criticised by the left, seen as a bit slimy”.

This does not extend only to M; similar comments are made about others. And yes, it’s confusing. I do not speak with any ‘fellow-travellers’, only with staff and Board, and I hear contradictory observations. On the one hand Plenty - and M - are regarded as one of the few organisations able to pull disparate elements of the left together, onto the same platform. Plenty collaborates with a vast range of players, and thereby influences, whereas many other similar organisations remain splintered and fragmented from the mainstream of struggle. Indeed, Plenty’s genius has been seen to be precisely this ability to move with acumen and flexibility amongst many warring

parties, in the name of the struggle. On the other hand, there is increasing recognition that those days are going (if not gone), that Plenty has marginalised itself through its own stance of contempt for others' contributions and its manipulation of others for its own short term ends. "Actually we don't work very well with other organisations (except where we get our way and dominate)". Amongst fellow-travellers, there is an increasing lack of trust with regard to Plenty now, and an increasing lack of respect that mirrors the lack of respect shown by it to its fellow-travellers, that mirrors the lack of respect implicit in the internal organisational culture. It seems clear at least that, 10 years on, Plenty is no longer showing the promise it once did; that promise is waning.

A culture of disrespect and contempt has become all pervasive within Plenty. *Was this all M's doing, or was M himself caught in it, a victim of, or player in, something larger?* Because not everyone is worried by this all pervasive culture. Inside Plenty aspects of this culture are regarded as necessary, strategic, a demonstration of political nous, part of the territory. It is averred that Plenty is a political NGO, and "has an explicitly political function: it is oppositional, opposed to neoliberalism and globalisation". "Some of the organisational culture is to do with the fact that there is a perception that (Plenty) is not an ordinary NGO but a political NGO, so we must behave differently, with a political culture, which is . . . what . . . more ruthless?" "Yes, (Plenty) postures, is highly critical, manipulates - this is a political NGO, we mustn't mince words, we don't need to be nuanced." "There's no love lost in this game". Indeed, no quarter asked and none given. *Neoliberalism and globalisation fight dirty, it's a dirty fight, we have to fight dirty too. Once again, is my concern for the kind of world we are creating in the process just bourgeois indulgence? Does the end indeed justify the means, or is even the raising of this question an indulgence? But leaving these questions aside, the stance taken by Plenty is rendering it ragged and crumbling, a shadow of its former self. Has Plenty been caught in its own backwash? How can one go to work on this without addressing this issue of culture?*

As the interviews progress I become convinced that understanding with respect to the questions being raised lies even deeper than organisational culture, that we haven't hit bedrock yet. Not only is M contentious, not only is the organisational culture contentious, but strategy is contentious too. And contentions with regard to strategy (and overall intent) seem to underlie all that I have heard. I begin to penetrate the realm of Plenty strategy.

Plenty's strategic thrusts appear to lie in two directions, which may be contradictory or complementary, depending on how they are played. Currently the oppositional rules.

On the one hand, Plenty is "an intellectual collaboration of left wing leaders, of left wing forces". It is an intellectual coalition of diverse left wing leanings and activists, dedicated to fostering critical thinking and inquiry, and to researching and presenting alternatives to the current status quo.

On the other hand, even amongst formations on the left Plenty has its own, and very focused, ideological stance - which could be regarded as having populist leanings - and translates this into strategy through working directly with the working (and not working) class. The intention here is mass-based action through building campaigns in particular areas, and then the building of social movements through the initial campaign work. There have been schools and training courses on various subjects for youth and women and working (and not working) leaders, all centred around issues of unemployment (in the broadest understanding of that word) and political economic understanding directed towards capacity building.

Currently, there are four units in Plenty. An administration unit and a resource centre supposed to service the other two units. The two primarily strategic units are the one geared towards the stimulation of critical thinking through research, dissemination and dialogue around alternatives to neoliberalism and globalisation (which has an international reach and connectivity), and the one directed towards the building of a social movement on the back of a campaign around work and human rights. There is also a media person who once, I think, was situated in the resource centre but now works out of the last mentioned unit.

But this presents the current situation far too blandly. Let's start again. In fact Plenty is polarised along strategic lines. There is a campaign being run around work and human rights, intended to build into a social movement of the unemployed, and the unit running this campaign has achieved currency in Plenty with respect to power, distribution of resources (including personnel), and generally the gearing of all organisational activities deemed to be of relevance, towards resourcing of the campaign

(and the eventual) building of the movement. All fieldwork, training and workshops, media work, most organisational energy, is geared towards realising this (populist?) strategy. Even the organisational publication, which used to present a diverse range of issues, has now become “the mouthpiece of the campaign”. In contrast, the research and dialogue unit, tiny (though very effective, by many accounts) at the best of times, feels marginalised and “like an orphan, struggling to get someone’s attention, operating in a vacuum”. This (latter) unit is an “odddity” in the organisation, an “intellectual think tank”.

And then there is the resource centre, which is disaffected from the campaigns unit and, it seems, more committed to its original function of providing resources for the stimulation of critical thinking around alternatives. And then there is the administration unit, to which P, the Deputy Director, belongs, which has no influence whatsoever on the strategic direction taken by Plenty. Things were not always like this, but they are now. The campaign and social movement unit has achieved the high ground - indeed, it is said to me often that this unit *is* Plenty, these days - and given the prevailing culture of contempt for others and the dismissing of others’ contributions, this does not necessarily make for rational strategic thinking.

There are a number of different angles to this state of affairs. First is the question of potential impact and effectiveness. Most respondents agree that Plenty’s reputation, nationally and internationally, has been built on its capacity with respect to research and dissemination, the stimulating of critical thinking and intellectual debate around alternatives. On the other hand, when it has entered the arena of mass-based campaigns intended to act as springboards for the building of social movements, it has failed each time. It has tried this twice in the past; the one time it failed when it had created the campaign and stepped back from leadership of the social movement too early (the movement collapsed), and the other time it tried to lead the social movement for too long, and the movement collapsed in acrimony.

There are major strategic questions as to whether an NGO can build a social movement at all, or should even attempt to, given issues around control of, and accountability for, resources, as well as the fact that social movements build from a groundswell, not from the top down (to be instigator and resource at the same time may well be untenable). And there are major methodological questions around Plenty’s specific approach, which is “to recruit individuals to build the movement. This is fragile”, contend some, “for

they have no base". (We will return to this methodological observation again, as it becomes relevant at a different level of the story). In any event, Plenty has not proved its capacity in terms of the campaign and movement strategy, whereas it has proved its capacity in respect of the other strategy.

The second angle is more immediate. With respect to the current campaign, the unit responsible is strategically - or perhaps methodologically - at sea. The national conference mentioned earlier was the launch of this campaign, but the unit has no clear picture as to how things should continue. Local campaign forums have been set up in many provinces, but these are not 'of the people' so much as Plenty constructions, and already the local organisers are questioning Plenty's role *vis a vis* their own roles in the furthering of the campaign. They are challenging and asking questions - reminiscent of the issues which led to collapse of the two previous endeavours - and Plenty does not have any strategically thought through response.

More to the point, perhaps (and remarkable, given the history of failure) the unit does not engage in anything remotely resembling strategic thinking or planning sessions. From out of the unit itself come the following comments: "There is a lack of coherent strategy with respect to the campaign". "Once you raise questions, there is a lack of proper response from those responsible. I don't expect them to know everything, but at least to open up a forum so we can engage. It's not enough for someone to say 'We're going to build a campaign this way or that way, through making demands'; demands don't make a movement". "We're faced here with the fact that the campaign is not growing. When we respond to this, we respond in pieces . . . like, let's have a training programme or workshop . . . but this is not adequate, we must coherently look at how we build this campaign". "When contentious or problematic issues are raised people nod and agree that we must talk about it thoroughly, but it never happens!" . "Meetings are operational and reactive to external demands". "The central question of how we can lead responsively never gets dealt with".

As everyone points out, none of this is to imply that Plenty should not throw its weight behind such a campaign and (perhaps) nascent social movement. One of the largest points being made, it seems, is that, whether it is within the campaigns unit or within Plenty as a whole, there is no coherence, and no cohering, around strategy. "Previous evaluations always talk about synergy, but it never happens".

But then, how could synergy 'happen', either within units or between, when the strategic split is indicative of a deeper split, perhaps an ideological one, that runs through Plenty like a deeply dark canyon. This third angle on the state of strategy is the most consequent.

"Imagine going into a hospital to read to patients, as a social initiative, and discovering that you had joined a bible-punching group". A nice metaphor, referring to the observation that the campaigns unit "brooks no alternatives; there is a vehement political/ideological agenda here". "Is Plenty captive to a particular ideological stance, rather than really stimulating critical debate around alternatives?". On the other hand, "The (research and dialogue) unit is simply a networking strategy, for punching above our weight". "The (research and dialogue) unit is part of an intellectual think tank, one of M's needs, so now they do, for example, highbrow privatisation research, and we're struggling to bring their writing and findings into the campaign, popularise them, run workshops and so on; the unit is an oddity (but it could be a support)".

The polarisation is expressed in different ways. As intellectual versus populist. As critical versus ideological. As a focus on stimulating independent thinking versus a focus on achieving mass-based action. "Plenty has been seduced by the intellectual academic NGO level, struggles with the populist campaign, wants quarterly journals, is pulled back and forth . . .". On the other hand, those running the campaign are " . . . populist demagogues using half-baked youngsters". They "replace analysis with formulas". They " . . . think that (Plenty) is a crypto-political organisation - cadre building, indoctrination - which doesn't include critical thinking". "Are we collaborative and diverse or are we building a cohesive unitary political movement?".

Out here on the furthest horizons of the left, there is clearly lots of room for debate, for adopting different - and exclusive - approaches. They do not of necessity have to be exclusive; perhaps there is room for a complementary and collaborative working together. But "we would need a very different mindset. There would have to be a very conscious effort to bring units and people together". Yes, but who is there who would or could make that "conscious effort"? Note again the observation raised earlier in this report, that: 'There is no focused leadership within Plenty, no place where the organisation coheres, no uncontroversial authority, no-one and nowhere to turn to in search of some kind of holding, some kind of recognised power.' It returns now a thousand-fold.

It is observed, by some, that perhaps M's increasing erraticism, depression and abusive behaviour have to do with the fact that the tensions running through Plenty also ran through him, that he was the one who held the organisation together in the face of these tensions - which have increased substantially in recent times through the influx of new staff - through all these years. *And I wonder whether he himself, inside himself, could ever come to rest with respect to these oppositional positions, whether they tore him apart personally, from within. The split between wanting to engage and wanting to dictate, wanting to influence through argument and wanting to rally in opposition. The frustrations of legitimate outrage at illegitimate power.*

And the polarisation runs like a fault line through the ranks of personnel. All those who are part of the campaigns unit - which is the bulk of staff - find themselves on one side; all those in the resource centre and (research and dialogue) unit, as well as perhaps the media person (but I am not clear of this) fall on the other. The administration unit vacillates, and appears more confused than anything else, though some are clearly worried by the ascendancy (and lack of strategic or methodological clarity) of the campaigns unit. (The administration unit, it should be noted, had supposedly formed - with M - the management committee of Plenty; in fact the unit has been, in the words of one respondent, traumatised, and is weak, unable to stand up for anything; "I have never seen such fear before.").

The more people I speak to, the more a shadowy and almost opaque layer of intrigue seems to manifest as underlying the (ideological) chasm that exists between the two 'tendencies' of staff. Mention is made by a number of respondents of a 'clandestine' political organisation whose tentacles seem to reach, enigmatically and esoterically, to each member of staff, one way or the other. All members of the campaigns unit appear to be members of this organisation; and no other staff are members. Campaigns unit staff have been recruited as much on the basis of their relationship with this organisation as with regard to their capacity or relationship with Plenty. These staff speak as though they are adherents of a faith; all other staff keep their distance, as though there is something frightening and unnerving about this organisation. There is great hesitancy in people even mentioning the organisation 'to an outsider', and for a long time it remains strangely backgrounded for me, an arcane factor in this story that I cannot quite pin down; a ghostly and wraithlike presence. A taint or stain on the transparency of organisation.

But I am in desperate search for the governing ideas or persons behind this situation which appears so polarised and rudderless, for how else will decisions be made concerning Plenty's future? So it becomes necessary to probe further, in search of such leadership, in search of the levers that have confused and fragmented but that may also clarify and determine. I thus turn to the Board, as the last port of call. They are, in any case, the last persons in my schedule to be interviewed.

* * * * *

Leadership

It seems that for most of Plenty's history, while M has reigned supreme, those with whom he conferred as leader were always Board members, never staff. Until recently - with the rise to ascendancy of the campaigns unit - staff have never been taken into M's confidence, had never shared in M's strategic thinking or doubts and queries. Yet M was never alone. He was able to share with his Board, at least on a political and on a strategic level.

So far as staff are concerned, this was part of the problem. The Board was connected to M in diverse 'ties that bind', and therefore had no objectivity (M's wife is on the Board, and his brother-in-law, there are various old activist cliques and groupings that go back a long way, and there is the question of this "clandestine" party grouping; though it is recognised that there are Board members with differing tendencies, and newer Board members as well). Nevertheless, to staff, the composition of the Board has appeared to vindicate their contention that Plenty is M's "family business"; and that consequently staff will never gain any authority in the organisation.

While (begrudgingly, for the most part) recognising some of the staff's contentions, the Board holds that its objectivity has never been impaired by these facts, and that in reality they have done an admirable job over the years - less so recently - in assisting Plenty at least in its political and strategic deliberations. My own interviews seem to bear this out. There is no doubt that the Board has engaged deeply and with dedication - far more so than many Boards I have come across - in these political and strategic deliberations; the level of argument and conversation at Board meetings has evidently been of very high quality indeed. And this makes sense to me, because the Board

members I have met are, for the most part, remarkable individuals - activists of long standing with impeccable histories of sacrifice, intelligent and articulate, committed and tireless in their devotion to the struggle against neoliberalism and (elite) globalisation. I am convinced that Plenty's success in the intellectual and international arena, and in terms of forming an "intellectual collaboration of the left", is largely due to the composition of the Board.

The question remains, however, as to whether the Board has the wherewithal to assume leadership of Plenty at this stage. Board and staff are polarised in their own ways, after all; the Board has very little credibility with staff anymore, given its connections to M, what has appeared to staff as its defense of M and its lack of adequate recognition of staff contributions, and its lack of grasp or perception of the dire state of affairs which has existed in Plenty over this last while. And the Board, for its part, does not appear particularly impressed by staff; the problem of lack of capacity remains the Board's biggest headache (and one of their reasons for excusing or remaining blind to M's excesses of abuse, though the lack of capacity building of staff over the years - surely an accountable responsibility of leadership - appears to call the Board's bluff on this).

But the question of the Board's capacity to assume leadership at this stage runs further. The Board itself is deeply divided, polarised, in a state of constant opposition rather than collaboration. I do not meet all Board members, but from what I see it appears that, currently at least, the Board is split between the Chair, D, on the one hand (a formidable individual who does not easily entertain doubts) - with perhaps some members loyal to him whom I do not meet - and all the others occupying various positions on the other. And the split has recently become highly acrimonious - the contagion of organisational culture spreads either to or from this point - with outpourings of venom, sides being taken, alliances forming between certain staff and the Chair of the Board, and so on. As I probe deeper it becomes clear that there are resonances here of the ideological polarisation that has emerged with respect to staff. Members of the campaign unit - particularly its leaders - are now closely allied with D (many other staff would perhaps align themselves with the rest of the Board were it not for the fact that the Board as a whole has entirely lost credibility with staff through their - apparent - relationship to M). Thus complexity seems to pile on complexity.

And then, in my most confused hour, light seems to shine through the darkness,

(though what it reveals makes me wonder if the darkness had not been preferable). Finally, through a deeper and deeper probing of the Board - and because the more I begin to understand the more I can begin to see - I come to the heart of the ideological polarisation that runs through Board and staff and strategy, and in so doing begin to understand the particular culture that has come to hold this NGO in thrall. There is a history that exerts a stranglehold on Plenty, on its culture and strategy and people and leadership.

It goes something like this. Many years ago - ten years ago, in fact - a small group of activists of the far left, recognising that the ANC was intent on leading itself and the country further to the centre and to the right, were faced with the renewal of struggle almost in the very moment of euphoria at South Africa's transition to democracy. They formed a "political initiative, by a group of socialists sick of the sectarian left, left of the communist party, which said that small groups of 4/5 people writing manifestos were part of the problem, what was needed was a mass movement, and what was needed to build that mass movement was a vehicle". Plenty was thus formed to be that vehicle. As a "clandestine and secret" grouping this political initiative - which I will call SOFT (Socialists of a Future Transition) - was too radical to pursue a mass-based agenda. So it "plotted" to form Plenty, a "front" NGO which would not appear sectarian, which would "represent and convene a diverse group of left wing intellectuals", which would not itself follow an ideologically rigid agenda (or staffing policy), but which would at all times be controlled - from the backroom, as it were - by SOFT, and which would gradually build a mass movement able to take SOFT's radical and hidden agenda out into the public domain. As such a radical initiative SOFT was hamstrung financially, but as an NGO Plenty would be eligible to raise donor money, and to employ technical skills, with neither the donors nor the technical experts necessarily knowing anything of SOFT or SOFT's agenda.

Three people who were the founders of SOFT remained involved with Plenty all the way through: D (the Chair), M (the erstwhile Director), and a third who remains a significant roleplayer on the Board. M was to act as the Director of Plenty, but always as a (secret) representative of SOFT. D was to be the Chair. Gradually other Board members were 'brought on board', people with similar tendencies who could bring requisite skills or positioning possibilities. *(Interestingly I am informed that all these people were recruited individually; you never raise these things in public meetings, you identify someone who might be recruitable and draw him aside, encourage him, and so on, until he comes*

on board. This is the way things are done in this world, I am told with more than a hint of incredulity at my naivete . . . and I realise, pennies dropping as if out of a slot machine, that this is where the campaign unit's methodology of individual recruitment to form a mass movement comes from. It's a clandestine political method of the far left - and presumably of the far right - that has been seamlessly, though ineffectually it appears, incorporated into this NGO's methodology. The reach of SOFT's tentacles is long indeed.)

So Board members are recruited, most - though not all - members of SOFT. And Plenty, through the abilities of M, raises vast sums of money, and gains great credibility - though losing it latterly - as a hard-hitting, streetwise, intellectual NGO, all the while trying and failing at its original task of building a mass movement. *(As I understand it, if the mass movement were finally to take off then Plenty's work would be done, and Plenty could go its own way - as a legitimately independent NGO - because SOFT would be able to ride on the momentum of the mass movement.)*

Currently many Board members who were (relatively) privy to these ideas no longer hold to them. For them Plenty has become a legitimately autonomous NGO. Because as time went on many factors came to bear on Plenty's strategic thinking and positioning. Donor pressures, alliances with NGOs (both locally and internationally) and academic institutions, and so on. Not least Plenty's own successes in the realm of dialogue, research and the stimulation of critical thinking around alternatives. Not least M's own development, his own shifts and changes. Not least changes in the life circumstances and political/strategic views of Board members themselves.

On the other hand, due to the pressures of having a clandestine political initiative 'run' Plenty, SOFT launched itself as a public political initiative some two years ago, and its meetings are now open to anyone to attend . . . and through the offices of D and M all Plenty staff have been encouraged to attend and to get involved, and all members of the campaigns unit have done so - indeed, many are more closely aligned with SOFT than with Plenty, and were recruited on this basis - while all other members of staff look askance, and somewhat fearfully, at this SOFT thing in the dusky twilit background (or is that foreground, I hear many of these staff ask).

So far as some members of the Board are concerned, then, Plenty is not - and never has been? - a 'front' NGO. There are connections, but there is nothing clandestine about this, they say. Others recognise that Plenty still has a role to perform for SOFT, and in

fact that role is now more important and more imminent than ever, with the current work on the new campaign and social movement possibly about to bear fruit. All these years of work are, possibly, about to be fulfilled; but M's own personal attachment to his own star, and his vacillation with respect to which side of the ideological divide he stands on, and his increasing frustration and depression and abuse of staff, have jeopardised the existence and the work of Plenty.

And now M has gone, and Board and staff and Chair and units remain, glaring at each other across a great divide. Whither, then; and to what end?

* * * * *

To What End?

So where does it all cohere? Who makes decisions? On what basis? Who leads, and where to? There is a funding trip planned for the next few weeks; what exactly are the funds to be raised for?

The Chair, D, has been accused by other members of the Board of what amounts to dereliction of duty, in that he has vigorously sided with staff against M, even to an extent instigated the growing revolt, certainly collaborated with members of staff in their struggle with M; and all this without informing the rest of the Board either of his actions or his ongoing knowledge of the increasingly unsatisfactory state of affairs inside Plenty. D is unrepentant, claiming that as a good socialist he will always side with the workers against the bosses, that this is his duty and responsibility, that workers' grievances are his first and foremost concern. Well, yes, but what then of his role of Chair of the Board of an NGO? Is he not also then a 'boss'? Is he trying to play the game both ways? Is he not at least as accountable to his comrades on the Board as he is to the workers on the staff? And are Board members 'bosses' in reality, and are staff members of a small and dedicated NGO 'workers'?

I raise the issue here because it brings into question what an NGO is in the first place. Perhaps this entire story has been heading towards this question; Plenty is our primary concern, after all. And my way of engaging with it is to return to the central question raised in the early part of this story: *If the organisation were to speak, what would it say about itself?*

And I think, in all honesty, that if Plenty were to speak, it would speak in the voice of a battered wife, of an abused child. But its words would not make sense to me, because they would indicate only the world of schizophrenia. A split personality, alternating between moments of sanity and periods of incomprehensible mumbling, swinging wildly and erratically from one pole to another, from one fantasy to another.

And we could say that it has been driven to schizophrenia, that its past history has generated its current pain, its lack of rational connection to its world and to itself. But it is not just past history; still today it is being pulled asunder, like a tortured prisoner stretched by chains attached to the wall. It can no longer fathom which way is up and which way down.

There are NGOs that have been set up with conservative agendas, but this is not one of them. This is a progressive NGO – what some would call these days a CSO (civil society organisation) – dedicated to human rights, to improving the lot of the people, to social transformation and renewal. But it has adopted the means of its enemies. It is inherently oppositional; it doesn't open things up but closes them down. It doesn't engage in such a way that new possibilities may be released and realised, but manipulates, renders the transparent clandestine, trusts no-one, suspects everyone, and generates paranoia and fear. Is this the world that it wants to realise for us all in the future? Is this the world that its members want for themselves and for their loved ones?

I had thought that NGOs were there to herald a better society, that they are to be, literally, the organs of a more civil society. I know that the world we create is made each and every moment by the way that we are. Gandhi put it succinctly: "There is no way to peace; peace is the only way". The comrades in Plenty may beg to differ, may maintain that the end justifies the means . . . but the fallacy of their position is evidenced by the untenable meltdown that Plenty is experiencing. Yes, Plenty is caught in its own backwash; its approach has come back to haunt its very self. The chickens always come home to roost. Or, in the words of a wonderful African proverb: "He who shits in the road will meet flies on his return". There is nothing we do to others that we do not do to ourselves; not a moral injunction but a description of the way things work. And Plenty proves the point. We cannot abuse, manipulate, disrespect, conceal, and hope that an honourable world will emerge from the mix; instead, we simply become abused, manipulated, disrespected and withheld from ourselves.

Whichever side of the ideological divide staff and Board members find themselves on, all seem to agree that (at least aspects of) the culture of Plenty should be understood and expected because Plenty is a “political NGO”. But what does this mean? Does being political create licence to eschew the best of what NGOs promise? On the other hand, is there any NGO – in the sense of being an organisation working towards social renewal – that is not political? *I suspect that the epithet ‘political’ has become an excuse, and in a supremely ironic sense. Saying that Plenty is political implies that the world we already know cannot change, that the world we already know is the world that we can expect in the future. Politics is politics. Yet this is the world that Plenty has been created to change; this is the world, therefore, that we cannot accept. Adopting a ‘political’ stance, where ‘political’ means the way that politics is played currently, implies that we have forsaken any agenda of transformation. Plenty may think that it is fighting to push our society forward; I see an organisation that appears hellbent on pulling our society backwards. The lack of civility that Plenty manifests has little hope of enabling a more civil society to emerge.*

At the same time, Plenty’s arguments and efforts at facilitating social change are laudatory and admirable. Plenty is an invaluable resource for all those struggling with the depredations and distortions of neoliberalism and (elite) globalisation. There is no question but that, if Plenty were to disappear, the world of struggle towards a more viable and humane future would be a poorer place. There is no doubt that most staff and Board members are honourable activists working for radical change. There is no doubt that the outrage which is the *leitmotif* of Plenty is both justified and invaluable. But something has to be played differently. Plenty has been bent out of shape, distorted almost beyond recognition, hounded into a state of schizophrenia such that the enemy now exists as much within as without.

A time of sober reflection is called for. And time for (critical self -) reflection is Plenty’s greatest deficiency. *A bourgeois indulgence? But as the depth psychologist Jung once said: “What if I were to discover that the enemy is within, that I am the very enemy who must be confronted; what then?”. Or, to quote Wittgenstein: “For those who are afraid to look deep inside themselves because it is too painful, their style will be a form of deceit”. Indeed.*

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And So Perhaps

Plenty could be something to be proud of. Plenty could be intact, and a flame of outrage. Plenty could be upright and vehement. Plenty could be a rigorous resource for us all.

Already there are signs that something may be changing. The special Board meeting that I facilitated as part of this process to date elicited a level of honest communication which bodes well for the future. Things are starting to be put on the table; reality is beginning to surface. Staff are feeling more empowered, more enthusiastic, more motivated, more ownership. The situation, though in crisis, has changed irrevocably with the events of the last few months, and a new beginning is possible.

Of course there are major issues to deal with of conventional organisational concern. The clarification of strategy and methodology, the vexed question of staff capacity (or the lack thereof), the setting up of appropriate structures and systems and procedures and policies.

But these are all secondary. Of primary concern is the working through to resolution of other questions. Who and what does Plenty want to be? Who will lead it, and how? To what end, precisely, does it exist; what agenda informs it? What image of the future does it want to carry into the world through the very way that it is. What must be let go of; what new must be taken on board? What changes must individuals make, so that the whole coheres? Who will take responsibility?

Every part reflects the whole. The whole is informed by every part. Organisations, as living organisms, continuously self-generate from within, reproducing the ideas that form them. Everything we create conforms to the way of thinking that created it. It is Plenty's way of thinking, and so way of behaving, that is as much in need of transformation as the world that it seeks to address, or redress. If members have the mettle to face themselves as vehemently as they face the outer world, then perhaps Plenty can emerge victorious, a Phoenix rising from the ashes of its own consuming fire.

The game cannot be played both ways.

Unquestionably, Plenty is a product of its context. And the context is adversarial and debilitating, increasingly so. But if it is working towards social renewal, surely it has to

become incongruent with its context. How else will that context ever be alternatively influenced?

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Originally a Postscript, Now an Interlude

Many years ago I was working on a rural development project in a remote mountain village some hours north of Cape Town. One night I was travelling over a high pass on a gravel road, the bakkie's lights cutting across the rock faces on either side. The passenger sitting alongside me was a member of the community, someone I worked with regularly. We talked companionably as I focused on the task of driving, he taking swigs every now and then from a bottle of Coke. Eventually he finished the Coke, and, before I realised what he was doing, rolled down his window and tossed the bottle out into the night. We heard the smashing of glass as it hit the rocks at the side of the road; then it was gone, and the night filled once more with the strain of the bakkie's engine. He rolled up his window, and turned towards me to resume our conversation.

But how can you do that, I asked him incredulously. Do what, he replied, his eyes bewildered at my change of conversation. Throw the bottle out the window! But what's the problem? He turned and looked briefly into the darkness behind us. There are no cars following us, so there's nothing to worry about. Relax. He shook a cigarette out of its box, lit it, took a drag, put the match into the ashtray.

And I drove on nonplussed, questions hammering in my brain – how far behind us does someone have to be for our actions to affect them? Is 'far' a question of space only, or perhaps more significantly of time? And how do I engage in *this* conversation with the man sitting next to me?

Pass me a cigarette, I said; the night is dark outside.

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On the Back of the Story – The Two Day Conversation

Throughout the two day conversation – which had been part of the agreement from the beginning - the atmosphere is charged and volatile, and I feel as if I am desperately trying to ride a runaway horse bareback, a bolt of lightning in one hand and a hurricane in the other.

I enter the meeting knowing that everyone has read – and probably reread, as I asked them to – the ‘report’ (as in the preceding pages). I enter with trepidation, not knowing what reception I will get. At first it appears that my attempt to generate a picture which may be a revelation to many but still resound as truth to all, has misfired. I am accused, largely by those Board members who are also members of SOFT, of telling a beautiful story which unfortunately is nothing more than a fairytale, a fantasy; I am accused of entering the situation with very strong prejudices of my own, and that it is these prejudices which have found their way into the story, rather than any reference to actuality. My responses are minimal, even when participants contradict the very things that they have told me in confidence.

I know that if I am defensive I will simply direct the energies towards myself rather than towards the situation that Plenty finds itself in. I cannot afford to take offence, to defend my name or work; I have to find the stillness to rise above my own instinctive need to protect and promote myself. It is Plenty’s life, and the lives of its members, that are at stake here, not my own. Yet I cannot simply allow myself to be abused – this is part of Plenty’s problem, after all – because those with less power than others are being silenced in the process. And the validity of the picture that has been presented is being tarnished in such a way that these others are losing the confidence they might have gained from seeing the whole story for the first time, and so realising what they are part of, what they are both victims and perpetrators of. So I do respond at times, but only to issues of fact, or when deliberate dissimulation takes place. For the rest I remain silent; simple presence being more persuasive than protestation.

Gradually others begin to speak, providing different perspectives, thanking me for the story – both with respect to its content and also the form in which I have chosen to write the report – and expressing anger at those who have denied the validity of the story with such vehemence. And so the painful process of dealing with awful truth begins.

(There is still doubt about aspects of the story I have told, and misunderstanding and lack of understanding. There is fear that should the report become public it will indeed

ruin reputations and the organisation itself, and so I am asked to amend it on the back of the discussions that are taking place. But it seems clear that all factions and all individuals present trust me, even where they do not trust themselves, and this allows me to continue to guide and challenge, to make space for the marginal and the confused, to push for alternative understanding and even memory, to help reveal the essentials of the story from the very interactions that are taking place between people there and then).

And so what takes place through the conversation is not simply an exchange of ideas, of agreements or disagreements, but actual instances of abuse, of disrespect, of mistrust and suspicion, of manipulation, of obfuscation and concealment, of dissimulation, of contempt for the opinions and realities of others. There and then, as it were, in the midst of the conversation, these instances of Plenty's habitual ways of being rise to the surface, and the validity of the story as told above is not so much revealed as directly experienced for the first time; that which had taken place unconsciously now takes place in the unremitting light of consciousness. And gradually self-consciousness begins to emerge.

But it emerges painfully, and slowly. Whenever a consensual picture begins to emerge, someone must shoot it down. Whenever a place of trust and rest is reached, someone must shatter the moment with an ill-timed abusive comment or attempt at manipulation. Whenever someone offers themselves in honesty, someone else uses that person's vulnerability to preserve their own space. When I ask participants, at the beginning of the second day, to reflect on what they may have learned *about themselves* through the previous day's discussion, they prove entirely incapable of undertaking the reflection, either unable to sit with themselves in silence or using the space to talk about the problems that others are causing them.

Yet we do make progress, until eventually the entire group recognises the whole story they are, and have been, part of. At this point the members of SOFT ask permission for some time to caucus, and when they join the wider group again after tea on the second afternoon they make a blanket – though grudging – apology for anything that SOFT might have done to cause the difficulties that Plenty is experiencing (though they are still not entirely convinced that SOFT has in fact acted incorrectly) and assert that they will refrain from any incorrect activities in the future. Others accept the apology – though hesitantly. It seems that we have arrived at a better place than when we

started, though just prior to closure a comment is made which leads to another round of shooting from the hip, and everyone feels slightly bruised and bewildered once more.

I am again asked to amend the report for public consumption. This I refuse to do, on the grounds that it should be clear to everyone at this point that the story which the report outlines is entirely valid, and therefore I cannot amend without myself perpetrating a lie. I suggest instead that, the story having served its purpose, everyone should simply agree to delete the report from their computer, and then there will be no public document at all; there is in fact no necessity for one. The meeting agrees, and I am then asked to facilitate a three day strategic planning session – to take place a few weeks later – which, having arrived at this point, may help the organisation to move beyond the past and present and into a more viable and honourable future. I ask for some time to think about this (and, some days later, agree to continue the work with Plenty).

As the meeting breaks up and people go their separate ways, one person comes up to me and asks – Do you think we have really gotten somewhere? I don't know, I respond; it's up to you, really.

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Towards Closure – Later Reflections

During the year that has elapsed since that two-day conversation, Plenty has not recovered but has steadily withered and shrivelled, becoming all but a husk of its former self. Many people have resigned; some were asked to leave; there are precious few left currently, and none who can assume leadership responsibilities. During this time accusation and counter-accusation have continued, with new people constantly being drawn into the fray, until numbers dwindled to such an extent that perhaps sheer exhaustion has set in, and the fire is dying down due to lack of fuel. Vindictive acts of sabotage and intrigue were perpetrated, not least the emailing - to many of Plenty's partners and donors and constituency around the world - of confidential copies of emails and memoranda (including the very report which you are reading now - bar the last two sections, of course - and which had supposedly been deleted from everyone's computer . . . but no-one was that naive).

During this time I had contact with Plenty in that I was asked to facilitate two processes - a strategic planning session and a follow--up process - as well as to comment on Plenty's new funding proposal being written in the light of all that had transpired. None of this led anywhere; the processes never lost their haunting edge, and the organisation continued to leak energy and lose resilience. I continued - for awhile, until my engagement with Plenty faded away - to try to keep the situation as clear as I could, so that decisions could be made in conditions of relative transparency; but this too helped little.

And this really is where the story ends, not with a bang, as the poet noted, but with a whimper. A tragic story, really. Perhaps something will still arise from the ashes. In the meantime, I would like to conclude, briefly, with a couple of my own reflections, on thinking about this unholy demise.

Over time, as things got worse and worse and many different people allowed their ugly sides to be caught on camera, as it were, and my early suspicion about hidden agendas came to be sadly vindicated, a number of people kept coming back to the report which I had written. They wanted it noted that I had been mistaken in my treatment of M, that I had been far too harsh in my treatment of him and that I had been misled by those with hidden agendas. Because clearly, they said, when you see what's going down now, you can see that, though he may have had issues, many others had issues too, and he was perhaps used by factions who undermined his position by turning the heads of various staff and followers through their powerful and persuasive selves which were gunning for concealed agendas . . . and so, as I pointed out to them, the problematic culture continued through all the attacks and all the defences. For this was the problem, really - a culture had taken hold of the organisation, and everyone was held captive by it, everyone marched to its tune, without thinking. And it is the lack of individual thought and integrity, I realise, that for me is the true tragedy and casualty of this story.

This report, this story, was never intended as an indictment of M, and it was never my intention to demonstrate, nor was it my understanding, in fact, that M was the problem. That he was part of the problem, no doubt; but the problem was always much bigger than him. We have a tendency to focus on the parts and pieces, on the individuals; if we can somehow deal with 'that thing out there' then we'll have it all resolved . . . but the situations we find ourselves in

don't work that way. There are far larger forces at play, and anyway, we are part of the problem.

Many pages earlier, in an italicised section of the report - I noted to those who accosted me in this way - I had written the following: "*Was this all M's doing, or was M himself caught in it, a victim of, or player in, something larger?*" Why did no-one pick up on this sentence? Or on a further couple of sentences that I used: "*What precisely was it, then, that he felt he was responsible for? What underlying assumptions informed his behaviour?*" Why did no-one pick up on this? *In both cases, I believe, because we cannot see what we cannot think. We think the part, the person, the piece . . . but everything is part of a larger context, and everything is influenced by, informed by, that context. If we cannot see the context, if we cannot see the fields that we all operate within, then we lose our individual ability to respond with personal integrity to that field, we become caught in the field, and we lose both responsibility and freedom.*

These fields, the contexts that we work within, are not physical or material fields; they are, as it were, fields of force in which we can become caught like spiders in invisible webs. When we oppose something with too much vehemence and too little awareness, we take on the character of that which we oppose. This at least is the danger. Plenty, operating as it did on the very far left, always ran the risk of, unthinkingly, taking on the character of the far left, which, itself unthinkingly, runs the risk of taking on the character of that which it opposes, in this case the far right. Thus left and right end up with identical characters even in the midst of their opposition to each other; in fact, through that very opposition. The culture of disrespect and contempt which had arisen within Plenty was not the result of individual intent but rather lack of individual intent. It had entered a war in which no quarter was given and none asked. The assumptions which had come to rule behaviour, what Plenty felt responsible for, had devolved down into a bitter struggle to win that war. Nothing else mattered any longer.

Struggle is a noble intent, and heaven knows we are in desperate need of those who make this intent their guiding star. But, once the battle is joined, struggle also becomes a practice, and a practice always runs the risk of becoming distorted and bent out of shape if it is not pursued with individual integrity and consciousness. The practice of struggle loses its rigour and humanity when we cease to recognise that any and every practice is also a struggle in its own right. Perhaps the most noble struggle of all. The integrity of a practice can only be maintained by the individual who is practising it, and by that individual maintaining levels of self-critique and awareness which keep the practice noble and intact. This is the nature of the struggle to practice.

When the individual practice of struggle becomes subsumed in unconscious fields of struggle, then we become little more than unwitting footsoldiers. And we begin to perpetrate the very thing that we were struggling against - inhumanity itself. To maintain our humanity in the face of struggle, we have to maintain the most fundamental practice of all, that of remaining conscious and personally responsible human beings in the midst of collective struggle. Anything less, and each and every struggle will eventually end up mimicking that against which it struggles.

If there is anything to be learned in this story of Plenty, it is that the story of Plenty is not the story of an individual. And it is in this very observation - that it is not the story of an individual - that the value of the story lies. For it could have been very different if it had been the story of an individual. Or the collective story of many individuals. Instead, it became the story of a collective that failed to maintain individual awareness and integrity. Thus assisting - through the failure to recognise that struggle is a practice, and that every practice, while it shares so much with others, is always individual - in transmuting the struggle into a parody of itself.

* * * * *

Succumbing to Temptation

It is hard, then, to resist leaving the last word to the unparalleled Bertolt Brecht, for whom the struggle was as familiar as his own breathing, yet never too familiar to be looked at afresh.

TO THOSE BORN LATER

By Bertolt Brecht

1

Truly, I live in dark times!
The guileless word is folly. A smooth forehead
Suggests insensitivity. The man who laughs
Has simply not yet had
The terrible news.

What kind of times are they, when
A talk about trees is almost a crime
Because it implies silence about so many horrors?
That man there calmly crossing the street
Is already perhaps beyond the reach of his friends
Who are in need?

It is true I still earn my keep
But, believe me, that is only an accident. Nothing
I do gives me the right to eat my fill.
By chance I've been spared. (If my luck breaks, I am lost.)

They say to me: Eat and drink! Be glad you have it!
But how can I eat and drink if I snatch what I eat
From the starving, and
My glass of water belongs to one dying of thirst?
And yet I eat and drink.

I would also like to be wise.
In the old books it says what wisdom is:
To shun the strife of the world and to live out
Your brief time without fear
Also to get along without violence
To return good for evil
Not to fulfil your desires but to forget them
Is accounted wise.
All this I cannot do:
Truly, I live in dark times.

11
I came to the cities in a time of disorder
When hunger reigned there.
I came among men in a time of revolt
And I rebelled with them.
So passed my time
Which had been given to me on earth.

My food I ate between battles
To sleep I lay down among murderers
Love I practised carelessly
And nature I looked at without patience.
So passed my time
Which had been given to me on earth.

All roads led into the mire in my time.
My tongue betrayed me to the butchers.
There was little I could do. But those in power
Sat safer without me; that was my hope.
So passed my time
Which had been given to me on earth.

Our forces were slight. Our goal
Lay far in the distance

It was clearly visible, though I myself
Was unlikely to reach it.
So passed my time
Which had been given to me on earth.

111

You who will emerge from the flood
In which we have gone under
Remember
When you speak of our failings
The dark time too
Which you have escaped.
For we went, changing countries oftener than our shoes
Through the wars of the classes, despairing
When there was injustice only, and no rebellion.

And yet we know:
Hatred, even of meanness
Contorts the features.
Anger, even against injustice
Makes the voice hoarse. Oh, we
Who wanted to prepare the ground for friendliness
Could not ourselves be friendly.

But you, when the time comes at last
And man is a helper to man
Think of us
With forbearance