

**Notes for the Proteus
Board Meeting
24 September 2008**

This Year ...

We last met at the beginning of April when it felt as though the year was spreading graciously and expansively before us. Time to contemplate, to breathe into the possibilities that lay before us, time to stretch ourselves into the myriad tracks that lay before and around us. Now, as I sit to write, I can hardly believe that it is already spring equinox time: our last meeting had just slipped over the side of the autumn equinox – almost six months ago! It is hard to imagine that Time is not moving objectively faster. This meeting we decided to dedicate to some strategic thinking for Proteus – to begin to think together through where we are, what we have accomplished (and not), what surrounds us in terms of local and global reality, where we need to be heading. And so these notes serve as a way in, as it were ... a way of thinking into the future.

Up to this point it has been a rich and busy year. We seem somehow to be managing to get more of a balance in our work: we are definitely spending more time at Towerland and that is an important indicator that we are getting things a little more right than we were last year. We have had at least three periods of two weeks or more here (I say ‘here’ because I am writing this at Towerland), and we are beginning to feel somewhat settled in. More like home than a holiday ‘break’. So there is something more of a rhythm that we have managed to achieve, although when we are in Cape Town it can become quite frenetic! And we have almost completed the first phase of our building here, which now gives us a respite in terms of management of the place and the ongoing need to generate more funds for more building. (More on Towerland further on ...)

We have also managed to come closer to running Proteus Programmes. Although we have not achieved this in terms of something we have generated on our own out of our own intent in terms of our own chosen programmes – at Towerland – we have been involved in two very intensive programmes which capture and give expression to the most important elements of our orientation and essence. This has been exciting and full. And we also lost a programme that we were supposed to have run (in part) with CDRA – they did not have enough applicants to run the programme.

In May, with Sue Soal of CDRA we co-facilitated a 2½-week programme entitled *Observation, Insight and Intervention*. Part in Cape Town, part in Heidelberg at a wonderful guest farm, we engaged our 16 (local and international) participants in a rigorous and intensive process of building the relationship between and extending the capacities of observation, insight and intervention in a very focused way. This programme had a quality of rigour and discipline and demanded a high degree of inner engagement for the participants. It was extremely challenging and exacting, and we ourselves found new forms, many new exercises and insights as we stretched our own imagination and practice to meet a very lively and intelligent group. Liz joined us for some days of this process, bringing the ‘perspective’ of social eurythmy to bear on the themes we were working with, and it proved highly illuminating indeed. This process really felt like the crowning activity of the year. It was wonderful to have all

the administrative details handled by someone else – we realise that our administration has really been exhausting for us and remains an ongoing challenge.

In June we facilitated a conversation among (mostly) South African NGO leaders looking at the NGO in South Africa today: *Boundaries, Possibilities and Constraints amongst NGOs in South Africa*. This conversation was both prompted and funded by EED, a German donor organisation which has a real interest in reflecting on its own donor practice in a rather bleak South African and global scenario/context. Once again Liz contributed to the process with social eurythmy, and here we tried to create a living conversation where people were able to find themselves, their voices, one another, their ‘truth’, and to undergo a process of engagement which allowed them to see into and feel differently about the context by the end of the week – through authentic engagement with the topic. For us it was a first, and for us it was a really powerful experience, coming to an understanding of how different a conversation is from a specific programme that we might offer; it is a place of little input from the facilitators but rather a holding of the movement and direction and flow of the conversation so that it can reveal itself. A delicate yet very powerful process.¹

Allan has ongoing work in Brazil (the proposal for further work next year was included in the last ‘pack’ sent to you): his work in Brazil is enormously challenging and fulfilling. He has a large group of people who really want to work with him and have a clear understanding of the inner nature of his work. This enables him to be experimental and open with his work and to explore new frontiers all the time. He seldom has to be concerned about having enough participants or interest in his workshops. It makes sense therefore to put more energy into working in Brazil in the coming year.

Our work for the Rockefeller Brothers Fund – organisational accompaniment and the start of a two-year leadership programme – continues and it is interesting, sometimes very frustrating, but a very good base for ongoing work. (It is also interesting to engage with current SA NGO leadership and organisational realities; the dearth of leadership, the growth of management and the increasing ‘bureaucratisation, or corporatisation, or commodification’ – for want of better words – processes within which NGOs find themselves are ... well, yes, interesting, at least.)

This year feels as a year of ending and beginnings (nascent yet firm). Our work in Mozambique, with Oliveira (the Development Practitioner Programme), has come to an end. It ran over two years, and comprised six modules. Both AI and Liz participated in the facilitation, but Oliveira and I were the two constant facilitators. Liz brought wonderful social eurythmy, and the programme itself unfolded as an incredibly rich tapestry of development practice in which the paradigms of the more conventional approach to development were gently shifted aside and participants were able to encounter themselves – and a more respectful and insightful way of working than they had experienced in the past. It was really wonderful to experience the shifts that took place in the participants from one session to the next – both at a personal and professional level.

¹ For a more detailed description of Conversation as Method, please see the appendix at the end of this report: this was the rationale which we submitted to EED to hold the Conversation.

Another ending has been our masters' programme in Social Development Practice, which we were running for 18 students from central and eastern Europe. Accredited by London Metropolitan University and funded generously by the Mott Foundation, this programme (coursework and dissertation) also ran over two years and provided the opportunity for students to find themselves and their practice in ways which they indicated were totally unexpected for them but extremely rich and profound. This masters' programme focused on both the professional and academic dimensions, and we engaged in a six-module (integrated thematic) programme, the most central module of which was "Reading and Making Meaning of Social Situations". We believe that many of our students became more literate at the level of *social process* itself, and became very excited at what this enabled for them in terms of their practice and their personal lives. We meet one more time now in November, in Croatia, for a writing session for those who are going on to do their dissertations. Since the programme was so meaningful for the students, and we enjoyed teaching so much, we are now looking towards finding ways of offering this again. The Mott Foundation is very interested in what we have to say about this; they fund in central and eastern Europe and in South Africa, and one thing we would love to talk about in this meeting is the possibility/advisability of trying to run the programme at one of the Cape Town universities, linking up with what is already happening there. We have heard from various students that the approaches at both universities are more academic and theoretical than focusing on practice as well, and we thought it might be interesting to open up a conversation here or there.

Work on facilitation that I have been doing for Oxfam Canada in Ethiopia last year has also come to an end. This has been a deeply fulfilling process, with participants exploring new understandings, insights, observations and practices in relation to their work in the field. It has also spawned further possible work in Somaliland.

I have chosen to write about the bigger pieces of work that we have engaged in, rather than all the details of every intervention we undertake. And as I write all of the above I see so clearly how in all the work that we have been doing the underlying thread of our approach knits its way through the fabric of each engagement, each intervention. And perhaps what our participants seem to respond to is the more human, intentional, respectful, responsive, insightful way of working which is not goal-oriented and formulaic, but is rather carried by principles – not tools; and is really grounded in building the capacity to *read* a situation by enabling the invisible underlying process to become visible; and which recognises the relationship between inner and outer, and the need to work at both levels – both individually and organisationally. There is a sense in which we have stretched our understanding through what we have been doing this year, and deepened our practice. There is a strong sense of consolidation coupled with a feeling of constant movement forward.

Other thoughts which have emerged for us in our own reflections on our work have been that what we are doing is not geared towards the greater population. We feel that our approach is quite specific, and not likely to become very popular. It draws a narrow band of interested people (that's why Brazil is important) – just like Towerland will definitely not be for everyone! They are clear reflections of one another (and us!) in this regard. We have also become increasingly aware of the fact that we are not writing as we would like to ... having to write the papers for the Conversation brought us close to our longing to write, and we realise that the pace of

our current work does not allow for time to think and write. And it is also a question of financing the times when we write and are not working with clients. ('Writing', it should be said, is not simply about producing product, but rather about spending time at the spring, from which all our creativity flows; it is this lack of time at the spring that desiccates.)

... *And Next Year*

So what about next year then? We would like to share some of our thinking with you, as a springboard for a conversation about next year. Hopefully the description of this current year will also provide some sense of our trajectory and possibilities.

We would still very much like to run a process for the Board (at Towerland), and want to find a time that can work for everyone. Depending on when this is, we might open it up and invite a few other people to participate in the process. We see it as an introductory overview/experience of Proteus work. We would also like to run three Proteus Programmes (at Towerland) during 2009. Here we have many ideas and possibilities and will begin to focus in as we write the blurbs and see what is living most vividly and assertively.

We are planning to run another *Observation, Insight and Intervention* in collaboration with CDRA in the first half of next year. This time the time out of Cape Town will be at Towerland. And there is also a possibility of running a week long reflective process – together with Sue Soal and CDRA – with people who have participated in our programmes in the past, to explore what has worked and been meaningful for them and what this means for their and our work into the future (in a sense – what is the practice that is emerging from what we are putting into the world?). If we do this it will be in the second half of the year.

Other possibilities include running a few processes in New Zealand and Australia: we have been in conversation with someone from each of these countries who would be very keen for us to share our work over there. We would be very keen to do this also – we have a sense that there might be interesting and interested groups of people in both of these countries. Much depends on the financing of this and the available time and sufficient interest, all of which are unknowns at the moment. However, we have sent some of our writing to a connection in Australia and to one in New Zealand and have left the ball in their court.

There are some interesting pieces of work in South Africa which are currently embryonic but look very likely to happen next year. We have put in a proposal to run an ongoing programme for EED partners, which looks like it could happen (this would be mainly around leadership and organisational accompaniment questions – similar to the RBF work). RBF work will be ongoing. Also, there has been a request to facilitate an ongoing three year learning and evaluation process for a consortium of the “Big Six” conservation and environment NGOs in SA as they begin to develop various and multi-pronged collaborative projects and strategies.

In addition, Allan has written a proposal to raise funds for the writing of a new book (which writing would begin some time next year); this is being done in collaboration with certain parties in Brazil and some money has already been raised – more is

needed and the proposal is being disseminated more widely (we have included the book proposal as an attachment to this email). I am also percolating some writing ideas for next year. We also intend to slow down building at Towerland (so that our need to earn to cover building costs is reduced), and also to try out Towerland as a venue and see how it works before going ahead with further building.

One thing that we feel passionately about is our own learning spaces. And while everything we do provides that opportunity for learning, we are also thirsting to be learning from some ‘teachers’: the person who first brought us into the real practice of Goethean methodology is Craig Holdrege from The Nature Institute in upstate New York. He remains a constant source of inspiration and we would love to do some collaborative work with him in South Africa. He does not know about this yet, but we will be writing to him soon to explore possibilities of working with him and also his running his own processes on Goethean observation.

And then there is the thought of bringing people together to think creatively into our collective future – hosting some spaces at Towerland to really grapple with the challenges of this time. Loose thoughts at the moment, but with an exciting undertone!

... and Towerland

At this point I would like to say a little bit more about Towerland, though I know that this is a Proteus Board meeting, and not a meeting for the Towerland Trust. Nevertheless, the two impulses are so deeply intertwined, and since so much of our Proteus work – and thinking – is informed and shaped by our involvement at Towerland, it is very difficult to separate them. And it seems important and timely to share a little with you of what has been happening at Towerland this year, because it has been such a significant year.

In February we signed an agreement with CapeNature – the Western Cape conservation parastatal organisation – to register Towerland as a private nature reserve and wilderness area. While there are a number of private landowners in the Western Cape who have registered their land as private nature reserve, the registering of the property as a private *wilderness area* seems to be a first of such an agreement. What this does, in effect, is to protect the land as it is – no roads, no amenities/facilities, the protection of silence and solitude – into perpetuity. This was a very significant moment for us, and our partnership with CapeNature has been really productive and mutually supportive.

One month after signing this agreement (we bought the land in 1996), we discovered rock art in a cave overhang. The timing was really remarkable, because we have walked extensively on the land, and certainly in this particular place before. We were quite overwhelmed by the discovery (*was* it discovered, or was it revealed?). Since then, we have discovered three more sites with rock art. This whole land has been blessed by the presence of those early people! I feel now as though Towerland – and we – are tumbling into wildness – further and further backwards and forwards simultaneously. This place becomes transformed by each new discovery: this extraordinary sense of those small people having marked and covered every corner of this land, having ritually created these sanctified places everywhere ... they have

made their marks on the walls of this land, of the first consciousness of Self and life – so rudimentary and childlike, and yet what a gift for us. These holy shrines dotted all over our landscape, indications of the earliest consciousness.

Though obviously with a more modern consciousness, we have come to understand that the work we are doing in Proteus and at Towerland may be of the same moment – a precipitous turning point of consciousness. It is an attempt to work with wildness and consciousness – and the interplay between them. Aeons later, here we are on the same land, a clear intention to restore and return the land to itself, and through our intervention and presence, to enable the land to become and to become conscious of itself. For many many years now I have been aware of how land – any land – needs our awareness and presence to realise itself (though of course an irresponsible intrusion does the opposite). But I have never really understood fully why or how. It now becomes clearer and clearer. And what a gift from Towerland – to enable us to give it back to itself and in the process ourselves to find that wildness, that God within. That is perhaps at the heart of our Proteus work – through engagement with inner and outer, to become conscious of living process, to be able to *see* living process and therefore intervene in harmony with what we see and understand. Just as those first moments of separation from oneness from their world (indicated by the depictions of their world in the forms of the rock art) reflect a shift in consciousness, so we are working to facilitate a shift to a consciousness that may apprehend oneness and be separate – as we are – simultaneously. (And so discover a new practice of social sensibility.)

Well, this is certainly enough for you to read, and for the start of our thinking together into the next year(s) for Proteus.

Thanks and see you on the 24th.

Written by Sue
For both of us
The Proteus Initiative

Appendix

Methodology for Facilitated Conversations

We describe what we are trying to do as building a 'phenomenological', or 'organic', conversation. What do we mean by this? At best we are attempting to engage in a free, yet focused, intelligent conversation. This means that there is no predetermined or even expected outcome; the emphasis is on the free emergence of observations and ideas from the diversity, richness and complexity of conversational, personal, contextual and conceptual interaction. At the same time, the process is not simply 'left to happen'; it is guided, facilitated, encouraged to develop, to deepen, to enlighten. We are investigating a living phenomenon, and our conversation must be as alive as our subject.

So what method informs our facilitation? For, though hopefully unobtrusive, there is method in the madness, design in the emergence, order in the chaos. But the method does not consist of techniques, tools, exercises, procedures; using these, the resultant conversation would become a contrived construction. Rather, there are some underlying principles which inform the process.

Our task is to ensure open, free and continuous evolution of the process of conversation; to enable an intelligent reading to emerge. To support and ensure that there is human warmth – which is different from agreement – between participants; to challenge tendencies towards superficiality, jargon, the glib and fast conclusion or the stuckness of a relationship or pattern. Keep the conversation alive and open; yet focused, and always intent. Be awake to where the process is going, where it has been, how it is coming into being. Anticipate, and find the right question to move the conversation on. Work with participants to make meaning of the conversation; be able to draw threads together, help weave the forming tapestry. Prepare thoroughly, with respect to overall design (given a five day process) and with respect to the substance of the conversation to be explored; but this is different from planning and developing procedures and set routines to follow. Be aware that anything may emerge. Be ready to let go. What we are striving for in these conversations is the balance between *freedom* and *form*; between *guidance* and *open-endedness*. The quality of the conversation to a large extent rests with the quality of how the conversation is held: we should emerge from the conversation 'enlarged' on a number of levels. In the end, this is the only 'desired outcome' which we hope to 'achieve'.

Keep the conversation focused on *what people actually observe*, do not allow it to veer off into abstraction, into theoretical conjecture. Through such focused observation, we may be able to build our imaginative faculties, enhance our seeing in ways which allow us to, as Bortoft describes it, *understand* rather than explain: "... explanation evidently takes the form of saying that something is really an instance of another, different thing. Understanding, on the other hand, by seeing something in the context in which it belongs, is the experience of seeing it more fully as itself. Instead of seeing it as an instance of something else, it becomes more fully itself through being seen in its context. Thus, understanding is holistic whereas explanation is analytical"². Always keep the conversation's eye on the phenomenon under discussion.

² Bortoft, H, *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way of Science*, 1996, Floris Books, Hudson, New York, p. 291

