



The Proteus Initiative

Awakening Thinking, Facilitating Change

an inner path towards social participation

(based in Cape Town, South Africa)

The Towerland Trust

A Wilderness Retreat Centre

in the pristine fynbos mountains of the Outeniqua
(situated in the southern Cape, South Africa)

... Social Transformation



The Overarching Intent . . .

Our organisational practices, our social situations, the cultural and ecological contexts we inhabit – all are becoming poorer, more fragmented, more disabled. Our social institutions, at all levels, are less able to facilitate renewal, less able to imagine or to venture anything sufficiently alternative, anything sufficiently new. Increasingly, the social actors and institutions attempting to facilitate change are themselves subject to a chilling uniformity of practice. Poverty and fragmentation exist within the very individuals and organisations working towards transformation. *We have become trapped within a way of thinking which underlies all our action and which is both cause and effect of increasing poverty – social, economic, ecological.*

More than simply attempting new projects and programmes, it is our way of thinking that needs to transform. Proteus and Towerland

. . . Is Directed Towards . . .

Social development practitioners and activists (leaders, managers, teachers, administrators, community organisers, development workers, fieldworkers, programme officers, policy analysts); development consultants (internal or external helpers to practitioners and organi-

are two entwined initiatives which address themselves, not to new projects, but to a new – what may be termed organic – way of thinking, so that we may move beyond the calculative mindset that produces our paralysis.

Our world is in deep, systemic trouble. We – human beings and the societies we create – are both the cause and the only possible resolution. Every action we take, everything that we generate is formed through the way we observe, understand and think. The source of all we produce lies in the way that we think. Social renewal is thus dependent on the transformation of our thinking. Our social, organisational and ecological health is compromised by a mechanistic tendency; yet an enlivened thinking is possible, and our only way through the impasse.

. . . To Achieve A Living Thinking

“There is a kind of seeing which is also a kind of thinking . . . the seeing of connections” (Ray Monk on Wittgenstein)

All that is alive, both natural and social, comprises two aspects. An outer, physical, visible reality – the circumstances we see manifest in the world – and an inner, more invisible, *character* – the underlying inner nature which creates the outer circumstances. Through working with the *inner nature of phenomena* real progress can be made. The art of social transformation demands such engagement; for this is where the formative and generative forces lie which give rise to visible outer circumstance. Such work demands a new understanding of individuals, communities and organisations as *alive*, a rigorous methodology for observing, appreciating and intervening into these social situations, the building of new faculties for applying such methodology, and an increasing understanding of self.

We have learned to think of the social and the natural worlds the way we think of the inanimate world – as something which we dominate from without, controlling in order to use. This has nurtured a particular way of thinking; and we now apply that thinking to the living world. As a result, we strive ever more desperately to control a world which spirals increasingly beyond and against the choices which we would make towards a viable future.

We are left with shadows, fragments; in the midst of paradoxes. Our obsession with control results in increasing chaos and uncertainty; our reductionist paradigm brings increasing complexity. Our prevailing calculative mindset, then, contradicts what it presumes to do. Instead of enhancing life, it compromises our future. We still believe we can redeem our world by fixing

sations in specific settings); all those who are engaged in complex social situations – smaller or larger – and are endeavouring to facilitate fundamental change; and all those organisations, governmental or civil, focused on any aspect of social transformation and renewal. Globally,

fragmented parts. Yet this submits to the very thinking that produces the problems we try to fix. It is our thinking that has created the impasse; why is this the very aspect of our social context that we pay no attention to? It can only be through a renewal, a transformation, of our very approach to our world that we may find a way through.

The unconscious assumption that we can deal adequately with our social and natural worlds without working on our inner capacities and ways of thinking, gives way to a recognition that we create the world we inhabit through who we are and how we approach it. Many of us in the social sphere constantly encounter grand visions, explanatory frameworks, packaged services, the demand for detailed planning and predictable outcome – in short, a solution orientation that bureaucratizes the steps needed to get there, and ignores the inner capacities and approaches of practitioners and participants. A different kind of engagement is called for; an organic thinking which enters, rather than

simply ‘works on’. We are asked to *pay attention*, and *take responsibility*, and *build new faculties*, in a radical departure from ‘business as usual’. The problem is not ‘out there’; *our approach* is the problem.

This commitment to a new way of thinking is not simply a new way of thinking *about* phenomena – which is all that can be said or read – but a new way of *engaging* phenomena (including self). Rigorous practices enable us to get inside living process, unravel a social situation, get under the skin of the world, so to speak.



The Proteus Initiative

It is one thing to talk *about* the organic, the social and ecological; it is quite another to think organically, ecologically, socially. The Proteus Initiative takes its departure from the work of JW von Goethe (1750-1832), who developed a unique way of seeing and thinking into the living phenomena of the natural world. We learn from, and apply this way of thinking, both with respect to the world of the social as well as the natural world.

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

The Proteus Initiative seeks to develop an agile, flexible, alert consciousness in social practitioners. So that we may begin to facilitate sense of complex situations, meaning of seeming chaos, wholeness out of fragmenting parts. Proteus is about an inner path of social change, an intimate participation in social transformation. This is not a soft option but perhaps the hardest option of all. Building the faculties needed to hold and nurture our emerging future demands an 'engagement with' rather than a 'working upon'. A letting go of outcome whilst maintaining a focused intent. Nothing less than a re-working of ourselves.



Three Intertwined Strategies

Working Responsively We respond to requests to work within the context of social situations – individuals and organisations – through organisation development, accompaniment, coaching and mentoring, facilitating learning through reflection and focused conversations, research, and learning programmes designed to meet the needs of individual (and groups of) organisations. All within the context of a methodology and accompanying practices which seek to 'get under the skin' of the social situation in question.

Programmes We run shorter and longer programmes of learning and exploration and conversation, all of these in the interests of building new faculties and ways of thinking and intervening. Some of these are run at Towerland, some are available to organisations and groups at locations of their choice.

We have various introductory and exposure courses that run over one or two weeks; also courses on facilitation, biography work and writing (shorter than this does not allow adequate exposure to the new approaches we are working with). We have longer courses – for experienced organisation development consultants, for example, and for leaders and managers working in larger, more complex organisations (bureaucracies) which comprise a number of week long sessions spread over a year. There is a two-year part-time programme for highly experienced social development practitioners; this is a master's level programme though not accredited (because we are working with an approach that does not easily fit in with prevailing academic tendencies – the same is true for all our programmes). And then there are opportunities for social practitioners to come together in conversation around various themes, and also to request use of the space and the facilitation as particular groupings would request.

Writing, Research and Dissemination To engage a wider audience, to enable others to speak with that audience and to create a forum for investigation into a new approach to social practice, Proteus is constructing a vibrant website, investigating the feasibility of an alternative social development journal, and embarking on the writing of a number of books. Proteus is also interested in conducting responsive in-depth research for those who may commission such work.

The Towerland Wilderness Retreat Centre

Towerland is a mountain wilderness, 700 hectares in extent, situated in the Outeniqua Mountains of the southern Cape, South Africa. It contains pristine mountain fynbos (the most diverse floral kingdom in the world); hillsides and ravines and imposing mountain peaks; a generous river; three earth-dams; and the abundant wild life of the Cape Floral Kingdom.

We have created/are creating a space where people can meet together in a wilderness context – where through proximity to the living forces of nature, real meeting(s) can take place, real conversations can be held, and new thinking, appropriate to our collective future, can be nurtured. Because Nature offers us such remarkable access to, and experience of, wholeness; because being in Nature, in the wilderness, enables us to access inside ourselves our own inner wholeness, our inner wilderness.

The land lends itself to a sense of communion with a world filled with life and growth and diversity, with colour and texture: mountains and ravines; seasonal rhythms of growth and decay; phases of development, and always, always, the experience of living process, of abundant life and the detail of interdependence between plant and animal, between ourselves and nature.

It is a very delicate balance that needs to be held so that the wilderness is not intruded upon or unduly tamed; yet at the same time that it becomes accessible in such a way that its intrinsic wildness, its pristine untrammelled essence, is not disturbed. We are going about this development as organically as possible. Buildings are simple and aesthetic, constructed of clay and stone with succulent roofs, in a format which encourages both community and solitude. There is no electricity; the elements of nature are experienced in their wildness and power. The space is basic yet relaxed and exquisite.



The impulse of the Towerland Trust cannot be seen outside of The Proteus Initiative. Towerland is the primary home of Proteus, the venue we would choose for most of our programmatic work, because it offers limitless resources and possibilities for exploration and observation of Nature, and self, in the context of group process. Fundamental to the work of Proteus is an understanding that these three (Nature, self and group) are inextricably intertwined. We thus wish to provide the opportunities for our participants to experience this relationship as immediately as possible. Towerland serves invaluable as a learning ground for a new and alive way of thinking, for the renewal of souls and impulses.





The Proteus Initiative facilitates conversations amongst, and learning processes for, individuals and groups in the social sphere, either within their organisations or places of work, or as Proteus programmes both in Cape Town and at our wilderness centre, Towerland, in the mountains of the southern Cape, South Africa (where an immersion in wilderness and powerful natural elements infinitely enhance our experiences and capacities).

Proteus associates also work, as appropriate, as organisation development consultants in response to specific requests from organisations concerned with social renewal, globally; those organisations exhausted with fragmented and piecemeal solutions and which are wishing to develop more coherent, responsive and developmental ways of working and organising, towards social renewal.

“The journey is not a seeking out, but a seeing in . . .”

*Please connect with us
if any of this stimulates your interest.*

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