Reflections on Development ~ several 'shiny things'

> *The Way alone nourishes and brings everything to fulfilment.*
>
> ~ Lao Tzu

> *Pay attention to what works, and do more of it, and try to understand the principles involved. And also: pay attention to what doesn't work, and* stop doing it.
>
> ~ Nathaniel Branden

The weka is a New Zealand native bird, a kind of flightless woodhen notorious as a campsite pilferer. I once saw a weka's nest up in the headwaters of the Ruakituri. Arrayed about it were accumulated 'shiny things': coins, milk bottle tops, a child's compass, buttons, a buckle, a chocolate wrapper... Each was placed presumably at random, yet in that first moment of seeing, each seemed to have reference to everything else. The best visual art is like this; it seems we encounter a simultaneity of patterned effects as — to repeat that felicitous phrase by the poet Alan Loney — 'a location to be dwelt in'.

My father was a collector of all kinds of potentially useful things. 'I'm a weka,' he would say, hoarding them in his shed. I suppose I too am a weka; I tend to take an eclectic approach to sources that inform my work — so much so that if I quote others it is in order to 'let them have my say'… I find it useful when others can clarify my own experience, as though in a conversation. So, indwelling the location, I fossick about for insight.

There are several 'shiny things' I have found arrayed about my nesting consciousness. I've dwelt in their vicinity for a while, deciding it is a location worth exploring further… Here, I want to consider them in relation to organisation development, which so often is regarded in the same way in which we think of marriage guidance — we resort to it at a rather late stage. When dysfunction is chronic, we turn to an 'expert' who we hope will make it all better; but unfortunately, once problems have become habitual, transformation is very difficult. What is it in us that resists development?

Resistance takes various forms, succinctly summed up as the negations of doubt, cynicism (hatred), and fear. Perhaps it is because these particular negations feel uncomfortably close to some core reality in us that we do not want to reflect on their significance. Instead we look critically at others, wanting to find fault and blame in everyone else. This is an endemic attitude, typical of early adolescence, and in the wider community promoted in large part by politicians and the media; but it seems expressive of a malaise afflicting humanity as a whole. Essentially, it is the 'dis-ease' of required yet deferred development.

This challenge to develop engenders such negative reactions, I suggest, because it demands attention exactly where we don't want to look. Consequently, when some kind of recognition comes at last, it has been forced on us by extreme circumstances. Daunted, we would prefer to assign the whole shebang to the 'too-hard basket'. Organisation development processes that concentrate attention on problems, to the exclusion of most other aspects, soon exhaust people already struggling in the situation. The problems escalate. Issues then seem to 'issue forth' like real infestations of hostile entities. Ah, we sigh, who needs it? But around my nest I have found these shiny things…

Pay attention to what works…

Walking daily in Ashton Park near their Sydney home in the mid-twentieth century, sisters Eileen and Joan Bradley observed the rampant growth of invasive weeds, and the futility of the usual weed control measures. Beginning quite informally, they gradually developed the approach to bush regeneration that now bears their name. Three principles are at the heart of the Bradley Method:

- *Work outward from less infested to more seriously infested areas;*
- *Minimize disturbance, and replace topsoil and litter;*
- *Do not over-clear; allow regeneration to set the pace of the work.*

These three injunctions could stand as metaphors for so much else in life. So, for instance, as a practitioner in organisation development, I have to start somewhere — the difficult places invite us to swarm like flies to the infected spot. Where should an intervention enter the field of possibilities? The Bradley sisters are clear about this: begin with some patch where nature is working more or less harmoniously. This is the basis of their hygiene.
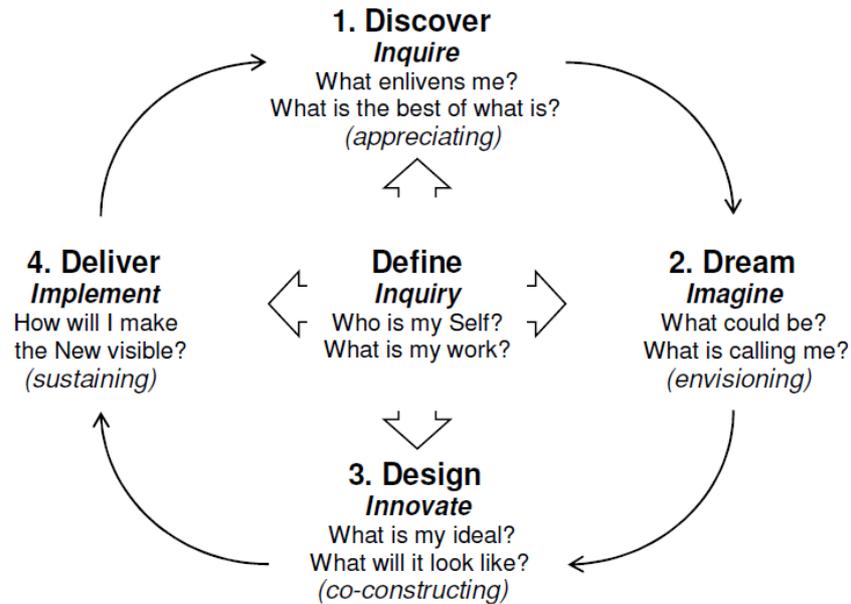
So we look together at the whole organisation, noting the healthy and unhealthy parts. Then we work with the strengths, enhancing and developing their effects, while keeping an eye on the areas to be transformed in the course of things. One way of identifying the strengths and challenges, and also their attendant opportunities and risks, is to do a SCORE analysis[1] with the people concerned. The ethical dimension will be a measure of commitment to positive action in accord with agreed values.

The process of intervention needs to be subtle, not a wholesale land-clearing operation. Not everything needs to be uprooted; people need help to sort and sift their observations and other intimations, and to acknowledge that while some things seem blatantly obvious, other possibilities and potentialities are implicit and will be revealed in time. Nondescript seeds belong to as yet unimagined futures. Working with a U Process[2] enables people to sort the essential from the non-essential in the topsoil and apparent litter of the organisation.

The capacity for change varies in each organisation, in each group, in each individual. Truly social processes enable everyone to participate; whereas enforced change only causes further difficulties and resistance. *Never discourage anyone who continually makes progress, no matter how slow*, said Plato. Genuine development is perceptible and can be enhanced; for processes, like water, and like life, have their own characteristic movements.

Do more of it…

Appreciative Inquiry was first developed by David Cooperrider as a positive approach to organisation development, through which the focus of attention is shifted away from what is not working to what is working. The basic approach is a fourfold process: *Discover*; *Dream*; *Design*; *Destiny* (this latter term can seem too portentous for some people; I have renamed it *Deliver*). There is an initial step that precedes the others, that of *Defining* the focus of the inquiry — which needs to be framed in affirmative terms, to enable the process to go ahead without any defensiveness or other reactions occurring amongst participants.

1. Discover
Inquire
What enlivens me?
What is the best of what is?
(appreciating)

4. Deliver
Implement
How will I make
the New visible?
(sustaining)

Define
Inquiry
Who is my Self?
What is my work?

2. Dream
Imagine
What could be?
What is calling me?
(envisioning)

3. Design
Innovate
What is my ideal?
What will it look like?
(co-constructing)

This adaptation of Appreciative Inquiry can be summarised as follows, giving an indication of the creative potential of the process:

Discover: appreciating 'the best of what is'. This is discerned through inquiry (interviews / storytelling) into people's experience of the group, organisation or community: noting where it is most vibrantly alive; reflecting on these highlights; recognising what it was that made those experiences possible. Thus they discover the positive core of the enterprise. This stage includes clarification of those elements which people want to retain in the process of change, as well as identification of 'intriguing potentials' for the future.

Dream: envisioning 'what could be'. Together people build a vision of the future they want, responsive to their sensing of what the world is calling them to become. They imagine that 'the best of what is' will be the foundation for the way things will be in the future. Together these realisations will form their leading image and values. Questions in this phase include: 'What does our positive core indicate about what we could be?' 'What are our most exciting possibilities?' 'What is the world asking us to become?'

Design: co-constructing 'what it looks like'. Participants shape an organisation or community in which the positive core is present, vibrant and alive. They formulate positive aims. The design focus is placed on those elements that help bring the dreams to life, such as functions, structures, processes, and resources. The intent is to develop bold possibilities ('provocative propositions') and innovative principles of design that integrate the positive core into every future realisation.

Deliver: sustaining creation of 'the New'. The next steps include the initiatives and structural changes needed to realise the future that has been articulated in the design propositions, and which manifests the positive core. This phase needs to be implemented in such a way that everyone remains connected with this intent, making the most of the insight of all involved, allowing self-selected groups to plan the next steps in those areas they are most passionate about, and which they are committed to taking responsibility for.

Understand the principles involved…

At Easter 2004, my wife Bettye and I travelled to San Francisco. We walked in the Golden Gate Park, and along the Ocean Beach, discovering the chilling fog that can characterise San Francisco. In the park we noted numerous Australian trees and plants, although the general lushness and greenness of spring reminded us more of New Zealand.

There is a story behind this lushness and the exotic flora. Early in San Francisco's history, the council had set aside over 1000 acres for a park, but little could be made to grow in what was a sandy wind-swept wilderness. Then, in 1887 a 29 year old landscape gardener, a Scot called John McLaren, was employed 'to make the Golden Gate Park one of the beauty spots of the world'. By the time of his death in 1943, when he was still the park's superintendent, it had been transformed into a forested and meadowed wonder. McLaren's solution was to observe and respond. He noted the conditions, and sought plants for those conditions, progressively modifying the landscape. Among the first plants he found that could hold their own in this arid environment were Australian acacias, tea-tree scrub and eucalypts.

So I imagine John McLaren, hunkered down in the dunes, watching, seeing the momentary shifts of light and life, and then travelling about to find their like. He could not *make* things grow; he had to find those plants which could become companions in that desolate place and which would ultimately transform it. A hardy form of life had first to be established, which could then harbour further, more diverse life.

And also…

The cultivation of the ground is always the thing. How often we think the issue is 'out there', and that our solutions can be imposed on the world; but the ground of change is first to be cultivated within the human soul. John McLaren, for instance, had first to get out of all the conventional mindsets — he had to get beyond himself. So too, in organisation development, it always requires some inner work by the practitioner.

Accompanying every process are necessary attitudes through which whatever we do may be potentised. When we keep an open mind, an open heart, and open intent towards the field of our work, we can be amazed by what reveals itself; so we might find ourselves responding to people and situations out of particular soul-moods, which Rudolf Steiner has characterised in his lectures *The World of the Senses and the World of the Spirit*.[4] They seem fundamental to a gesture of connection — which *is* essential, as we cannot remain detached, standing outside the process, as uncommitted onlookers… We are part of the story.

Learning to trust our sense perceptions is always a first step. This is often undermined today; critics state, 'That's your perception,' when in reality they mean, 'That's your opinion'. We need to differentiate between senses and thoughts; an observational method that enables us to note what is happening is the basis for all inquiry. Suspending our initial judgment, we gaze in *wonder* — openness in the senses and the mind — at the phenomena of the world, experiencing all that presents itself. Repeated observation leads to a careful sifting of data; significant impressions emerge, arrayed like those shiny things placed about a weka's nest. This is how things are — poised in awareness, in an attentive mind, we note this.

An organisation can be seen as a mechanism or an organism. If it is a mechanism, it will be dead and deadening; but if it is the latter, then we need to respect it as we respect all living things. Life is mysterious. If we decide not only to look *at* it, but to participate *in* it and know ourselves co-existent with it, then we begin to feel our consciousness is in touch with that mystery. We sense the rhythms and patterns, the pulse of the place. We get the feel of it. As we grow more aware of the sculpting, shaping forces active in the organisation, we begin to feel respect — that can deepen into *reverence* — for what has been accomplished, for what wants to be. Something seems to be living and breathing within the institution, like a true organism — and we want to work in accord with this, allowing the life processes to set the pace of the work.

Every group and every organisation is more than alive; each has a particular atmosphere, or character. In entering into relationship with whatever we find through inquiry, we feel the quality of each encounter, and how it seems to be expressed through characteristic gestures and attitudes. As we identify these, observing how an intricate web of associations is woven throughout the organisation, we 'tune in' to its fundamental tones — a harsh dissonance in the case of the dysfunctional organisation, or else the *wisdom-filled laws of harmony* resonating in the healthy one. A group of individuals, who begin spontaneously singing, usually comes into a creative symphony of sound — we orchestrate this as the essence of team-building.

Ultimately, we want to serve development in such a way that within it we may find meaning and purpose. We relinquish our ambitions and personal concerns in seeking answers to that question: 'What is the world asking us to become?' There always is a particular moment in a process when this turning occurs, from 'want' to 'need'. It is a *letting go,* in order to *let come*… We then feel in touch with reality. Sensing intent, we can give ourselves to development in a mood of *devotion* or *self-surrender* to what is needed — we then love what we do.

When these soul-moods *inform* developmental techniques such as Appreciative Inquiry as a process of inner engagement, we have an integrated method. This is an artistic-scientific path towards reality. Especially in organisation development, it is a necessary discipline if we are to understand the entire world of forces active in any situation.

The Way alone nourishes…

These are several of the shiny things I've found about me as I reflect upon my organisation development practice. They nestle in my nesting consciousness, in some kind of association that seems co-resonant. Together, they suggest a methodology of conscious action — of active consciousness — through which development can be cultivated. In formulating my approach, based on the life processes (see my essay 'Consulting and the Life Processes' and the lecture transcript 'Presencing through the Life Processes' — both on my website), these shiny things I have accumulated here illuminate my essential gesture.

The poet-philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge was talking of Shakespeare, but could well have been referring to organisation development — or parks — when he wrote:

> *The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material;— as when to a mass of wet clay*

we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form.

Organisations seem to me to be as unique as individuals. There is no straightforward recipe through which their challenges can be resolved. Processes — not easy solutions — are what is needed. To work like this is to see how 'it shapes as it develops itself from within', rather than to 'impress a pre-determined form' upon it. The latter does not really work — except at great cost to the environment and to the human soul — so therefore we could decide to 'stop doing it'.

In conclusion, I'm convinced that if we take such an approach to development, from any of these perspectives, forests and parks may grow themselves rightly, and organisations may become organisms in which our true humanity takes root.

References:

(1) SCORE analysis is a form of SWOT – with an **E**thical dimension applied to the quadrant of **S**trengths / **C**hallenges / **O**pportunities / **R**isks – the particular way I use this SCORE filter is adapted from a version by Inspired Outcomes.

(2) The U Process is a diagnostic process tool first developed by Glasl and Lemson of the Netherlands Pedagogical Institute (NPI) – see my lecture transcripts 'Presencing through the Life Processes' and 'Learning to Accompany the Child' on my website at http://www.johnallison.com.au

(3) I have adapted this characterisation of David Cooperrider's Appreciative Inquiry from a report by Pioneers of Change on the CDRA website at http://www.cdra.org.za

(4) These lectures by Rudolf Steiner can be found on the web at http://www.rsarchive.org/lectures