

# *If you meet the White Rabbit on the road, steal his watch!*



*by Doug Reeler*

Community Development Resource Association, 2003

*Or what began as an attempt to write a donor report became a stream of consciousness on time, development-land, activism and practice<sup>1</sup>*

The centre has not held. The ceremony of innocence is drowning. We have all failed. The invasion of Iraq has begun. My watch tells me it's 7.34 am precisely, on South Africa's Human Rights Day, of all days, the 21st March 2003, and I have sat down to write a donors report, unfinished business on this public holiday, but cannot. My head is too full and has to be cleared, or at least my anxiety and outrage about the war must for a moment be stilled so that I can help our donors to see, now, what will only 'sustainably' unfold later, over time. Tricky. Maybe that's what I'm avoiding, but actually I think it's both and they are connected. I'm in a spin. Wheels within wheels, a broken, unbalanced gyroscope in my head. Like Alice in development-land, nothing is what it seems to be. You see, I live in two time zones at once: one zone, the now-zone, the urgent, anxious, angry one of the activist, peacenik, petitioner (and for the donors its now-time for accountability), and the other time zone of a much longer, slower rhythm, of the development worker, gardener, the practice I must describe vividly, precisely, care-fully in the report I must urgently write. I sit between Chronos the god of time and Kairos the god of timing...

There's a gap in my thoughts and I take it quickly, logging onto the internet, [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk). Half appalled, half excited, I read of more hopeless missiles and ultimatums fired off onto the hapless people of Iraq. I feel a bit sickened with myself in my addiction for now-news and my schoolboy fascination with war, so none the wiser and more anxious, I log off. Then I remember the homily that says: trying to understand what is going on by listening to the daily news is like trying to tell the time by looking only at the second hand. It doesn't help much either, just a pithy description of the same dilemma.

So let me be the urgent activist, though not for too long, like the woodcutter who is too much in a hurry to take the time to sharpen his saw. Activists are wood-cutters in many ways, radical interventionists, surgical. This is not the War in Iraq war, it is another War of America, a Bush war, yet

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<sup>1</sup> For those who haven't read Alice in Wonderland, Alice is a naive, innocent young girl who falls down a rabbit hole into Wonderland, a nightmarish, paradoxical, upside-down world where nothing is what

another one, based on ignorant and willing fear of the other, the alien horde and of course for the love of money and oil and power, hiding a deeper fear that the rich and dangerous are forever cursed with, and curse us all in turn, of never having enough security, living without trust in the future or faith in humanity, behind grotesquely staged images of themselves, harbouring a shocking and awful cynicism. I look askew at Bush's show of his 'faith', his daily bible-study sessions and these only emphasise for me what it is that he is needing to balance in his life, of having to atone for. But my activist core is most outraged by the fact that the Bushes and Saddams have always been connected at the hip, this Saddam yet another rogue dictator who has risen and fallen at the whim and the will of Washington. This war is the separation of siamese twins, another lopping off of a gangrenous sibling.

So now that I have to choose activism, where do I start? I do have quite a choice of which activist to be: at the one pole I can be the desperate, implacable militant, full of anger, to the point of sacrificing myself (and taking many unwitting unfortunates with me); or I can at the other pole attend vigils or petitions and a gentle, trusting activist be. And in between I can march, get civilly disobedient, congregate noisily, boycott things made in the USA, graffiti walls, advocate, lobby, phone in, shake politicians awake.

And what is an activist's practice? To wake us all up, to summon the leaders amongst us, active defenders of the faith, of justice, of truth, champions of the underdog, rallying one and all to do something now and direct about the issue, to stop beating about the bush. Beat The Bush Directly! But I am by nature an inconsistent activist, and much less of one than I used to be, one of a transient mob, less sure these days of what tactics work or are worth it, but fully supportive of those who want to get out there and be heard, to force the change, face the beast. And on our Human Rights Day you have to admit that our Constitution is a fine weapon. And maybe social movements and a strong civil society are the new struggle, I am starting to believe, the real opposition and alternative to the stuckness and choicelessness of parliamentary democracy, so I have to keep my eyes open, keep in tune. It sounds fantastic, real civil democracy, cultural community participation balancing the power of economic and political societies. But if it has to happen quickly I feel overwhelmed and worried that this exciting power will soon congeal at its centres and become beholden to new elites. Perhaps I am not young enough or angry enough anymore. But anger, a hot kind of passion, is not the same as compassion, not until all life is respected, even Saddam's and Bush's, the abused become abusers. Then the anger has to be rethought, refelt, refocused. To do what with?

But I do love the naïve intelligence of Dr. Robert Muller, former assistant secretary general of the United Nations, who said recently about all the peace marches and rallies against the American war in Iraq:

*"Never before in the history of the world has there been a global, visible, public, viable, open dialogue and conversation about the very legitimacy of war... there are [now] two*

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it seems to be, and soon encounters (and then pursues) a white rabbit, a hurried, neurotic, anxious watcher of time.

*superpowers: the United States and the merging, surging voice of the people of the world...  
[they are] waging peace”.*

Wonderful. Equally naiively I hope he is right, that Bush has overplayed his hand and that the millions who have been marching all over the world do use this mobilisation to vote such imbeciles out of office, in any country where it applies, the sooner the better, now-time. But who will be voted in next, anyone very different, and if not then what will we do with our activism? What are we actually needing to fight? What is fighting us? How do we size it up?

Well try let's try HIV/Aids for size, and famine and crime and abuse and the environment, GMOs, unfair trade, water, housing and education, the list is endless. Each needs its own social movement. Do I choose to fight with the most urgent issue? Which one is that, the most current, the biggest? Or should I choose the least represented, the most worthy and needy of members? Or do I fight what I can, where I am, where I am affected, what hurts me the most? Or if they are all connected, where then do I take my fight, put my energy, nail my colours, where is the strategic leverage, what's the big plot? Is it mostly about fighting? Or is there a deeper place to work, behind all of this, a question which answers other questions?

Christopher Fry pops into mind, from “The sleep of prisoners”:

*Thank God our time is now when wrong  
Comes up to face us till we take  
The longest stride of soul men ever took.  
Affairs are now soul size.*

These lines have always challenged me, deeply. What's the soul size, the soul dimension, of all these issues? What is my soul size in trying to meet them? What soul size does an activist take?

I am getting exhausted, a bit stranded, because there is no clear way yet. My mind is grasping and a quote from Thomas Merton comes through as a vague memory (so I dig it out of my hard-drive - amazing how much time technology seems to save, and remember, I am still in a hurry and this is still about time):

*“There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist fighting for peace by non-violent methods most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes one's work for peace. It destroys one's inner capacity of peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of one's work because it kills the roots of inner wisdom which make work fruitful.”*

So that sounds true, less exhausting and maybe comforting because it means I can breathe out for a while, less guilty. Less is more. But this is not a confident critique of the activist in me or in others at

all, because activism is probably a big part of an answer, but I am not sure which part or what the right question is. And I am looking for the places of reconciliation between the urgency of activism and the patience of developmental work. That is my quest, my question. And I still have a donor's report to write.

Social activism will always be about hard struggles to wage, often impossible to win, at least in obvious ways - so often every battle appears lost but over time, consciousness shifts and suddenly society shifts and the day is won.

*When we win it's with small things,  
and the triumph itself makes us small.  
What is extraordinary and eternal  
does not want to be bent by us.  
I mean the Angel who appeared  
to the wrestlers of the Old Testament:  
when the wrestler's sinews  
grew long like metal strings,  
he felt them under his fingers  
like chords of deep music.*

*Whoever was beaten by this Angel  
(who often simply declined the fight)  
went away proud and strengthened  
and great from that harsh hand,  
that kneaded him as if to change his shape.  
Winning does not tempt that man.  
This is how he grows: by being defeated, decisively,  
by constantly greater beings.*

From *The Man Watching* by Rainer Maria Rilke

Can we learn to recognise threads of victory in our inevitable string of defeats? Can we develop new orientations and the will to do activism differently, with a different paradigm that fights, not only with fire where fire is needed, but with water where only water will do?

Development workers should know about water.

So now let me the development worker be, for a while, preferably all day, because such thoughts must come from patience and patience cannot be summoned like anger, by the flick of a TV remote. (There is so much remoteness.) Forget the report. I'm changing gear.

What choices do we have here?. On the one hand, we have the relief and welfare worker, and though not particularly developmental, they do at least buy time (it's still about time), keeping people alive

and intact so that they can continue developing, hopefully, one day. The more sceptical view sees famines as a contemporary feature of elite globalisation and environmental degradation, and relief-workers and food-aid as its necessary safety-net, tummyfilla polyfilla into the widening cracks of capitalism. Bomb 'em and feed 'em, bomb 'em and feed 'em, as American pilots in Vietnam used to chant as they alternately delivered bombs and food-parcels to villagers in the fire-zone. Its already happening in Africa all over, though more slowly, less visibly, grindingly. Now it will happen in Iraq, all of a sudden. And then I just want to be an angry activist again... breathe out.

At the other pole of developmental work, are what I call the "development aunties and uncles", young and old, the veritable salts-of-the-earth, warm and committed, peoples' persons found in every community, volunteer or lowly paid saints, some even employed by NGOs, who quietly go about looking after others, gardeners who grow relationships and en-courage the people they know and love, and they are what they love (aren't we all?), informal leaders, forever tying up the loosening and fraying threads of community fabric. Often unassertive by nature, invisible by their own choice, and usually ignored by outsiders.

And in between are the rest of us, NGO project workers, field staff, 'capacity-builders', development facilitators, programme officers, donors, intervening from the outside into communities or organisations. Outsiders going in to work from the inside out.

What is the practice here, of the in-betweeners, or what should it be? Well, first to own that an outside intervention is exceedingly arrogant and can only be mitigated by its antidote, a respectful facilitative approach. So intervening at our best when we do so with warmth and humble respect for what developmental streams are already moving in the community, tuning into their time, earning the trust to see and be a mirror, human ecologists looking for what is indigenous, latent and potent, looking for the will that is buried but alive. Bringing to light hidden memories, untold stories that block the developing streams. Trying to connect communities with what is already theirs, healing relationships and helping humane leadership to surface and be strengthened and be responsible (and response-able), for what lies within and for what lies without.. Between today and the future, the urgent needs of today and the developing needs of tomorrow. To help people to develop deep strength and voice over time to tackle their own contexts, representing themselves. And we have to work over time, with time, not against it, without deadlines (what a word!), without clocks, time to know and be known, to be trusted, to see and be seen, to try things out, fail, succeed, fail, and harvest the experiences, growing relationships as the means and the end. Transforming time. And so finding the right timing for courage. Courage... does it come in a second or over a lifetime – how do we span this time? Can we fully frame it in a Project or a Campaign? We can measure its impact, though, over time... The will to learn and be honest (which takes great courage) can be measured. If we take the time. What else matters to measure because what success doesn't flow from these qualities?

And maybe our work is, as importantly, with the development aunties and uncles and, less importantly, with Projects or Urgent Issues. Perhaps it is inside this quality of person where activism

and developmental work meet and are reconciled, through a process of emergence. If true, this means the particular role for the very few development workers is to help to encourage development aunts and uncles, to encourage other aunts and uncles, horizontal learning, farmer-to-farmer, street-to-street, self-generating, not in predetermined Project time, but in the time they have and understand, that is theirs, as their own thinking activists, alive with their own culture.

This reveals a real paradox, in the need for a kind of patient urgency for processes of accompanying people, over good time, necessary time, renewing and developing deep roots of leadership and culture that will, where needed, engender a grassroots activism, authentic and cultured, which must patiently wait for its time, its turn - it could be next week, it could take years. A patience full of potential, poised to grasp the opportune and suddenly revealed moments of social, political and economic change and turn them into the next stage of broad social development.

And if social movements are important then I have seen two qualities of social movement in South Africa. The first is of the hard-learned, bitter kind, a bit wretched, terribly assertive, often intolerant and monotone, riding on anger, on hateful memories, on past-time, on broken promises. With a committed, stable, unchanging leadership core and a large transient base, needing great effort to mobilise and hold. Elite globalisation's dark twin. The other kind of social movement is more organically led, with leaders emerging out of communities, emerging together, more culturally 'originated', and when in coalitions as convergences of diverse, more humane, textured, colourful and tolerant community cultures, riding on anger as positive will and hope, on vision, and full of aunts and uncles (with their wanton acts of generosity). Less of a threat, more of a challenge.

So my response to the madness being played out between Baghdad and Washington is to go on planting seeds<sup>2</sup>, to be a patient gardener, regardlessly and relentlessly, looking for the right people to work beside. That is the quiet urgency I have, to connect more at that level, to connect with myself at that level.

But all strength to activists, really, call me if you need a foot-soldier, a hand to paint a banner, or better even a still place to think about what we could do together, over time.

I can see this planting of seeds being based on a new respect for human time, not politicians' or activists' time or donors or back-donors' time, but time between time and beyond clocks, many times the rhythms, poly-rhythmic, southern time. All kinds of time for all kinds of things, it-depends-time, male time, female time, children's time ('tutti-fruity time'), story-telling time, mourning time, celebration time, a time to confront, work time, learning time, cooking time and eating time (slow-food time), dreamtime, loving time.<sup>3</sup> Tea drinking time. We live day-by-day, by the clock, in the burning present, but we are also living into the future unevenly, between those two gods: Chronos, the god of chronological clock time, linear, planned, now-time, the beating time, calculated time, and

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<sup>2</sup> "The man who planted Trees" Jean Giono or the video/film by Frederic Back is a must. The full story can be found on our website under "What's New" (for a while) or under "Art"

<sup>3</sup> Read Pip-Pip – a sideways look at time by Jay Griffiths for a wacky, radical treatise on time.

then Kairos the god of timing, unfolding, non-linear time, rhythmic, cyclical, wild time, sensed time. If only somebody would make us kairological clocks to enable us to feel when the time is right to act, we wouldn't need clocks... we might be less calculating and more discerning, judging by more by the heart, a bit less by the head.

Within this notion of time, real time, as something else, cyclical and wild, I want my developmental practice to be a not too complicated or over-planned thing, something straightforward yet subtle, thought through but open, "a path made by the walking of it", an artistic crafting of time, not an engineered plan. Many edged, sweet and sour, soft and hard. With some good planning, but a different kind, lighter, with regular rhythms of learning and rethinking. Always on the lookout for opportunities to reveal and connect with impulses that can spill invisibly from community to community, horizontally, spaces to surprise us with those generative acts of wanton generosity. More horizontal learning, a bit less vertical training. Knowing that immense impulses are already innate in people, between people, acknowledging our huge inner significances, our mythical inner beings holding whole worlds between them, reminding us of simple truths to live boldly by, bold truths to live simply by, essences of what we already know, but have forgotten somewhere along the timeline. Learning to read the streams of people in community, to find the flows and stoppages to their wills and to be with them, accompany them and then leave them be when the time is right.

Not a too over-articulated, theorised thing that weighs down on us with its gravitas, bullet-points, boxes and complicated models that scare or bore the heck out of ordinary folk, and us besides. Which is why metaphor, word pictures, poetry, song and story-telling, the speech of ordinary people, have to become core to our language of development, along with our science, our capacity to conceptualise, archetypally, bringing forward artistic and natural mediums for working with complexity and invisible things that matter. Disciplined in its commitment to regular, honest learning, and unlearning, from experience.

Not even a very explicit thing, conscious yes but not always explainable, except through stories, parables, metaphors – something which can only truly be practiced when fed back into our forgetteries to grow out over time into our fingertips, out through our speech tone, as authentic gestures and movements. We are on the right track, and the texture is better, it does smell good, but we have a long way to go, bagfuls of models and tools to heave off our cart and some others to develop.

And there are Moments To Look Out For. Moments of unplannable transformation which don't come often, but can be encouraged and waited for and when they do appear, recognised, embraced and worked with. Invitations to a looking-glass through which we see ourselves and enter, crossing thresholds through still, timeless zones of self-effacement. Of shadows to embrace, where the real thresholds lie. Facing our habits, our addictions and attachment to safe patterns and known security, our self-doubts, self-hatreds and fears, our anxious urgencies and deadlines, our huge capacity to tell lies, and deny, our sceptical need for immediate visible measurable evidence, instant solutions and

answers to everything, time bound, smart, feeding a need for proof, correction, punishment, abuse, violence and war. To exhaustion, resignation and compromise. And we have to face these in ourselves as we help others do the same, or how else can we know the method? And seek the still centre. To find there our sources of faith to balance doubt, of compassion to balance hatred and courage to balance fear. And if we can't take the time to know intimately the people into whose lives we are intervening, can we choose to work with them, with any integrity? We know, though we find it hard to admit, that deep accountability lives in relationships, in intimacy, enabling the heart to judge with the head. But we seek accountability only in mechanical things, like bland, two-dimensional reports, the digital documents of the clocks and scales we have devised to measure worth in cost benefits and time spent – Time Is Money! God save us from the notion, the cash register ringing to the clock, no time, no money! No money, no time! We are truly lost, until we decide to seduce time back out of the clock, and step through the looking-glass again as wiser and wiler Alices in development-land to steal the pocket-watch from the White Rabbit!

I start to feel hopeful, even relieved, if I can see my work as long-term, in it for the long haul... if my anger and urgency can be stretched into long chords over many years to keep company with my longest heartbeats and deepest breaths, patiently, resonant with hope. Why live otherwise? Then I shall have to die on my back, an old wrinkled son-of-a-bottle, with a last thankful sigh breathed out of the knowledge that time will continue long after me... And if there is a chance of another time, another life... who really knows? I have faith at least that it is a good idea to believe in time beyond, even if that beyond is just a deep, blissful falling into space, like a dream, backwards... timelessly...

So here I am, in a world that has no centre, a broken gyroscope now in my hands, my own centre to restore, still puzzled, still between Chronos and Kairos, but a little less uncomfortably and ready to write a donors report. Though I do hope they have the time for what I want to say.

### **About the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA)**

The Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) was established in 1987 as a non-profit, non-governmental organisation (NGO) to build the capacity of organisations and individuals engaged in development and social transformation. We are based in Cape Town, South Africa and work mostly in Southern and East Africa.

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