



being at the cdra biennial: blending colours, blurring boundaries – reflections of a novice artist

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A personal account in which Sandra Hill reflects on her participation in CDRA's Biennial practice conference (May 2007) held on the premise that bringing thinking practitioners together in a developmental process contributes powerfully to an emerging developmental discipline.

The road to McGregor is a tiny tributary trickling from a main branch of the great road north, the national highway linking Cape Town to the rest of Africa. Without a map book or diligent navigator by your side, it would be easy to miss the turnings, each one smaller and less well sign posted. Geographically, McGregor, a small hamlet founded in 1862, with only a smattering of residents, is not on the way to anywhere. Ringed by an impressive band of fynbos covered, Cape fold mountains, it's a dead end for those intent on going places. But for the pilgrim it is both a place of refuelling and a destination in itself.

I sit transfixed, the tiny car speeding across the chapped Karoo landscape, enchanted by the autumn colours, watching as the repressed architecture of small town South Africa gives way to wave after wave of crimson vineyard, fringed by scrubby, grey-green shrub. Inside the car, my colleague and I are on another trip. Like Thelma and Louise, we are heading off the highway, off the map and out into the great unknown, determined only to find where our hearts are and still astounded by the opportunity to go there.

The Community Development Resource Association's (CDRA) Biennial practice conference was billed as a space for development practitioners from all over the world to meet, learn and innovate together. Its purpose was to add to an emerging development discipline in the development sector, not from the perspective of theory but from the experience of thinking practitioners.

My purpose in attending was less clearly formulated. Caught up in the excitement and frenzy of planning the conference as a member of CDRA, host to this gathering, my own expectations and intentions took a little while to filter through the careful preparations I had made for my role in the conference. As a researcher my brief was to observe and record the unfolding process. I was to look at how process served or hindered conference intentions and to do this as part of a small inquiry group. We approached the inquiry by observing and making sense of our own, personal experience, by stepping out of the process and looking at it with fresh eyes. This it seems was not purpose enough, however. I did not knowingly set off as a pilgrim, but I returned home as one.

In his book *The Heart Aroused*,¹ poet David Whyte encourages us to locate our work deep in the soul. "By definition, soul evades the cage of definition. It is the indefinable essence of a person's spirit and being." *The Heart Aroused* "is a book dedicated to the weary questioner...struggling with the increasing complexity of the modern workplace". Though written for corporate USA, much of Whyte's message is relevant to us. We experience the many tier-ed complexities of working within the third sector, the development sector, civil society. With a vision of bringing those at the periphery ever closer to the centre, thereby transforming both the centre, and the rest of the world, for ever – complexity is perhaps too banal a word. And we know, from that place of deep knowing, that this is not a journey we can simply direct others on, like an air traffic controller at

¹ David Whyte (2002) *The Heart Aroused* (Doubleday)

a busy airport, with aeroplanes landing and taking off every few seconds and hundreds of thousands of lives at stake. At the Biennial, we remember that the only way to bring change is to be the change we want to be². This is our passport to development work. The only way to engage with development is to locate our work deep in our indefinable selves. What this means, what this really means for each of us, takes on its own unique shape-shifting reality in the chaotic day to day life of love, laundry, laptops, lunchtime meetings and late nights.

This is my first Biennial. I know nobody apart from my colleagues. The bus bringing some 80 delegates from 15 different countries pulls up in the middle of the village, and stops outside the square church hall, our central venue. Argus-eyed, I watch as a colourful parade of people overflow onto the forecourt, the babble of voices, the excitement of adventurers meeting unexpected, unfamiliar and well loved faces on a foreign shore. I look for the faces which belong to the names recommended to me for the process inquiry group. I had accepted blindly their recommendations, and having done no homework to ascertain their background or various achievements – I am intrigued and not a little shy to meet each one of them. Although we only gather twice during the conference, these are the people through whom I become a part of the growing conference community.



² Mahatma Ghandi

Community: state of being shared or held in common fellowship. **Fellowship:** participation, sharing community of interest, companionship, friendliness, body of associates (Concise Oxford Dictionary).

There is a palpable sense of ‘fellowship’ during the Biennial. I feel it most strongly in the daily openings with musician Neo Muyanga leading us in chant...our voices swelling with expectation, excitement and in unison with each others’. I feel it in the emotions of acknowledging one another in the closing ‘ceremony’, “...I see you, and you, and you...”. I feel it in our art group, I feel it in the inquiry group meetings and when we see each other in the hall, the streets, the restaurants. I feel it as a sense of deep connection, of knowing, of familiarity and of being a part of this particular commune of people. “Have I really only just met you?”

It is an odd feeling of knowing which does not rely on having a CV of each one I meet, of knowing who they work for, what position they hold, where they come from, what they do or what they studied. I’m not interested in those details. It is a ‘knowing’ in the moment. A ‘meeting’ of people which makes the other kind of conventional ‘knowing’ redundant. I feel I am met and responded to as a person, not a position, nor a history, nor an organisation. And I take pleasure meeting and working with others in the same way. I am aware that without this background, I am listening to people better, percolating what they say and how they say it through a little less of that complex web of (largely unconscious) filters.

Novice: a probationary member of a religious order, before the taking of vows. A new convert. A beginner; an inexperienced person. **Artist:** a painter. A person who practises any of the arts. A person who works with the dedication and attributes associated with an artist. (Concise Oxford Dictionary).

After the hurly burly opening of the conference, a parade of welcomes, introductions and instructions, we are invited to choose an art medium through which to explore the concepts we have come to grapple with. From the options of dance, eurhythmy, sculpture, singing, cartooning and painting, I choose painting. Because I cannot paint.

It’s an odd bunch which climbs aboard the battered old mini bus taxi to drive down Voortrekker Road to the art studio we are to work in. We’re gallantly directed to its entrance by the village drunk, holding a ‘spliff’ as long as his arm. It’s a small studio, beautiful. Filled with light, pallets, paintings, with colour. Our facilitators, Desiree Paulsen and Chou-Chou Diallo, give out oversized white T-shirts to protect our clothes. We are like kids around a Christmas tree. Our white T-shirts a blank canvas inviting us to paint a new identity. Yet early on there is a sense of urgency. A lot of joking, a lot of laughter. Signs of tension, of anxiety? I am quiet. Absorbed. Intense. Annoyed when asked to change gear, to leave the paints and portraits aside. The resistance in me is reflected in the group at large. I don’t want to let go of what I am doing. But there is task to be done. A time line of the development sector. Starting in the 40’s. What a contrast to the swirling colours, the thick acrylic paint, the textured layers, the red smudge on her flushed

cheek. The facilitators are stressed, concerned with generating enough material for tomorrow's report back. Egging us on. People are frustrated, talking over each other, vying to be heard, out of sync. Random and haphazard. It feels like a naming of parts rather than a deepening of understanding. We wrap up rather than finish our task. Ours a clinical, linear....line. I don't feature. I doubt if any one of us feature.....it is all about...others. We have been tasked with compiling a sector biography. But this is not a story at all. Onto the taxi again, waiting patiently to drive us back up the main road.....named for the Afrikaaner pioneers...those intrepid travellers who ventured where no European had been before. And I wonder, will we traverse virgin territory or travel worn paths at this gathering? Will I? I think about the portrait I did of an acquaintance during the afternoon. So much of her seemingly reflected in my random flourish of colours. How did I know? I'd never met her before? Funny what really looking at someone can reveal. Or, perhaps I am becoming seasoned in finding meaning in chaos. Is this virtue or vice? I go to bed wondering if I have a story and if so, what it is. I am tired, disappointed, alone, home sick. I wonder how CDRA will piece together the fragmented, rushed pieces of this, the opening day.

Journal entry

As novices in the way of painting, for we had all chosen it as an unfamiliar medium, we meet and work as equals. Our early fractiousness sinking to give rise to intense engagement, meeting ourselves, each other and our questions on different levels as we move, sometimes seamlessly, sometimes begrudgingly,



between individual and group tasks. In these sessions we are urged to meld together the social and the creative. To experience them, not as two different disciplines, one somehow in service of the other, but vicariously. Vicariously, in the sense of experiencing this melding in our imagination, through another part, the creative, imaginative part of ourselves, rather than through another person.

John Heron uses a pyramid as a symbol for different kinds of knowing: feeling, the largest, base level, a support fundamental to the other three, imagining, thinking, and doing. “Experiential knowing is through direct face-to-face encounter with person, place or thing, it is knowing through empathy and resonance. Presentational knowing emerges from experiential knowing and provides the first form of expression by drawing on expressive forms of imagery through story, drawing, sculpture, movement, dance and so on. Propositional knowing ‘about’ something is knowing through ideas and theories, expressed in informative statements. Practical knowing is knowing ‘how to’ do something and is expressed in a skill, knack or competence.” (Peter Reason and John Heron in *A short guide to co-operative inquiry*)³. I prefer the symbol of a spiral, but like their extended epistemology.

In the sessions combining both art and social questions, we work on all these levels. My insecurity as a novice artist heightens my vulnerability to the feelings triggered – and in a vulnerable state, I am more open to questions I have either not considered before or conversely already consider closed books. I have more of the qualities associated with a beginner’s mind, and this freedom fires the conversations which unfold in the days following.

In the afternoon of the second day I meet with another small group of participants. Our task this time is to share stories from our experiences of ‘facilitating partnerships and networks for development’. And then in another assault on the impossible, to pull the essence of each story together into a single, archetypal story. Five more groups meet simultaneously to consider other aspects of development; capacity building, advocacy, community development practice, donor practice and enabling facilitation.

I sit with two others in the lush garden of Oblivion Guest House. The verdant vegetation a stark contrast to the parched hills beyond. Garden hoses sprinkle away, oblivious to the chronic water shortage plaguing the village, the province, the country, the world. Story telling pulls the world into our circle as we speak of brokering deals and shuttle diplomacy. Of our work with powerful champions and with worker ants. Of experimenting with new ideas, working with diversity, with conflict, with power. And we talk of our work with each other. Together with the rest of our focus group, we talk about horizontal exchanges, networks of peers – of what happens among us, rather than networking as a thing we ‘do’ to others. Our need is to get together because we have joint questions, joint work to do. We are driven by the need to understand and to act. We dialogue to inquire and understand with the purpose of co-existing, collaborating, complementing each

³ see <http://www.human-inquiry.com/cishortg.htm> for the whole article

others' practices. We look at the differences we've experienced between organising, where we build a common strategy to counter prevailing power versus networking and especially at the self within partnerships and networks, where we come together collectively and then depart as individuals, better able to go on. I remember an artist's caution "we cannot create anything new in the world without first finding that within ourselves." Quoting Kurt Lewin, someone asks; "how will I know what I think until I see what I do?" We wrap up with a participant reluctantly volunteering to pull our rich mishmash of thoughts together for presentation the next day.

Then I'm catapulted back into the art group at the other end of town. The busyness of the programme makes it hard to float long enough for the water to calm and the mud to settle. The rest of the day is a welcome blur of silence and colour. We are working with paradox, with friend and foe, with all that is unresolved. I cannot remember the instructions clearly, but find I'm using the late afternoon light to paint a life sized, whole body portrait.

That night the process inquiry group meets after supper. I choose big leather couches of ample proportion in a simple, book lined room as a venue. Everyone comes. Everyone is weary. It has been a long, long day. I ask them quite simply to share their experience of the process thus far. There is an incredible sense of security despite all the raw newness of the country and of the conference. There is a sense of art extending boundaries, of the space and the challenge to be oneself, to bring oneself into community. There is a sense of beautiful beginnings. But there is also discomfort with the pace, it's too fast. Walking is good, but everyone agrees, there is no place for running. We wonder at the paradox of promoting process, yet a seeming fixation with producing a worthy conference product?



There is frustration that the creative experience and the intellectual ponderings are not coming together, that synergy is lacking. That synthesis floats away into abstraction. That we are entertaining and entertained, but still have to plumb the depths for meaning and coherence.

On so, on the third day the tempo changes. The morning is full of report backs from the previous day's work. But we are given the spaciousness of an empty afternoon to join a walking tour of the area or to explore our own personal autobiography. I choose the latter, excited by a passage in Anne Schuster's book, *Foolish Delusions*⁴: "Auto-biography is not the story of a life, it is the recreation or the discovery of one."

I agree to meet another participant in an hour and a half to share some of our stories in response to the framing questions given for this task, then wander distractedly around the gardens at Temenos. The retreat centre is saturated with memories of my last visit here some years back. Three days of solitude and silence in a room of deep blue, of midnight swims under the blanket of a black sky, of waking and sleeping with the fierce Karoo sun and of feeling deeply connected to the impulse of life. My nearly-nine-month pregnant belly preceding every move, every thought. I could've stayed forever.

I try centring through meditation. It doesn't work. Restless, I search out another place to sit, resentful of the others I bump into. I begin to write. We've been asked to think of incidents from our working lives where we were deeply moved or touched. I can't answer the question. Work is work, something separate from my heart. It hasn't always been like that. This schism between me and work seems to have come with approaching middle age and with motherhood. I struggle on. Who are my heroes? I cast my net wide. It comes back empty. Yesterday's feelings of disconnection, of alienation from the world, return.

I order tea, trusting in this calming, old English tradition. But instead of tinkering with the teaspoon, I am drawn into conversation which leads me away from myself and to the cusp of a vertical plunge. The tea goes cold in its white china pot as the cool morning breeze and a few words from a stranger, my gentle companion, nudge me over the edge.

Enough by David Whyte⁵

*Enough. These few words are enough.
If not these words, this breath.
If not this breath, this sitting here.*

*This opening to the life
we have refused
again and again
until now.
Until now.*

⁴ Anne Schuster (2005) *Foolish Delusions* (Jacana)

⁵ 'Enough' from *The Heart Aroused* by David Whyte (Doubleday 2002)

And I have a little glimpse of how all the parts are little wholes. Of how all the pieces, now lying so higgledy piggledy, will emerge into an, albeit never complete, story. Some weeks after the Biennial a friend introduces me to Daphne de Marneffe's *Maternal Desire*⁶ which speaks to my own sense of self-dividedness. I am heartened by her observation, that "whatever our individual vantage points, mothers share a common predicament: we all deal in one way or another with the splits and conflicts in our lives...". She notes that whatever the choices we make, "the reality for most of us is that we are torn, and live with a sense of conflict, sometimes flickering, sometimes flaring, hour by hour and day by day". On my 30th birthday, I resigned from the socially prestigious position as director of a burgeoning organisation. It was a seminal moment in my struggle with notions of success and of identity. And it was amplified years later when I became a mother. I think about Goethe's assertion that the whole is in all of its parts, knowing now a little more of what I think he means, knowing that it is so.

After lunch I return to the art studio with the rest of the group. My carefree composure soon shatters as Chou-Chou asks us to re-imagine and re-tell our stories. In other words to paint over the self portrait I had so proudly worked on the day before. I don't want to destroy this image I have created of myself. This me as a product I am proud of, happy to exhibit, to show the world. This is a trap my companion helps me see in our ongoing conversation: ..."the fight within ourselves, trying to keep control, to keep the shape, to project something that sometimes we are not." And "This phenomenon of hiding things like emotions, like characteristics we think or were taught are not good, are not necessary, that don't fit neatly into our lives...is what creates shadow". Robert Johnson, in his book *Owning Your Own Shadow*⁷, describes it as that part of us we fail to see or know, in comparison to the persona, which is what we would like to be and how we wish to be seen by the world. With a paint brush of the size used for applying wall paper glue in hand, I attack my portrait sulkily. But soothed by the sensation of working with my hands, working with colour, and of giving up control, sullenness slowly seeps out of me. And I think; it's all very well saying that development starts with self, but perhaps I have to start by getting over (my)self.

That night we party to the New Year's Day parade sounds of a local band. The celebration is tinged with sadness for it also signifies the approaching end of the conference. The following morning is a kaleidoscope of creative presentations.

Each group offers something of their insights with the whole community. After a tea break, we prepare for the ending. I use Kit Wright's poem, *The Magic Box*⁸ to help us reflect on the past days. I choose it because he uses bits of things: *the swish of a silk sari on a summer night, fire from the nostrils of a Chinese dragon, the tip of a tongue touching a tooth*. He also uses the unexpected and unusual, even the impossible: *a fifth season and a black sun, a cowboy on a broomstick,*

⁶ Daphne De Marneffe (2004) *Maternal Desire: on children, love and the inner life* (Virago)

⁷ Robert A. Johnson (1991) *Owning your own shadow: understanding the dark side of the psyche* (Harper)

⁸ 'The Magic Box' from *CAT AMONG THE PIGEONS* by Kit Wright (Viking Kestrel, 1987)

and a witch on a white horse. It seems fitting somehow for this gathering. I invite each one to write their own poem, choosing their own magic container and filling it with the unexpected, the unusual, the impossible, or whatever has grabbed their hearts or minds.

The evaluation form is a large blank sheet of paper. We use the four elements of air, water, fire and earth to frame our reflections on the different streams within the conference: inspiration, fellowship, passion and containment.

In rock climbing there is something called the crux move, the most difficult move on a route. It could be anywhere, but in my experience, it's always just when I feel I've made it. It's the pivotal moment in a climb. You either make the move successfully.....or you fall off. Making the crux move requires you to let go of what you know, of what feels solid and to lunge, swing, stretch or glide into the unknown. It's an act of courage. Of faith. Of daring. For me the Biennial synthesis was one of those moves. Described as a short stop at the end of the last day to make sense of our own experiences of the conference, as a defining moment where I decide what to take with me. What to finally leave behind. Instead of a short stop, I've found my synthesis is still in process. An ongoing work. Rather than a defining moment, it has been a stream of moments. Rather than deciding, I seem to be discovering what has already serendipitously been decided. The things that have stayed with me and the things that have blown away.

Identity: absolute sameness. Individuality. Condition of being a specific person.
Identify: association of self inseparably or very closely with.... (Concise Oxford Dictionary)

In the weeks that follow I think again and again about identity, my own and that of the sector. I harp back to the time line exercise set to help us create a biography of the sector. To better understand the collective us which makes up this thing called the development sector by looking back and remembering our past. But time lines and stories are not easy companions; the one flat-lines, the other takes a plunge. Perhaps if I had gone back and used some of those events listed on the time line as prompts for pieces of biographical writing, I could've found the colourful stories I was looking for. The stuff that would give substance to the identity we were trying to fathom. No matter how unsatisfying I found it, the time line did, however, form bedrock, a context in which I heard and understood the stories that came in the sessions that followed. It also revealed parts of my own internal tectonic plate, surfacing events and experiences fundamental to my own paradigms and practices that have lain dormant for years.

If I had to separate one strand from the entanglement of all that was McGregor, it was relationships, no matter how fleeting, and the sense of community that gave me an 'in' to the quest for the sector's purpose and identity. This crazy cross-section of people, personalities and practices all identifying with, and drawing identity from, the wonderfully amorphous development sector. It was through this feeling of community that I remembered myself, my work, as part of a bigger story and a bigger purpose.

In one of the pre-Biennial planning sessions, the artists spoke in depth of the rigorous discipline within their chosen art forms. The discipline which precedes, which paves the way for improvisation. Similarly, David Whyte speaks of continuity and community as the foundation for our ability to innovate and follow individual vision. With creativity as the nucleus of the Biennial I began to reconnect soul and work. The Biennial process and orientation gave this journey legitimacy, space, and value. It helped blur the borders which maintain a feeling of self-dividedness and I hope will continue to nourish a sense of integration which so often eludes me. De Marneffe's wry challenge of work as "the royal road to meaning and autonomy" and Whyte's invitation to locate work deep in our soul, opens a wonderful and nuanced corner in the dialogue on purpose and identity. The fusion we sought between the social and creative process begins to feel like a metaphor for the ongoing struggle for integration and synchronicity in our own lives. If development work demands we bring ourselves to our work, then it is as much about being as about doing.

