**LIVING INSTITUTIONAL BUREAUCRACY IN DARK TIMES**

**In the dark**

I’m walking up the river in Towerland’s mountains where I’ve come for the CDRA writing retreat. Suddenly I notice the moment when the gush of water coming towards me is louder than what bubbles behind. Soon all I can hear is what is coming towards me. Of course we are always standing in this place in our lives, between our past and our future, but not always in an equal relationship to both. For so much of my life, my striving has been directed at overcoming my past, as if I was walking backwards turned to take care of ancestral trauma. Now I am turned to face my future, a gentle breeze reminding me of the ancestors at my back.

So I am better orientated than ever before, perhaps for the first time facing in the right direction; and I am feeling more lost than ever before, as if my inner compass needle is swinging wildly to and fro around the dial, and as if none of my senses are of any help at all in compensating.

*I originally wrote that my senses were of no help in compensating for this malfunction. But I had written this before the time of the Coronavirus; coming back to my writing now, it feels like this disorientation was a very accurate reading of the times rather than a symptom of malfunction.*

Two days later, walking this time on the mountain, Sue[[1]](#footnote-1) who lives in Towerland talks of the drought having revealed the difference between a full silence and an empty silence, the no-water-no-frogs-no-signs-of-life silence of dried up river. That night, I realise that my penchant for walking in the dark is related to the dark equivalent of a full silence. I wonder at the light that usually surprises me once my eyes have had time to adjust, even on a cloudy night of sliver moon yet to rise. I have memories of nights when even that light isn’t enough to see by, of feeling my way, albeit slowly, tentative step by tentative step, feeling out rock and sand with my toes before choosing where to place my foot.

This feeling my way in a full living dark is familiar to me, a quality I bring to my work out of somewhere deep in my biography. It was first made visible in an evaluation of Cape Flats Nature, a project I led which had attracted me to the ‘biodiversity sector’. The gesture of the project our evaluator – another Sue, Sue Soal, at the time a CDRA practitioner – offered through poetry was of a snail moving in the dark beneath dew-laden blades of grass “drenched … with purpose, knowing nothing”[[2]](#footnote-2). I have come to see myself in this, have come to appreciate that this light accompanying the shadow of uncertainty and lack of confidence, is fundamental to the gifts I bring to my work.

But the dark that has me lost now is of a different quality. It’s an empty dark. Devoid of life. And only I see it. How do I begin to portray it in a way that you too might see both the substance and the lack of it? Previous experience tells me, that if I can do that – see the qualities of this dark – accurately, and find an alive way to share what I see, some of the life that I bring to it through my seeing might change it. Did writing my Masters dissertation not help me look at the fragmenting institutional bureaucracy within which I work in ways that changed so much over the past few years? But what if this dark is too much, too other, to be seen in this way or to be changed through that seeing? I’m tentative, but I need to try, desperate for purpose if not drenched in it.

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I wrote of this dark months before most of us had even heard of the Coronavirus. The dark was there before this which changed everything, stopped our lives as we knew them for most of us. It feels important to remember this, as much as it is important to note the added qualities of this new dark. It is more visibly global, shining a spotlight on how we are all connected. Even as it isolates us, disconnecting us further. The virtual illusion of connection it offers leaves us further disembodied – the stones are no longer there to feel out in the sliver moon. And this virtual illusion is offered unremittingly around the clock in ways that stretch days endless, squeeze weeks into an instant and rob us of months. It amplifies all that was there already in the previous dark, the inequalities and iniquities, the greed and the hunger. As much as it has allowed the rest of the natural world to breathe, it has also fed our human impulse to control which is at the heart of what has done so much damage in the first place.

In the extremity of this new dark I have longed to be still, to stop the doing which kept me ever more on-the-go and up at night for the past five years as my work has gained traction, to allow my eyes to adjust, even to this dark, to see what might be seen or perhaps to feel out what might be felt from beyond the confines of this place where I am so safely sheltered from the virus.

Yet in this dark, work has expected us to continue – amidst home schooling, housekeeping and otherwise unbroken screen time – almost as if we and the world around us remain unchanged save for us not being out and about in it. We are expected to plan for the new financial year as if we have any idea of how the next days or weeks or months will unfold, who of us might fall ill, whether there will be a hospital bed for those in need, who of us might be in mourning, when we might gather in person again, who of us might no longer be here, when we might travel as we so often do for work. We are expected to meet virtually as if we were in the same room. We’re held to donor ‘deliverables’.

Chinks of light break through when a colleague owns authentically having a bad day or week, dropping what is anyway an illusory notion of professionalism to share the pain of bumping up against something they couldn’t see coming at them in the dark or a moment of small joy unanticipated in such a time. Creativity comes through such moments of real connection breaking through the barriers of screen and ether, moments when we listen to what is really happening for each other. As we emerge from hard lockdown, I feel resistant to returning to the adrenalin fuelled life of before; it is clearer to me that this serves only the disconnection which is destroying the natural world my work is supposedly intended to support.

I am a public servant, a proud public servant – it’s in our division’s latest vision statement. I wonder a lot in this time about what will truly serve the public and the rest of the natural world that supports life. I wonder at how to remedy disconnection while being sucked into an increasingly virtual world.

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**Writing my way**

Having made my start, in the dark of my original writing, I am instantly dispirited back at work, such a marked difference to my mood in the mountains. I spend days like that, perhaps a week or two, buried in the ashes of all that has grown and lived amongst us as colleagues over the past five years. On the one hand touched by the collegial warmth that exists in these ashes; on the other hand so aware of the apparent desolation of our organisational landscape that seems to reverberate through my being. It is as if the part of me that has grown with my colleagues over the past five years, as we have grown an intentionally relational practice between us, has too been burnt by the mechanistic compliance-driven bureaucratic responses to corruption in the public service that was state capture, intentionally impersonal, coldly ‘objective’.

Despite the signs of persisting life, overall there is no coherence. I have had no contact with our leadership team for five months now; little has been taken forward from initial meetings with D\_\_\_\_\_ – our new Chief Director – despite a good rapport. Their energies have been absorbed by a morass of administrative failings – staff appointments are stalled; invoices are not being paid timeously as we battle to meet changed requirements from the Auditor-General’s office; the space for legitimate collaboration agreements narrows as risk aversion and compliance grows in the face of audit queries.

Then somehow, without having planned for it, I manage to articulate this to M\_\_\_\_\_\_, my Director – we have dropped the key strategic thrust of our work, got to through deep organisational process over the preceding years, around steering organisational coherence. It isn’t being held organisationally. And it’s not something I can hold alone, from below, as a Deputy Director, albeit with a brief for social and organisational learning. My contribution, although critical, is only as strong as the leadership of the colleagues I work with; it’s a symbiotic relationship.

Somehow, out of my writing of the dark in the mountains, I’m able to articulate this in a way that doesn’t judge or blame myself, him, his fellow Directors or D\_\_\_\_\_. It’s accompanied by a seeing of the darkness of the bureaucracy in this time – the increasing rigidity and constraint, the endless mechanistic procedure and paperwork in pursuit of compliance at the expense of quality work – into which we’re working, all of us, each with our particular roles and responsibilities.

And M\_\_\_\_\_\_ hears me. He validates my experience – our work on steering organisational coherence has been dropped, our transformation process addressing issues of race in particular is stalled, and something precious has been lost; no-one is to blame, and it is for us together to take responsibility.

*It is profound for me to be heard in this way – I am now not alone with what I might have experienced as deep personal failure just a year or two previously. This deep listening is part of what we’ve been cultivating with the processes I’ve championed; it is gifted back to me in turn.*

**A new opening**

My gloom lightens, as if the intense heat of the fire that generated the ashes has dissipated. There is just the warmth, a warmth of the kind that in the fynbos enables seeds to crack open so that the veld can regenerate. I find myself open to working with M\_\_\_\_\_\_ to shape a directorate strategic planning session I’d been trying to persuade him to postpone. In conversation with him I easily get a felt sense of what might be called for; year-end fatigue dissolves as does anxiety around last minute preparation.

*If I wasn’t aware of my own process it would feel like magic that the wholehearted enthusiasm with which I approach the best of my work is suddenly available to me.*

M\_\_\_\_\_\_ has invited D\_\_\_\_\_ to the directorate session and it’s an opportunity for me to connect with her. I report to her on a Key Performance Area around leading organisational learning in the division that took shape in the work I’d done with our previous Chief Director, K\_\_\_\_\_\_.

*This is a critical relationship for me, one in which we hadn’t yet found our way. It’s only really possible to share my practice through experience so this was my opening.*

I enter the directorate strategic planning session open and confident in what I am trying to do and how I am trying to work, but uncertain how the process we’d designed would work.

*The confidence in this seemingly contradictory mix is new for me, something I’ve noticed emerging over the past year, my 50th.* *As I’m writing I realise it is grounded in the relationships that have grown with my colleagues over these years, with my colleagues and with myself, with myself in relation to my work – despite or perhaps through all the challenges we’ve faced in these relationships. There is a foundation of trust from and with which to move.*

In the session, I am open to seeing the holes in the design as they emerge and I make changes. I am able to be vulnerable with my colleagues, letting them know when I am trying something I am deeply unsure of, asking them to participate in the exploration with me, part of growing the trust that was our intention.

*This strength in vulnerability is not the way of ‘whiteness’ that is my inheritance by way of the skin I was born into and the legacy of colonialism, Apartheid and so much more that still lives in the fabric of our society. It is liberating to be finding another way.*

We open slowly, weaving in aspects of the work on structural racism and making explicit connections with the different strands of our organisational learning work that many were still relating to as separate. This sets a tone for the engagement as a whole, both the sense of coherence as well as the connection with our Directorate’s chosen themes of respect, trust, development and appreciation of each other.

*So I feel myself much more able to bring what I know, what I have cultivated in myself over a life time and over a decade and a half of professional study now, most intensively through a three year Masters in Reflective Practice with the Proteus Initiative which I completed five years ago. And I am confronted in equal measure by what I don’t know, where my new growth needs to happen.*

Colleagues from other programmes join us on the second day to ensure synergy with their work. The conversation becomes directed by confident and deeply experienced articulations of ‘logical’ framework planning on which so much of our organisation’s work is founded. It loses the qualities I had been working towards the previous day through warm, creative, deeply engaged visioning. How to meet this without judgement for its assumption that change takes place through simple and direct cause and effect – the obvious planning questions of what is the change I’m wanting to see and how am I going to get there – in ways that deny the complexity of relationship in the natural and social world? How to find an integration that allows a more holistic thinking to dominate?

*I can feel, as I write this, the ‘bureaucratese’ that is standard communication at work beginning to creep in; I struggle to hold onto the poetry by which I live and learn. How can I shed the dogged detail and foreground the spirit?*

*For all the work I have done around meeting the ‘other’ on its own ground, observing from the inside, listening for what is alive, working from there, the rational fortress of this particular ‘other’ feels so impenetrable, so sure in its assumptions and defences, so unquestioned by everyone else in the room, that I don’t know where to begin. It subverts the process I am trying to hold while wishing to support it; it undermines our relationship with our work while purporting to help us plan for it better, and it gets in the way of us engaging adaptively with our social and natural context as we go about our work even as it is intended to call us to account for that work. How do I meet this unintended act of subversion relationally, in the spirit of the change I am working to bring, when no one else is even asking for it, although all we’re struggling with is begging for it? How do I enable integration when this singular way of thinking remains so forcefully dominant and unaware of alternatives?*

*For now I just notice and allow the question to live inside of me, and take further shape through my writing.*

*This is so part of my practice, to be working at the edge of what I know and, through that, to be feeling out what is beyond me. My colleagues see me as most knowledgeable when it comes to social learning facilitation, a resource, ‘expert’ even; yet I am always working into what I don’t know, meeting new situations and stretching beyond what I have done before, learning as I facilitate learning. It is a big change, a huge part of my learning from the Masters[[3]](#footnote-3) and all that preceded it, that I welcome the feelings that come with not knowing without judging myself for being found wanting, that I understand it to be a fundamental part of the process.*

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**The opening back then**

As I complete my Masters in 2015, I look for opportunities to bring what I have learnt into my organisation more fully, beyond the facilitation of a particular event or a single process, into how we approach all of our work as a division. My learning has already shifted my role in this direction; yet I have no experience of broad organisational development work.

*Reflecting back on this time now, I see that my energy went into connecting more deeply with colleagues with all I had learnt, listening to what they were doing and what was needed to support what they were doing.*

Out of years of ongoing conversation, A\_\_\_\_ asks if I can help her team learn to facilitate complex engagements with municipalities and others involved in decision-making around land use. Al\_\_ is looking to enable ongoing collaboration across historical ‘silos’ of policy, planning and implementation in day-to-day work between learning events in our work with government’s Natural Resource Management (NRM) programme. This too can be met by growing capacities for social process facilitation among the programme’s leadership.

A collaboration with the Proteus Initiative is born, with Sue Davidoff and Allan Kaplan as facilitators of the social process learning programme that forms the heart of this collaboration.

**The restoration effort that grows**

*‘Capacity development’ is a language that is understood in our organisation, and as much as we called it a learning programme to differentiate it, capacity development is still most often understood as taking place through training. The learning programme was an entry point, but on its own would likely have been a blunt instrument.*

The social process learning programme is designed to introduce individual participants to a practice rooted in the very nature we are striving to take care of. Given how abstracted so much of our work for the care of nature is from that nature, we anticipate that the programme might leave individuals frustrated, possibly not seeing the relevance of this practice to their day-to-day organisational life. And, even if they did see its relevance, certainly not enabled to practice in this way by the institutional bureaucracy which relies on set ways of doing things to enable control and ensure accountability. We include time in the collaboration agreement for work with the two teams from which the bulk of participants were drawn, to further enable these teams to work out of what they were learning in their team context, as well as with a cross-team reference group.

*This programme keeps me very busy albeit not as a participant – I was managing all the logistics and administration without strong support. Ironic that a programme intended to grow living organic practice in the organisation grows my task list in the bureaucracy, and leaves me feeling quite disconnected from the work at times. There are moments where I feel like all I have done is ‘deliver’ my teachers to the organisation, like I have little part in it now that the learning programme is underway.*

*At least there is the practice work where I am both supported and stretched by Sue and Al’s engagement with the NRM team of which I am a part. It is also a space where I can work differently with the team because they are deeply engaged in the social process learning programme; they are more open to me bringing more of my practice.*

When the frustrations bubble up as anticipated (although in ways we hadn’t anticipated) I try to engage our division’s leadership team around the issues, especially as they relate to existing conversations around our work culture, capacity development and our efforts to address dominance and marginalisation particularly in relation to race. My ask is for them to engage experientially over a day or two, as I know there is no other way for them to understand the practice we are introducing to colleagues, but that opportunity isn’t coming any time soon.

*An old familiar frustration – the Directors are running fast and furious as usual – part of what our engagement in relation to race had surfaced as at issue in our work culture. How do you learn when there is no pause? How do you engage senior leadership in an issue that is critical to organisational life but not a deliverable? How do you do this when there is no rhythm that allows for it?*

Then, in the work we are doing in relation to race it becomes clear that there isn’t a commonly held vision for our work as a division amongst staff. This leaves many feeling like they don’t belong, like their views aren’t considered in decision-making and that we’re not necessarily all pulling in the same direction. The need to forge a common vision for the division coincides with a ten-year organisational review of SANBI’s knowledge management branch of which we are part. There is an opportunity for us to share the practice being nurtured through the social process learning programme with not just the leadership team, but the division more broadly.

As part of the practice integration work in the collaboration, the leadership team agrees to invite Sue and Al to work with feedback from the review in the broader leadership team by way of preparation for a division-wide strategic review session. The leadership preparation goes extremely well – there is lively and deep engagement with each other and with the substance of the review. We explore the issues in a wide range of ways from movement to theatre, written reflection to conversation, in ways that invite generative thinking rather than absorption of already known fact or statement of preconceived position, growing layer upon layer of fresh understanding of the key issues together.

We leave with deep learning around how much of our policy advice practice had gone unacknowledged and misunderstood, largely out of *our* inability to see our own practice and, out of that seeing, do it justice in our articulation of it. We get to this understanding by noticing what stood out for us, observing our responses to it, what resonates, what doesn’t, listening to a range of perspectives on this – all in the wonderfully entertaining form of a radio talk show hosted by K\_\_\_\_\_\_ with a panel of studio guests and the rest of us ‘calling in’ with questions.

*The whole way in which the space is structured holds out against us taking up hard positions; it is open, curious, enquiring, playful. It is spontaneous with minimal preparation time – there is no space to overthink things. We aren’t analysing, critiquing, debating. We are ‘just’ observing, ‘just’ listening, all of us entirely riveted and shaping what could have so easily been dry boring heavy input. So many of the qualities with which we need to approach our daily work are there, living, in the room with us in that exercise.*

We also have an embodied experience of how the disconnection at the heart of our work culture, so bemoaned in our work around race, has less to do with the fast pace of our work, and more to do with how we relate to each other as we move at that fast pace. I had wanted to bring social eurythmy into my work since I’d first encountered in 2008[[4]](#footnote-4). It is an expressive movement art that helps to render relationships visible, and specifically helps us see into those places and dynamics to which we are often blind. In this instance we connect with ourselves in two concentric circles and pulse in and out of the centre, each circle with its own rhythm. At first our movement is chaotic, but as we grow our awareness of our relationship with others in our circle and in the other circle as we move, the movement becomes more and more coherent, ordered in a way that is natural rather than controlled.

*We see how we might begin to relate differently by paying attention to relationship, simply by growing our awareness of each other, our movement in relation to that of others around us, the moment we connect and who we connect with in each moment, by paying attention to seeing each other, to connecting.*

*I still wonder at what opens up through this movement. This first session feels so alive and a sense of coherence in the broader leadership team begins to grow. We are reflecting and learning together, making sense of the review and what it means for how we needed to work into the next decade together. When I think back to how split this broader leadership team was just three years earlier in 2014 – most visibly along lines of race – I see what a long way we have come and how better positioned we are now to lead. I also remember the difference it makes having colleagues on the social process learning programme in the room, participating with all they have learnt there, bringing their new perspective and understanding.*

The division-wide session stands on less firm ground, with a complex set of dynamics at play as it gets caught in the crosshairs of our race transformation work. We are very much split between management and the rest of staff. It takes half a day of deep listening and engagement, with strong leadership, before we can enter the process at all. In the end, with the time that then available for the process, we also do good work across traditional lines of hierarchy and organisational units to come to a unified sense of our purpose in the world as a division and ourselves as practitioners.

*Next to my wonder at what opens up is also a concern that I haven’t foreseen the resistance from staff. What blinds me to what staff are seeing and what are the leadership seeing about the relationship between our social process learning work and race-related transformation work that other colleagues can’t see? What is the disconnect?*

For many staff who hadn’t had previous exposure through the social process learning process, much of what we do at the division-wide session might pass them by. However, there is good engagement amongst colleagues who don’t usually get to interact and we emerge from that strategic session with a common vision and a strong statement of who we were as practitioners in the world, as well as six strategic focus areas, including one on steering organisational coherence that I am to support K\_\_\_\_\_\_ in leading. These outcomes stand and are largely affirmed in later team ‘transformation’ sessions.

*I only realise now as I’m writing that the key strategic focus area that emerges around steering organisational coherence in a way stands in answer to my reflections above. At the time it just feels like it was is was needed to address the relational disconnect amongst us in the division.*

The broader leadership team works into the outcomes from the strategic planning session more deeply, sometimes on our own with me supporting K\_\_\_\_\_\_ with facilitation and sometimes with facilitation from Sue and Al. This lays the basis for us to develop a further collaboration agreement with the Proteus Initiative. And this includes support for me to deepen my role in what I come to understand as transformative organisational learning facilitation.

*This is an exciting time – K\_\_\_\_\_\_ and I are working closely together to take the strategic areas forward in our broader leadership team meetings, and we have a clear picture of what support we need. My practice is being stretched and I am going to receive the support I needed to stretch it further.*

**What it takes to restore connection…**

The biggest turning crystallises out of these processes, with K\_\_\_\_\_\_ saying “I realise now that all our work is relational.” She understands that all our work succeeds or fails on the basis of the extent to which we’re able to relate effectively; and we’re able to relate effectively to do our work in the world to the extent that we’re able to do so inside the organisation. This is at the heart of the learning we’re needing to do as a division. She emerges from this process deeply committed to steering organisational coherence, with my support and the full engagement of her leadership team. She actively participates in shaping the new collaboration agreement that emerged, and champions its passage through the administrative channels in the organisation.

*I could see when I was writing my Masters dissertation already that K\_\_\_\_\_\_’s strength – her organic leadership style, so other to the bureaucracy – comes so naturally to her that she can’t fathom that others don’t always see what she sees. I come to see more clearly through these strategic sessions, how her leadership allows for an amazing interweaving of different programmes of work and staff across programmes, but this isn’t overtly enabled. Many of us can’t figure out how to engage; we don’t know how different colleagues get to be at different meetings; and if we aren’t inside of that flow of relationship we don’t know how to gain entry. In relation to our race work, it often feels like it is privilege at play rather than professionalism, and really hard to gain entry into the spaces of interaction as well as to the capacities and level of sophistication required to engage in that way.*

*I come to see this as at the heart of the strategic work – the need to steer organisational coherence. It isn’t just in my remit – where our work on structural racism, capacity development and social learning facilitation had been seen as discrete – but in all of our work where few can see a holistic picture of our work and how we go about it. This is a strategic focus out of that session two years ago, but I am only coming to understand it fully now, reflecting back on the process by which it emerged from where we are now.*

A key new understanding that emerges from the process that shifts the division’s capacity development strategy is that while discrete interventions, for example a learning programme, may support capacity development, it is most important to shift our day-to-day working practices to enable learning as we work: “This means that our approach to capacity development and our efforts to shift our work culture are very much bound up with each other – creating the time, space and relationships through which to learn is at the heart of the new inclusive work culture we are growing.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

*This is something I had felt instinctively before as a discomfort at the long wish list of activities that were included in our capacity development strategy, a discomfort inducing of overwhelm and inertia that I had taken personally. As I have come to internalise this understanding, I have become aware of how challenging it is to others to see capacity development in this way – tasks represent that which can be controlled like the projectable change contained in a ‘logical’ framework, achievable from an outside authority; whereas the alternative demands nothing less than full and active participation from the inside and in every moment by every single one of us.*

*This new understanding of capacity development shifts my role from trying to make additional activities happen when staff are already over-stretched and rushed, to trying to grow an awareness of the nature of our internal processes and enable a quality of interaction and engagement wherever I find myself in the organisation, and working to enable others to do the same.*

This approach calls on *all* of us to grow the faculties required for such learning, the very faculties I had been developing in the Masters programme and we were developing amongst participants of the social process learning programme – observation, reflection and self-awareness.

*It leaves me wanting to learn more how to grow these faculties through my work with colleagues.*

Over the course of this time, the various strands of our work begin to reinforce each other for me. By way of supporting Al\_\_ to draft a ‘learning network strategy’ for NRM, I insist that it be drafted with them and specifically engaging their leadership. As part of this process, we convene what becomes known as the organisational learning champions in NRM. For our first meeting Sue and Al suggest I reflect on SANBI’s experience.

*For the first time the social process learning work around which we are engaged with the Proteus Initiative coheres for me with other strands of our work relating to capacity development and race-related transformation I’d also championed for years, into what I now call transformative organisational learning. Seeing this coherence when I present to NRM colleagues then enables me to articulate my work more coherently back in our division and to other external audiences.*

So the work with NRM strengthens my understanding of my work within SANBI; and at the same time the work we are doing in SANBI is opening up new possibilities in the work with NRM where it begins to feel like we – SANBI and NRM – are together growing our transformative organisational learning facilitation practice at the same time as supporting NRM’s organisational learning.

*It is so exciting to see the kind of capacity development we are talking about in the division’s strategy actually happening in the NRM team. Within SANBI, Al\_\_ and Ma\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ both grow hugely as learning process facilitators to the point where they are facilitating processes in partnership with NRM without me; my role in the team shifts from lead facilitator to co-facilitator to observer to reflective partner, and in this my practice is growing too. And our NRM point person is growing into a role not dissimilar to mine.*

**And how easy it is to shut it down**

Then the darkness descends. It begins with collaboration agreements no longer being approved. In the context of SANBI’s first ever qualified audit, there is a fear that these would raise an alarm with the Auditor-General. So further work that was finely crafted in genuine collaboration now has to be put out to tender if it is to live, and the collaborators would be ineligible to apply. This kind of situation begs for the system to be corrupted, the very thing the Auditor-General is fighting.

Then K\_\_\_\_\_\_ resigns, leaving both a leadership vacuum and an opportunity for those below to step up.

*Perhaps she has foreseen this darkness, albeit unconsciously.*

The organisation all but grinds to a complete halt under the weight of a second qualified audit finding. As systems get adjusted to meet ever more gruelling demands from the Auditor-General, supply chain processes become completely overwhelmed and overwhelming; it becomes next to impossible to procure goods and services, and there are months- and year-long delays. It gets to a point where staff don’t have functional computers on which to work and there is no paper in the printer. There still isn’t, and it no longer scans because there is a payment outstanding to the company servicing it.

And then just when we think it can’t get any worse last year, the enforcement of a directive around a change in pay scales means that new staff aren’t being appointed so existing staff are left trying to play many roles to meet commitments to a time-sensitive donor funded project which all but grinds to a halt. D\_\_\_\_\_, when she is appointed as our new Chief Director mid-year, is left to fulfil commitments she had as a Director in another division of SANBI at the same time as adjusting to a very different role in a new division. (We only learn this at our directorate strategic planning six months later.)

In this context, even the threads I hold onto with the leadership team in an interim way after K\_\_\_\_\_\_ leaves are dropped and any life that remains in darkness dies back.

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**Deeper in darkness**

The coronavirus is first detected in South Africa in a town very nearby to where we are holding this year’s division-wide strategic planning session, while we are there. Overnight hardware stores – I am informed by a colleague who looks – empty of face masks and the airport on our way home is staffed by cleaners in smart new uniforms muted behind masks. Within three weeks we are locked down hard in our homes with the only possibility of connecting being virtually, online.

I drew such courage feeling how cohesive we were in our meeting, looking at much that was still at issue in the division together across traditional lines of hierarchy and race, without blame, experiencing myself able to open up and hold that space for us as facilitator. Yet now I feel quite alone amongst my colleagues, as if I am the only one mourning this situation, not jumping into adaptation mode before making sense of the fundamentally changed world in which we find ourselves, who feels like we should pause before we move. I feel my own capacities to relate seep away, my ability to listen to colleagues putting on a confident front, to speak into spaces where vulnerability and uncertainty aren’t welcome, to read social situations with only my sense of hearing to go by as some of us don’t have cameras and those relying on organisational funds for data are asked to cut costs.

*It is as if our separation from each other and the natural world that we are there to serve is complete. In this time all I want is for us to own this; yet we are driven by a compulsion to continue ‘as normal’, as if ‘normal’ as we know it still exists and will still exist once our time in lockdown is done.*

In this darkness the one relationship that sustains me is that with M\_\_\_\_\_\_ – he has proved himself so willing and able to listen to what I am struggling with. And I have been amazed at what that enables by way of working with this yet again utterly transformed context in which we find ourselves, including this writing.

My journal from when we first met to work on the CDRA publication charts the course of my practice in picture form, and oddly seems to anticipate the time of the Coronavirus:

*It’s not a nest I’m needing by way of containment, it’s containment that I might fly, that my energy might be freed up for flying. Oh to be contained without being confined. Containment without confinement. Containment without control. Ah, it’s that. All the control is standing in for containment that isn’t there. How do I grow it? I take so seriously that the quality and gesture with which we bring ourselves defines our relationships, and included in this is how we embody the tension between certainty and vulnerability. Sue said, “The more grounded we are in ourselves, the vaster the field becomes and the more that is possible.” When I look at that picture I drew yesterday and what I wrote on it, in a way at the heart of my practice is a capacity to mourn, this willingness to open myself to my losses, to live them deeply, every last ounce of difficult feeling of them. And to allow life to continue, to flow through that. Perhaps this. And perhaps this too is what brings me to these last rites of CDRA. And what is the seed of future practice.*

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**And now**

In this deeper darkness, I head once more to the mountains, as desperate for space to breath without a mask and time to be in my body rather than online and on email, as I am for time to finish writing this.

In April or May already, in the heart of hard lockdown, D\_\_\_\_\_ insists that we have a broad management team meeting within six months, to take our strategic work forward. As the time nears I balk, wondering how on earth the more than twenty of us were going to connect in any real way virtually.

Over my last meal with Sue and Al after five full restorative days walking and writing, I find the strength to come back to the task of preparing for this session that by then has changed to a morning’s full staff meeting – more than fifty of us on MS Teams – and a day’s broad management team meeting. They ask a few questions and then suggest that I write the narrative of how our strategic process has unfolded, easily included as part of the outcomes of the strategic planning session document I’d been asked to draft.

*Why wasn’t this obvious to me? J\_\_, another of the Directors, had even asked for it in her feedback on the strat planning notes. What is it about steering organisational coherence that I haven’t got yet? It is as if I am only realising now for the first time what it really means even as I am sure there is more to discover. For now I see it as being about making process visible so that it can be seen, reflected on and shaped actively by everyone involved.*

When I get home, late that evening, I am able to write the process with ease.

*It is in me; it flows.*

The staff meeting goes very well – staff are so appreciative of being informed of the bigger picture of what is happening organisationally and by way of big new projects with implications for resourcing – and it helps that there are a number of important milestones to celebrate too. The narrative on where we were in the process is well received it seems. I leave it to D\_\_\_\_\_ to hold the meeting, and she does well to allow each person a chance to say something by way of closure given that we’d only checked in through writing in the chat facility.

With the broader management team we try to go into more depth. D\_\_\_\_\_ brings input they’d received around institutional and interpersonal holding as part of transformation support the full SANBI Exco and Manco are getting, motivated by the work our division had done around race-related transformation. I suggest an experience-based exercise in pairs around what enables and what hampers personal agency, the related theme D\_\_\_\_\_ wants to explore. The process is a hybrid of information transfer and learning from experience.

*There is something about the openness with which I approach this that is new. In part borne of the paucity of preparation time I have with myself and with the leadership team, a symptom of my work on steering organisational coherence having been cut back as I’ve been given responsibility for additional work for which there is no longer dedicated budget; in part out of wanting to welcome what others are bringing by way of meeting them where they are at.*

At moments throughout the two meetings I feel M\_\_\_\_\_\_ really championing my work – emphasising the fact that capacity development is not a series of discrete activities but part of how we approach our daily work; celebrating how we are doing it; bragging what “lucky fish” we are in our division to have experience of transformative organisational learning and how he is going to take this into his new role as chair of Manco. He also does an interesting thing, not for the first time, of referring to me and a couple of other colleagues as the ‘experts’ in this who he will consult. This feels good to me, like he is intentionally broadening who is bringing this approach so that it might be accepted as belonging to us all.

*In this there is a letting go too. It won’t all look and feel as I might bring it. I can see that it might in moments even feel mechanised or reduced. But I can see now, having written this, that this will just ask of me to grow my practice further, to support us together in deepening our practice. This process of holding the thread of organisational coherence while letting go and having to find new ground feels like a constant if there is such a thing in these darkest of times.*

**Tanya Layne**

**December 2020**

1. Sue Davidoff, of Towerland and of the Proteus Initiative [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Considering the Snail’ by Thom Gunn in Soal S, Langley H and Jacobs V (2007) *Looking at Policy, out of Practice: Report to Cape Flats Nature on the outcome of its evaluation* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I completed a Masters in Reflective Practice offered by the Proteus Initiative through London Metropolitan University 2012-2015. The Masters, involving residential sessions, course work and mini-dissertation, focused on developing the faculties required for living thinking which is essential for us to meet the ecological and social challenges of our time. The Masters, and other programmes I had completed with Sue Davidoff and Allan Kaplan of the Proteus Initiative, as well as earlier courses with CDRA, supported me to develop ways of seeing without judgement that support my learning. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. My introduction to social eurythmy came at the same time I met Sue Davidoff and Allan Kaplan for the first time, on a course they co-facilitated with Sue Soal; Liz Smith did social eurythmy with us each morning of that course and the learnings from that time, and later work with Liz on leadership, still reverberate in me. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. SANBI Biodiversity Information and Policy Advice Division (2019) Capacity Development Strategy. Version 2 19 February 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)