

THIS IS WHAT WE NEED MORE OF: messages on organisation and creativity

from the CDRA Biennial Practice Conference 2009

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Creativity comes in many parts: There is the exhilarating rush of inspiration followed by the hard slog of application as you transform your idea into something real. To be truthful, there is often a lot of slog preceding the rush of inspiration too. When creativity is defined by an association with only the intoxicating moments of insights and illumination, the hard work lies forgotten. What is this 'hard work' required by creativity? Creativity requires that we become more agile in finding harmony from discord, more nimble in standing back, more supple in seeing, more sensitive in hearing, more confident in ourselves and present in the moment, more flexible in letting go, more lively in rhythm and more animated in form.

But why should we concern ourselves with creativity? Why should some fifty development practitioners from Africa, Asia, Australasia and Europe gather at the CDRA Biennial Practice Conference in South Africa, to explore what it takes for organisations not just to allow but to enable creativity - in our work, in our structures and in ourselves? Why, because without creativity we cannot begin to meet the developmental needs of the world. After all, finding new responses to local and global circumstances is, in essence, a creative process.¹

During the Biennial, we asked ourselves and each other, "*What do we need more of and what do we need less of for organisations to enable creativity?*" We shared our findings on the last morning in five presentations. This is some of what we came to:

Dissolve discord into harmony

"Our (voice group's) image of the Biennial was of a sanctuary, such as the Temenos garden, in which we were working. It is accommodating - of buddhas, dancing nuns, of exotic birds and birds with sore legs. It has formal rose beds and wild informal ground cover. It has precise still water pools and water that flows. It has many little paths, in most of which you can't see what is around the corner, but they are connected with each other. The sanctuary is real, though it is also disconnected from the real world, and it conceals divisions. You can only stay here a while, then you have to go back. Our work now is to take with us what we have learnt about harmony and discord, and take creativity with ourselves and into our organisations." [Francie Lund]

¹ The claim "development is creativity" emerged strongly from the first two Biennial Practice Conferences. In 2009, we explored what it takes for organisations not just to allow, but to enable, creativity. Each day, participants worked in one of five different art groups (painting, eurhythmy, tango, clay modelling and voice) so that, by directly experiencing a creative process, we could better understand its requirements. We also met daily in small home-groups to connect with self, mull over, crystallise and make sense of each day. In addition, the conference included a guided walk in nature, Open-Space, time for journaling, short plenary sessions, good food and informal conversations.

This is what we need more of: What if the sanctuary is the real world? What if our work is to find or create still, slow-paced places and spaces in our organisation? What if our work is to be more accommodating, more tolerant, more excited by difference and discord? When things arrange themselves, or we put them together in unexpected ways, discord dissolves into harmony. We experienced it during the voice group's presentation when standing shoulder to shoulder in five small circles, with each circle touching the centre circle, each person humming a note, our 'individual note'. It could have been noisy, embarrassing, discordant. It wasn't. It was more like finding ourselves unexpectedly part of a choir as it transforms a church hall into a great cathedral. We need organisations that embrace the full individual, that encourage the individual to become more fully themselves, to 'hum their note'. We need whole individuals to bring themselves into the collective.

This is what we need more of: We are being asked to reconsider the 'collective', the organisation, not as a mechanical, dead or death inducing thing, but as a living organism - and to relate to it as such. Nomvula Dlamini describes organisation as the invisible thing that is held between the different people who are part of it. Organisation is "invisible yet alive and also life giving....it brings to life something that has become dormant within those who participate in it....it is nourishing in the way that only something alive can in turn give life and help bring to life."

Stand back

The painting group's presentation challenged us to stand back, suspend self, change perspective, give more space and to be less judgemental. Rubert Van Blerk, who was in this group, elaborates on the quality of standing back: "Like a painting canvas, we learnt to keep standing back. It was similar on the walk in nature. We had the advantage of height to see the landscape before us and to gain a better perspective. Gaining understanding in this way is a discipline that is hard to keep in our current fast paced world and sector. And the understanding is not about trying to explain things. I often stood back during the painting quite unable to articulate what I was seeing. It was frustrating, but whenever I got back into the detail of painting, I was more sensitive and care-full."

This is what we need more of: Too often work presses our noses up against the canvas. Involved, deeply committed, often over-worked. It's easy to see why exhaustion, disillusionment and disenchantment follow. It's also easy to see why we sometimes 'just don't get it' - why our interventions are misguided or ineffectual. When we stop the doing long enough to stand back, listen, observe and really *see the painting*, a different kind of understanding *comes to you*. If we can avoid moving to define, or categorise or name things in the same instance we perceive them, if we do not move too quickly into thinking and making meaning, we are then more able to see things for what they are.

Be present

The beauty of trust
the centredness
sensitivity of interconnection
heightened awareness of intention
electricity of tenderness
economy of space
use the floor you always have it
I feel human again [Liz Swersky]

When doing the Tango, I learnt to forget the steps I had just been taught. I learnt not to anticipate, pre-empt, or predict the next move - but to be present (there, at hand, about to happen) with a fullness of self, with as much confidence and substance I could muster. Available but not easy! I learnt to listen for my partner's intention at a heart level: He could not push me around. He could not drag me around. He could not tell me where to go or what to do. When we were both there, fully present, fully ourselves, connected at our heart space. We did what we had set out to do, without even fully knowing what that doing involved or would lead to - and we danced, beautifully. For a moment.

This is what we need more of: The fundamentals of Tango were, well, fundamental! They were the group's reference point, and shared language...they were tools. Letting go of control does not mean anything goes. It does not mean a free for all. It means routing the fundamentals of your discipline through your being. It means knowing them well enough to forget about them. The ability to background the basic steps we had learnt was just as important as the steps themselves. By back-grounding the tools, we could foreground relationship, we could foreground intention - and we could use what we had: ourselves, each other, the music and the floor.

Hold and behold

A lump of clay was given to each of us during the clay modelling group's presentation. Mine became quite special to me after I had warmed it and shaped it into a ball. Then we were told to pass our ball to our neighbour. I was distracted from asking him not to change it in any way by my other neighbour who thrust her slightly smaller, slightly less spherical ball of clay at me. I began to make it mine. Once again we were asked to pass it on. After a few more minutes of this, they collected all the balls, worked them into bigger balls, stood in a circle in the centre of the hall and then, quite unceremoniously dropped them. Splat. Onto the floor.

Astrid von Kotze, who was in the clay group, wrote: "And as for the moment when you drop what you have formed (just let it go with all the pain and anguish!) and then pick it up and look at what it suggests - what better metaphor (experienced physically!) can there be for creative organisation!"

This is what we need more of: "Shut-up head!..when we give up a bit of control and silence the dominant part of our bodies, we can switch over and discover unknown curiosities and allow the other hand to take over and see what emerges. Suddenly emergence appeared as the coming together of imagination, the given material, and a process of prodding, holding, beholding and listening as I stepped back to see what appeared from my hands." [von Kotze]

Find form, freedom and rhythm

The eurhythmy group's presentation emphasised rhythm, flow, inclusion, form and an awareness of others. The group had explored the relationship between form and freedom in some depth. Liz Smith explained that instead of being held in tension, they found that form allows exploration, and quietens immobilising anxiety. "It encourages the freedom to do other than what is expected of you. That's when you're creative." Nomvula Dlamini was intrigued by her experience of form: "Working creatively demands understanding the difference between form and structure. Structure is rigid. It fixes and constrains. Form, on the other hand, is dynamic, flexible, elastic - form is alive, it allows for differentiation and enables

integration.” Rhythm has to do with beat as in heart beat, or in music. It is palpable, like a pulse. It has regularity and pattern. It is predictable. Rhythm offers a necessary familiarity that enables rather than constrains. It offers security but also brings us into movement.

This is what we need more of: To push boundaries, to think what hasn’t been thought before, to do the everyday differently, we need rhythm and form. We need organisational rhythms that provide familiarity *and* stimulate movement. We need “organisational forms that allow for different and separate actions to be integrated in the whole.” [Dlamini]

Hamba kakuhle

Can you begin to imagine yourself in an organisation that ran on these principles? Imagine using them to shape the organisation you are currently part of? Can you imagine an organisation welcoming discord because of the harmony it brings? Can you imagine an organisation that encourages still, quiet spaces and invites you to stand back from the endless doing? Can you imagine an organisation to which you would risk bringing your whole self? An organisation in which you could be fully present? Can you imagine an organisation that expects you to work with heartfelt intention *and* the ability to let go? Can you imagine all of this held together in a more rhythmic, less rigid form? If you can, if you are in any way inspired, we would like to say “hamba kakuhle²” as you continue on this creative journey.

² “Go well” – a Xhosa greeting.

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