CDRA – SEEDING A PRACTICE

SUE SOAL, OCTOBER 2021

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**1. ARRIVING – AWAKENING AN INNER LIGHT**

**Solely Because of the Increasing Disorder**

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In our cities of class struggle

Some of us have now decided

To speak no more of cities by the sea, snow on roofs, women

The smell of ripe apples in cellars, the senses of the flesh, all

That makes a man round and human

But to speak in future only about the disorder

And so become one-sided, reduced, enmeshed in the business

Of politics and the dry, ‘indecorous’ vocabulary

Of dialectical economics

So that this awful cramped coexistence

Of snowfalls (they’re not merely cold, we know)

Exploitation, the lured flesh, class justice, should not engender

Approval of a world so many-sided; delight in

The contradictions of so bloodstained a life

You understand.

**Bertolt Brecht**

*It’s August 1989 and I am driving my noisy Volkswagen Beetle down the N2 highway towards an unknown destination. My boss has suggested I join a residential course on organisation and I’m breathless with anxiety. It’s the first time I have ever driven so far on my own and the first time I have attended an event without the comforting presence of even one friend or comrade. I am 22 years old and eight months into my first job, and each minute that passes takes me further into the new.*

*South Africa is some years into a State of Emergency, the uprising continues unabated, and while there have been rumours of change, and even talks with Mandela who has been moved out of the cells to live in a house on prison grounds, violent repression of resistance continues. For activists in employment, much of our work happens through ‘service organisations.’ These are small scale focused initiatives that are largely locally based, often linked to the churches, and funded through international solidarity funding. They seek to meet welfare needs of black South Africans, or offer technical services, while simultaneously providing associative space and surreptitious resources from which to organise and make common cause.*

*In a month’s time, a peaceful march in Cape Town will be broken up violently, and a week after that a massive march will take the city, unmolested. It will be a triumph of peaceful people’s power and remembered as a turning point in the struggle against Apartheid. Three months later the Berlin Wall will begin its fall, heralding the end of the Cold War. Banks will foreclose on Apartheid debt and by February 1990 the unthinkable will have happened: the release of all political prisoners, unbanning of the liberation movements and the beginning of South Africa’s contested and violent four-year interregnum towards the end of Apartheid.*

*But none of this is known when I arrive, at lunch time, at the training centre which is a church-owned retreat in a semi-rural diocese. It is peaceful, comfortable and modest. One building houses the dining room and participants of all ages and races, activists from service-organisations all over South Africa and even a few from the southern African region, are laughing and chatting as they go in for their meal. It’s a mixed age, mixed race group, friendly and relaxed with a sense of common cause. The other building has a row of single rooms with shared bathrooms and a pay-phone at the end of the corridor. Attached to the bedroom wing is a large training room. It has comfortable chairs, a warm rug at its centre, flipchart boards at the front and a couch in the corner. Light streams through its open French doors and windows.*

*I enter this room to greet Allan Kaplan of CDRA. He, along with Hamo Hammond, will be running the course, called Facilitating Organisation Development (FOD). It is an initiative that by its closure ten years later, will have trained hundreds of people across southern Africa in a humanist and developmental approach to organisation and community development. It seeds an effective, warm, and thoughtful approach to social change and development, one that stretches across the southern African region and lives in the aspirations and practices of hundreds of people, even decades later. Allan turns from the flipchart board where he is writing up material, greets me and directs me to the dining room. I head off, steeling myself to meet the others, all of whom are older than me, and braver. In this very moment, my tiny life, so carried and shaped by these massive historical forces, is changing further. Changing towards a meeting with something that lives already inside of me.*

*The FOD course is a turning point in my world and life. Not a year before and disillusioned with the cynical instrumentalism of politics and activism, I had left the student movement seeking a ‘workshopper’s workshop.’ I wanted to understand what went into the social processes by which activism ran itself so that I could ‘do’ these processes better and also care better for the people who were so often hurt by the cruelly impersonal manner of political thinking and discipline.*

*And here it was.*

*In that week and the three week-long modules that follow, spread over the course of the next year we are introduced to an understanding of organisation and social process that strips away the mechanistic images we take for granted. We learn that organisation – social, human as it is – is organic; it is living process. We learn the difference between growth, change and development; the role of biography in coming to understand unique situations and the centrality of history, culture and context to the limits and possibilities of human endeavour. We learn that we are one with context – produced by and producing of, in a continuous stream of participation. We practice a bounty of methods for individual engagement, group facilitation, organisation development and community strategy, all as options to be deployed in service of these insights. And we begin to learn how to be dexterous in engaging these.*

*We learn how to listen and observe, how to care for human beings and the quality of social life, even while engaging in purposeful collective action. And we learn how to use our intellects in service of collective intent and the articulation of that (in other words, we learn how to synthesise).*

*We learn that it is all about being both* *purposive and responsive; and about cultivating the ability to be and remain open and responsive. And for this, reflection towards continuous awareness of and connection to the ‘now’ – to whatever is happening in any moment - is an essential practice. Reflection as part of strategy - as a means of staying connected to intention; reflection as learning about context and sustaining relevance; collective reflection as organisational strengthening; reflection as self-development. These are the core skills of practice.*

*By the end of the first week of FOD and echoing hundreds of other reached by this course, I declare that CDRA says what I ‘have always known yet not had the words to say.’ I emerge inspired, following this awakened thread that lives both inside of me – shining strongly – and, now, as a place and discipline outside of me. I have a path to follow, a trade to learn and new relationships that will endure for decades to come.*

**2. NURTURING – PURSUIT OF AN IDEAL THROUGH PRACTICE**

“To work with things is not hubris

when building the association beyond words;

denser and denser the pattern becomes–

being carried along is not enough.”

**from ‘Just as the winged energy of delight’ – Rainer Maria Rilke**

*It’s April 1994 and South Africa’s first ever democratic election has been a rapturous, peaceful success. It’s a miracle, literally. Following my thread, I have decided not to pursue working life in academia nor in government. Instead, I am one month into my new job at CDRA. My philosophy teacher, who is also a communist and former political prisoner, is unhappy: You are selling out to managerialism he tells me. No, no, I assure him, this place is precisely the opposite – it’s all about countering managerialism, through practice. He rolls his eyes.*

*CDRA was established to support a radical form of inner and outer transformation at a time in South Africa’s history when both kinds were sorely needed. This initiative was funded through the solidarity of people of the post-war welfare states of Europe, and alongside that, the vestiges of free philanthropy of the United States; the kind that promotes responsible agency and freedom in service of the common good. The impulse that inspired it was radical humanist and spiritual, defending and advancing a certain seriousness about agency, consciousness and justice, and what that asks of the individual and the organisation. In a time of very little freedom, CDRA offered a thoughtful, disciplined and free space.*

*CDRA was set up to be counter-cultural on all fronts, and to work with impeccable quality*. *Its task was to channel fidelity to an inner truth, an aspiration for the world that lived inside, and in so doing to support those it served to do the same.*

*Indeed, and in 1994, we might well say that we seek to counter managerialism, in practice. As former comrades peel off into government, including our own beloved co-Director Mzwai Msoki, and as the kool-aid of globalisation, the lean state and corporatisation trickles its way into people’s values and practices, CDRA shapes its post-Apartheid, post-Cold War identity on the fulcrum of practice. While for many, the grassroots struggle is over, CDRA persists in shaping its own mix of organisational consultancy and Freirean practice with organisations that seek to bring about change in the conditions of their lives and the lives of those they reach.*

*We promote and act out of a prefigurative ideal. That what you seek to bring into being shapes how you pursue it. It’s all about the ‘done deed.’ We seek to counter the crass material instrumentalism of our globalised world order.* *In our approach to reflective practice, pursuit of intention lies not in template, formula, recipe or even the colonising notion of ‘best practice,’ but in a lived and living approach that seeks to constantly unite means and ends, theory and practice. It is a thinking practice that works in the moment with what is emerging, taking direction from that, without imposing a method or outcome.*

*And the singular importance of cultivating and expressing a critical voice to this homogenising world is stressed.*

*In these years, CDRA pursues its humanist vision for organisation, and development, for grassroots initiatives and for global institutions with a conviction and ferocity that spreads our message far and wide. One of our teachers, David Scott, returns from a conference of the Association for Social Development (ASD), the contemporary embodiment of one of our founding inspirations, the National Pedagogise Institute (NPI), which was founded by Bernard Lievegoed. At this conference, they talked about being ‘points of light,’ an organic and inside-out view of change and what it means to work out of this view of social initiatives. This image stands in marked contrast to the grotesque engineering visions of scale that we are surrounded with, of pilots that somehow get enlarged, of the absurdity of ‘proof of concept’ (as if one thing that’s proven to work in one place might in any event be similarly successful in an altogether different context).*

*We decide that we are indeed one of the many ‘points of light’ seeking to do good in the world, and our work is to help others to do the same. And if, over time, there is a densification of those points to a point where they reach and interact with each other, where a discourse amongst like-minded practitioners emerges, where freedom to respond has been enlarged … well, well and good.*

*We are fortunate as our funders continue to support us to be an unusual and counter-cultural voice. Our annual reports become known for their incisive experience-based reflections on practice and on the world. They are dense and not always easy to follow, but they are also fresh, rooted in experience and in context, and beautifully laid out and illustrated. These are shared widely.*

*We convene gatherings of practitioners – peer-to-peer learning events; offer courses to fieldworkers; expand our notion of practice even to include those who manage the work of others. And all the while we foreground and valorise experience as a major source of knowing; of ‘capacity.’ We are invited into global organisations and onto global platforms, entering into definition of the instruments that this new world has called forth and streams out – capacity building, impact and evaluation – with a confidence borne of our solid grounding and belief in human agency, a growing collective reflective practice and lived experience of struggle and of fundamental change.*

*And at the centre of it all is our ongoing practice: responsive organisation development consultancy, itself a living practice under constant, regular and intentional refinement, and simultaneously promoting such living engagement with experience to those who seek our services. While retaining our grassroots base, we expand ever further, working nationally, regionally and globally with both grassroots organisations and others – policy makers, researchers, funders and sometimes even government.*

*In this time, in these few years around the turn-of-the-century and as the logic of New Public Management seeps into even donor-funded solidarity and philanthropy, clouds gather.*

*The harmonising effect of 2005’s Paris Declaration towards greater effectiveness of Aid has donors and colleagues and, increasingly, clients and partners, remind us that responsive practice must be made subject to the rigours of objective-oriented planning, and that the real job of practitioners such as us is to enable smooth journey towards those outcomes.*

*Simultaneously, and from that same source, the idea that services like ours should be paid for at ‘market-related’ rates begins to infuse itself into our work. Our founding offer to the world – of well-resourced and skilful organisational expertise to grassroots and service organisations – is increasingly eroded by the expectation that we should commercialise; be able to fund these services through fees, and be competitive. Our base becomes increasingly disillusioned – CDRA is now expensive – and we enter into agreements with donors to provide subsidised services to their selected beneficiaries – now called ‘partners’ – or to organisations that pursue particular ‘mainstreaming’ themes in their work, for example gender, or HIV. All of this reflects the success of the outcomes-based approach and simultaneously constrains our ability to offer bespoke support.*

*For those who can pay, the relationship is contested in other ways. We are meant to be helping our clients to meet the needs of the world and the immediate contexts in which they are embedded, but they are already under such pressure, so constrained to comply with the logics and frameworks above them that they lose their sovereign practice as response to reality. When our teammate James Taylor comes back from a trip in which he deliberately looked for the origin of the logic, he reports that at the top, there is nothing. We are in the vice-grip of a great, vacuous cipher, the cascaded logical frameworks go up endlessly into the sky, never finding any authority, only the exercise of a cold and bureaucratic power.*

*Internally, we struggle with all that is coming at us and all that we are becoming. We debate whether we should be heading ‘up’ the system (towards that empty top). We ask ourselves what it means to work ‘systemically’ and how this connects to communities of practice and to working in association with others (and whether associative work is different from partnership). We debate whether evaluation offers an opportunity to promote learning and hold an internal organisational space, or whether it is another mechanism to distract from the task of responding to lived reality. We circle – endlessly – the issue of technique and the usefulness and danger of codifying practice into method. And as we grow and recruit new staff members, so the shared value, aspiration and identity of our founding inspiration and history recedes and new approaches and values come into being inside of the organisation.*

**3. TURNING INTO SOMETHING WE DO NOT RECOGNISE**

“For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,

a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break”

**from ‘A ritual to read to each other’ - William Stafford**

*It’s June 2011 and I am at a conference in the Netherlands. It has been called by the major Dutch NGOs to discuss M&E – seeking harmonisation across approaches and simultaneously informing beneficiaries and the service industry that supports it of the new minimum requirements.*

*In a shocking moment, a senior bureaucrat from the Ministry responsible for development cooperation arrives and lambasts us from the stage. He tells us in these words that ‘the party is over’. The basis upon which Dutch NGOs receive their grants is about to be undone. That relic of the benign welfare state that trusted constituency identified organisations to work on behalf of the Dutch people with similarly identified organisations around the world, is to be replaced with a freshly conceived competitive performance-based system. Our Dutch colleagues are in tears. They grasp what is happening better than we do but, it turns out, only by a few months.*

*Already it is apparent that CDRA can no longer sustain itself in its current form of a subsidised service supported by core funding, and by November it has downsized from 18 staff to seven, shrinking to a core that will fundraise for and offer programmes, with parts of the building rented to others as a ‘centre’ for like-minded organisations and initiatives. I am amongst those who are retrenched, and as we all move apart in sorrow and reproach, we are left wondering what might have been other.*

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*The early days of freelance work can be so frightening. With no idea of what will come towards me, no colleagues to greet in the morning, no rhythms of action and reflection, I find myself wondering who I am. And if I am not CDRA, whether I even exist in the world of work. I begin a practice of journaling – a kind of retrospective diary - and every Monday morning I Iook back on the week that was and itemize all of my activity. I map this, reminding myself that even if I am not earning, I am working.*

*Over time I notice that much of my work consists in scanning the environment, reading things, and meeting and talking with colleagues about all we are seeing and experiencing. I am connecting and in correspondence. While I no longer have the bounded safety of CDRA’s regular homeweeks in which we did our organisational strategy, learning, reporting, and team building, traces of this practice pop up in new ways.*

*Over time some of my collegial relationships solidify into a structured and intentional reflective practice, several continuing to this day. We establish our purpose and devise small disciplines: methods and rhythms appropriate to our mutual interests and the time we have available. And as we pursue these commitments, so we grow our understanding of one another, our context and what is being asked of us in the world. We grow our practice. Focusing on this work, I notice that jobs do start coming in, and I am awash with gratitude. As I become more visibly busy a friend remarks jokingly that while others focus on marketing, I seem to focus on self-development, and somehow the work arrives. It turns out that this is actually true.*

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*Early in my freelance career I am tasked with undertaking an evaluation of a rural activist organisation with a long association with the South African struggle and a successful transition into facilitating contemporary land matters. The senior fieldworker and I drive the long distances between sites, discussing and arguing endlessly about strategy and practice, developing our thinking as we go along.*

*Nevertheless, and despite the fully contested and ultimately utilised evaluation findings that entail far-reaching changes to the strategy and practice of the organisation, the donor representative discards it as being ‘too positive.’ It’s not that he doesn’t concur with the findings or know that they are significant and being whole-heartedly implemented. It’s that this kind of critical yet participatory approach to evaluation no longer holds water with head office. And he knows that in order to stand a chance of renewing the grant he must submit something that is all the more abstract, disinterested and cold. He and I both know that this approach cannot possibly get right inside of the situation, cannot possibly yield the evidence that is so stridently demanded, yet what can we do? In any event this is his last-gasp attempt to retain the solidarity and humanity of the remarkable work he has undertaken for decades and soon after he takes early retirement, leaving the field and the web of relationships that he developed so carefully over decades. Ironically, all of what is now referred to as ‘social capital’ – the value he has built – is lost.*

*In these first five or so years after the world financial collapse of 2008, things are indeed bleak, and it seems to coincide with the end of the working lives of many activists and fieldworkers who found their calling in the local and global struggles of the 70s and 80s. There are retirement parties and sad farewells for people from civics and faith-based organisations. In South Africa it also heralds the end of a remarkable era of solidarity across race, class, culture and sector. Fieldworkers from the European and North American NGOs head for home, to their cabins and cottages in the woods and are seldom, if ever, replaced. Many carry with them a strong sense of failure.*

*Truly this is a time of hard endings and, in time, I come to see that CDRA’s transformation and down-sizing is but one manifestation of these times.*

**4. SLANTWISE, INTO THE 21st CENTURY**

“Where managerialism is the ism to make all isms wasms, the new 200 Dewey Decimal

The delirium of our age”

**from ‘End of the century – which is why wipers’ - Jeremy Cronin**

*In 2015 I am invited to support an NGO to develop a monitoring and evaluation framework that could help meet its donor obligations without compromising its purpose and identity. This turns out to be not such a simple job. To avoid succumbing to an inexorable logic, when even sympathetic donors and comrades speak increasingly in terms of ‘deliverable’ rather than mission, takes some hard thinking together.*

*Over a period of months and working iteratively and collaboratively with the whole staff of this organisation, we effectively put their M&E budget to work at developing both an M&E framework and an account of organisational identity and practice. As we think together, so the sense of practice grows, as the sense of practice grows, so something intelligible that can also fit into the ‘logic model’ grows.*

*By the end of the process, we have a Theory of Change that gives itself to a clear statement of purpose and values and a clear account of practice (occupying the ‘activities and outputs’ end of the logic model). Rather than simply listing activities as if they are self-evident (and ‘required’), ours is the opposite, offering definition, clarity on the relationship between the various activities, and the skills and qualities they entail. And with these commonly defined and understood, we can comfortably let go of defining outcomes in too much detail, safe in the knowledge that if we take good care of what goes into the work, what comes out of it is likely to land well. The adage that if you are seeking quality, look at the archer, not the target, does seem to fit here.*

*It’s interesting that the donor that had required the framework is so enthusiastic about the detail and rigour in theirs, that he asks if he can use it with other partners as an example of what he is actually wanting, when he asks for an M&E framework.*

*In the years that follow I become involved in supporting many project-based initiatives in various ways (and along the way I stop referring to my clients as organisations, as they are not always that). These are no longer bounded NGOs, their dimensions visible to the naked eye. They are vast projects, that span organisations, sectors, continents, scales and disciplines. Several are connected to academia’s attempts to secure resources for scholarship, and those that are not academic have a heavy emphasis on knowledge production as commodity.*

*Throughout there are people seeking to make meaning of the world they have entered, to cohere and find value within it, to coin new understandings of the new forms of organising they are a part of, and to do that in ways that preserve, advance and express agency. And they are working in a hard terrain: these vast projects seem to defy organic development of relationship, agency and voice: they arrive ready-made with log-frames, indicator frameworks and commitments to which people are held accountable, and oftentimes thought through to absurd levels of detail. These pre-imagined empires seem blind to the idea of living, responsive practice, assuming that action can be preprogrammed, separated from intelligence and contextual reality, and simply run – ‘implemented.’ Resources go into expensive specialized consulting fees, knowledge ‘production’ (as technical harvest), travel and contract managers. There is little time, money or energy left for what used to be called ‘the work’.*

*In these years, I have engaged with many clients as projects. They are almost always greater than the organisations that make them up, and certainly than those at the centre tasked with ‘coordination.’ Monstrous, overblown progeny of the accountancy imagination, these projects arrive ready-made, giant-born and under-resourced where they need it most: their sense of purpose, meaning and the ability to lay down memory, not to mention simple organisational ability, and the time and money to make it happen. They are devoid of the vitalizing practices of reflection – indeed there is ‘no time’ for this. The idea that we need time space and resources to organise ourselves has been thrown to the wind, and if it is not planned for at the start, it is virtually impossible to bring it in later.*

*These essential qualities are provided by these participants in the project machine – generally at night, on Sunday evenings (the new start to the working week) and at dawn. They are paid for not by ‘the project’ but in the harried exhausted surrender, the hardening of idealism and shrinking sense of what is possible. I am reminded of what I learnt about gender and organisational life, that like in traditional families, what was considered women’s work is also what is most often invisible, and least valued, often unpaid.*

**5. SEEKING THE WORK, PURSUING A PRACTICE**

“The work of the world is common as mud.Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.But the thing worth doing well donehas a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.Greek amphoras for wine or oil,Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museumsbut you know they were made to be used.The pitcher cries for water to carryand a person for work that is real.”

**from ‘To be of use’ - Marge Piercy**

*Ending this reflection, I find myself asking how we work in these times. I recall a moment at what was to be CDRA’s third and last Biennial Practice Conference in 2009, where, fresh out of the 2008 world financial crash, we anticipated the changes to come. One participant, close to tears, shared his dream for a retreat for developmental practitioners, a place to withdraw completely from the grueling necessities of the world, recharge, remind ourselves of who we are and re-emerge renewed. A kind of global expression of the reflective part of CDRA, imagined as a place of safety.*

*And at the close of the event we were asked to express all that we had learned in the form of a brief phrase or gesture. My group, out of discussion of the darkness to come, joined arms in a close circle, headed by the phrase ‘Stay Close,’ somehow conveying the need to continue working associatively and in community.*

*Twelve years later, I wonder how we have done. Much of the funded associative space of old has closed, yet there are those who persist in engaging in reflective practice that simultaneously grows community and keeps the work in the world alive. We retreat, and reflect, in order that we may go out into the world refreshed to meet the work once more. The ‘points of light’ exist, somewhat less formalized, less brick and mortar than was CDRA at its peak, but still alive. And while this undertaking of what is essentially voluntary and self-funded practice-development may not be sustainable – and is especially hard to reproduce in younger practitioners - there are signs of an emerging practice that is embedded in institutions and resourced as such.*

*There are research projects that build in collective meaning-making, and reward writing that goes beyond dry technical accounts of outcomes achieved. Synthesis has returned as a prized and sought-after faculty. Organisations and projects that manage to secure resources for reflective learning, and to have that accompanied, are seeking to develop habits and rhythms that enable them to read their environments and respond appropriately, in an ongoing way. Some secure facilitation support that stretches members’ sense of what is possible, and old and new skills are developed. And as this happens, so it settles that reflection and learning is also a way of cohering, of building community and common understanding. And in so doing, our ability to work in a living and purposeful way is replenished. And in that way, the good we seek in the world is extended just a little bit further.*

*Young people who were inspired by this practice have become the new bosses. People are efficient, and time-savvy in a way that the practitioners of old may not have always been. But their professionalism is not cold.*

*In our cultural and political landscape, there are heightened levels of awareness of the need for kindness and self-care. And even some recognition that this need can be met, in part, collectively. That the atomization of our times does not always have to reduce to individuals taking care of their needs in isolated and (literal) clinical ways. The task of being human, together, in world that is fragmenting its humanity and destroying its own planet, home, has never been more urgent. Perhaps we have to take our cue from Jeremy Cronin who, in the same poem quoted above, suggests that we should ‘leave pessimism for better times.’ I am seeing how the ills of the world are simultaneously a cause for both despair and courage. There are people – many of whom work in this sector - who won’t take it lying down and, increasingly I hear the language and working values that inspired me and were so distinctively articulated by CDRA, emerging from the language, values and practices of those I come to work with.*

*It is true the conditions are hard and the rules exacting. Yet the demand for specificity is not without its own consolations of more precise thinking. The longing for learning and space to do that well remains a persistent call and even the bureaucracies, creators of the machine that now crushes those within it – including its own architects, are finding spaces for expression of this life. In this small land of responsive practice – modest, relational, local – we continue to experience points of light and inspiration on the margins.*

*Life will not stop living, and the need to frame it on these terms – organic, responsive and non-mechanistic – remains as strong as it was all those years ago when I entered FOD and was introduced to this sensibility.*

*And as CDRA comes to the close of its own life, so there are traces of it all around – in the language of the new generation, in the pockets of responsive practice that project managers have become increasingly skillful at infusing into their proposals, and in the aspirations that are expressed by those entering the work. This, for me, is where the work lies and what offers direction for those of us who seek to offer fresh and contemporary responses to the world as it is. And it is this that continues to inspire me – a reflective practice that gathers what has been done, learns from that, and turn then to face the new.*

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