

**Emerging out of Goethe:  
Conversation as a Form of Social Inquiry**

(Originally published in Janus Head, Volume 8.1, *Goethe's Delicate Empiricism*, Trivium Publications,  
2005)

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Conversation as a Form of Social Inquiry**

“What is more valuable than gold?  
Light.  
What is more precious than light?  
Conversation”

J.W.von Goethe

***A Prologue: Biblical Professions***

*Once upon a time, about two years ago, I was traveling between Amsterdam and San Francisco. Sitting next to me on the flight was a young, fresh-faced American lass, keeping her head above water just this side of obesity. I had no interest in talking, seldom do on planes, but I was soon pinned to my seat with a vacuous barrage of questions which got me wondering whether suing the airline company for harassment was within the bounds of possibility. My monosyllabic answers were no deterrent; if I wasn't going to talk, she was. Twenty years old, a college student from Atlanta, very Christian in a particular kind of way, like she was aiming for a medal or maybe just an overdue citation in the Book of Books. I heard about the youth group she belonged to, the distance she put between herself and the masses of unwashed students who stalked the streets of America, the good works she did in the name of all that is holy. Somehow I couldn't put all this together with Amsterdam, and eventually inquired, summoning all my courage to engage at all, what she had been doing in Amsterdam.*

*I came over with a group, she said, to do missionary work. (Indeed, I had seen the other fresh-faced young Americans in her party, but had not for a moment thought of them as missionaries.) How long were you there, I asked. Ten days. And whom were you ministering to, who were you trying to convert? The prostitutes. You mean, the women in the windows of the red light district? Yes. You mean you went to the red light district? Of course, regularly, that's where we went every day. You mean you came all the way from America, for ten days, to try to get the women of the red light district to mend their ways? Yes. And did they? I don't know, I think they listened.*

*She thinks they listened. I tried to put the hard-bitten cynicism of the whores together with this rosy-cheeked presumptuousness. This facile condescension together with the outlook that must*

*come from having seen into the heart of weakness and inescapable instinct. I couldn't do it. I tried to imagine her wandering those streets, speaking with them. She thinks they listened. She, of course, had no need to listen, she came already kitted out with all the answers she needed, like a deviant Barbie doll. I felt my anger rise, tempered into bitter-sweetness by my delight at the sheer madness of the effrontery. Later, when she discovered that I came from South Africa - which she clearly had severe difficulty in placing - she asked me, in these words, "how is religion in South Africa?". I felt that same heady mix of anger and delight tickle the insides of my skin like a cocktail; here indeed was a kind of ludicrous banality that had me staring at everyday life as if into the furthest reaches of a science fiction fantasy. I could not reply; I tried gently to disengage.*

*But later, as the flight rolled the earth over far beneath our feet, I wondered whether I had had the grace to really listen. What did I really know of her, or of the whores, for that matter. I pretended to practice an art of social development, this was my trade, yet I was so quick to judge. Or was I? Was this really judgment, or an accurate assessment of the underlying "activity of soul" which gave rise to what was manifesting next to me, and on the streets I had left behind? Was I being presumptuous about my own powers of observation, or had I developed a discipline of observation which allowed me access to inner realities?*

*I wasn't to be left with this privilege of "scientific" distance. As the plane was landing, she asked me if I would accept, as a gift, a pocket version of the gospels; when I shook my head she tried to force the book onto me, a pleading look in her eyes, like a calf being led to slaughter. I said no, reiterating this many times, with all manner of explanation. She could not accept the refusal. She asked me, eventually, to accept the gift even if only for her sake. I said I would simply leave the book on the plane. I had no wish to aid or abet any part of this woman's fantasy. Tears filled her eyes; I could do what I liked with the book, she said, but please take it, for her sake.*

*Whatever my judgments, whatever my observations, I no longer had the luxury of remaining the uninvolved observer. Either way, whether I accepted or rejected the book, I would have an effect on her, on her life. I could not read this social phenomenon without acting; I was drawn in, a participant in the life I was witnessing. And what would my decision say about my own life, how would I read that, how would the reading change?*

*She, and her relationship with the whores, and with me, and mine with hers, and theirs, were all one, and were not simply as flowers of the field, or animals of the bush. I was intricately, intimately involved; I had to learn to read myself. Or was it always like this, that the very nature*

*of accurate observation implied intimate involvement with consequence?*

*And what was I to do about the book?*

## **Investigating a Social Phenomenon**

### **The Idea**

Many of us talk very easily and sometimes glibly about the necessity of adopting a qualitative approach to social development, but we are seldom precise enough to enable this kind of statement to stand its ground. I want to explore qualitative thinking in practice, to try to understand it by using it, because for those of us working in the social sphere, it forms a radical departure from the more conventional quantitative and analytic approach.

As a social development practitioner, I work with groups, organisations, communities, interpersonal relationships, trying to facilitate movement, unblock stuckness, enable a 'letting go' so that change and development is encouraged. I work in the social sphere, more specifically within that part of it which is called the development, or aid, sector - working with questions of poverty, marginalisation, and inequality; the arena of 'civil society'. I regard social situations as organic (alive) phenomena. I try to understand that which I'm working with - and am part of - qualitatively, which is a different way of pursuing the work from the prevailing search for cause and effect, from reduction into parts which we attempt to control and predict. Social phenomena are complex and emergent, not linear but simultaneous. I search for a way of appreciating and facilitating, rather than explaining and controlling. This search leads me to the phenomenological (qualitative) methodology developed by JW von Goethe.

Being alive, every organism, every social situation, is continually reproducing, recreating itself, constantly metamorphosing; as it lives, it and its environment transform through ongoing interaction, and the organism is never at rest, always in change, always in a state of becoming. This is what it means to be alive - the organism creating the organism anew from out of itself and its interactions with its (inevitably) changing context. So the 'character' of the organism is continually evolving; almost as a

'narrative thread', the life story of the organism. How then would we 'read' for such character, or what we may term the organising - or formative - relationship which informs, which *forms*, the phenomenon in question? It can only be qualitatively. The more analytical, quantitative approach seeks explanation in terms of cause and effect, which also seems to "take the form of saying that something is really an instance of another, different thing"<sup>i</sup>. A qualitative approach would be one that seeks to portray an organic phenomenon by observing each part as expressive of its character - which we may apprehend *by reading its gesture*. Every organism, at any particular moment in its life, *is present* in the world in a particular way, and that *way of being present, how* the parts *belong* together, can be understood as a particular gesture, like the expression on a loved one's face - a gesture of consciousness. Such gesture cannot be weighed or measured, or analysed - it disappears like mist before such approaches - but it can be 'read'. It can be read qualitatively, as a quality. Not a sense perception, but a perception of how the sensory 'parts' *belong* together, as one 'whole'. As Steve Talbot puts it: "... a quality is always the expressive shape of some inner gesture, a gesture of consciousness"<sup>ii</sup>. This is the essence of Goethe's 'delicate empiricism'.

But Goethe worked with nature. Social phenomena are even more complex than natural ones. Particularly because they entail the element of self-consciousness. We are so immediately involved, so undeniably a part of what we are attempting to understand. It's something like this: the city of Sao Paulo, Brazil, where I am writing this piece, is celebrating 450 years of being. As part of that celebration, a cultural centre down the road from where I'm staying gave each of 450 artists an old suitcase, a replica of those original traveling companions which are now antique - evocative suitcases made of wood and cardboard - and invited the artists to work with it however they wished, to capture some essence of their city. To render artistically a reading of the evolving character of their city, as I understand it. The result is one of overwhelming inspiration. The level of creativity, dedication, and rigor is breathtaking. Having come to know this vast and rumbling city of tens of millions of people somewhat, I am struck by how much of what I saw resonated with my own understanding of the city, and took it further. There is no one final truth, but each portrayal felt true, some more penetrating than others; and as I walked around, the many presentations of the city's evolving character interacted so that one whole and complex image emerged. Many individual pieces struck me forcibly, one most of all, a simple piece not even aesthetically pleasing. The suitcase was closed; a hand had been sculpted gripping the handle, clearly trying to open the case. The hand merged into an arm which swept up

and back over the lid of the suitcase, to end attached to the lid itself, as if emerging from the inside of the case. Where it 'entered' the lid, a small map of Brazil had been affixed to the lid. That was all, but it was everything. The city trying to open itself, unlock its own character, investigate its own essence. Not a paradox, but the nature of the task itself.

In my work with social organisms I try to do this, and facilitate others to do it. With varying degrees of success. The more instrumental, quantitative approach to the social - reducing complexity in the attempt to manipulate fragmented pieces - does not appeal; neither can it assist development, if the social is a living whole. I want here to explore one such process of social inquiry, facilitated a short time ago, in order to begin to understand a different way of thinking.

### **The Phenomenon**

In the south there are so-called 'developing' nations; in the north (or west, depending on your nomenclature), nations are 'developed' (whatever this may mean, with its implications of stasis and completion). The developing nations are poor and marginalised; also inefficient, sometimes lazy, unfortunately corrupt and severely lacking in capacity. The developed nations are rich and powerful, occupying centre stage; also efficient, effective, industrious and civilised. So at least the myth has it, not that anyone would ever own up to their role in propagating it. Of course there are reasons for this situation: historical, cultural, economic, political, geographical, agricultural, the dynamics of power and the vicissitudes of greed and survival. Anyway, there are those in the developed world who 'aid' those in the developing world, sometimes authentically, sometimes with ulterior motives. There is an entire 'industry' - note the word, we will come back to it later - that has grown up around the concept of eradicating poverty. With little success; poverty is a condition of the surfeit of wealth, after all - or, as Thomas Frank<sup>4</sup> notes, poverty is profitable - and it is unlikely that the help given will ever equal the wealth removed. But this is irony, even cynicism, and while it points to the overwhelming complexity of the situation, and gives the lie to the simplicity of the story I have just presented, I don't want to 'go there' right now. Lets stick to the myth of modernisation. Given this, the idea is to develop the merely developing so that poverty (whether material or otherwise) may be, if not eradicated at least reduced. Once again, one can read this as cynical comment or genuine challenge. Actually it is both; lets leave it there for awhile.

Given the situation, there has grown up over the years a plethora of development organisations, and a cadre of development practitioners, in and from both north (west) and south, of many different and sometimes contradictory persuasions, who are dedicated to the cause. It is with these organisations and practitioners that we are concerned here. With the genuine, committed, authentic and dedicated ones, those who really are trying to work for 'the good'. (Though we may fall into the trap of modernisation, lets rather go with the benefit of the doubt and accept that there is a better society - for all of us, though - to work towards).

The idea, then, is to assist in the development of the social sphere, the social fabric, society as such, call it what you will. Traditionally, for a number of generations, under the all pervasive influence of the 'old' sciences and the great engineering successes of the last century, the approach to social development has been an instrumental one: Social situations, and people, are things which can be developed by analysing the variables, separating and controlling them, predicting the inputs needed to realise desired outputs, inputting such inputs and reaping the predicted outcome. Thus the development industry viewed change as a controllable and measurable event. Thus arose the paper driven bureaucracy, with its uniform and simplifying approach, with its assumption that targets can be met if the right inputs are made and procedures followed.

But the social did not respond as expected; intransigently, sometimes it did not react at all or, perversely, many situations worsened immeasurably. A different approach was sought by some. This has given rise, also under the influence of the 'new' sciences - relativity, complexity theory and all their companions - to a more 'human' approach to the social. Development is a living process and may be facilitated and guided but not engineered, we work with respect for that process, and for its many parameters, we approach gently and try to cause no harm, we recognise that development is about qualitative transformation and not quantitative product, we understand that relationships lie at the heart of all phenomena (thus too implicating the practitioner) and that phenomena develop in complex and non-linear ways which we can learn to anticipate but not predict, perhaps at best guide but never control. We respect human freedom not in theory but as the very essence of a social practice. We understand change as erratic, dependent on context and underlying energy, involving complex social transformation in tune with cultural realities, and we work to free situations and

release peoples' energies to respond to intricate challenges and demands, rather than create systems for managing change.

We see this as a developmental, as opposed to an instrumental, approach to social change. Though it remains alternative rather than mainstream, the preserve of NGOs working on the ground as opposed to the bureaucratic apparatus, there are many in the development arena who are increasingly convinced of its legitimacy, many even within the bureaucratic apparatus itself; even here, the rhetoric is now all about quality as opposed to quantity, the human/social process as opposed to merely material product. Yet, despite the rhetoric, despite our increasing understanding of the social, and despite the many practitioners in all parts of the sector who attempt to adopt this change in approach, the prevailing culture of the 'industry' remains the instrumental one. Indeed, procedures get ever tighter, the focus on measurable goals and outcomes gets ever more intransigent, and the human project remains shackled to the chains of attempted manipulation and control. And the social development project remains ... how else can I put it ... anti-social.<sup>5</sup>

What is informing this phenomenon? O', we could of course advance many ideas, based on sociological, psychological, organisational, economic, political theories. But can we really try to get under the skin of this phenomenon, as it were, to discover the 'narrative thread', the 'whole story', that 'more' to which we referred above? Can we read the gesture of this phenomenon to get at the intrinsic energy, or formative idea, emerging as the phenomenon? Can we portray, in all complexity, rather than attempt to explain, which must always reduce. Instead of interposing theory between ourselves and the phenomenon, can we see it directly, on its own ground?

## **The Situation**

We are twenty-something development practitioners from southern, west and east Africa, meeting for five days on the coast just south of Durban, South Africa. This is an annual gathering of (mostly) highly experienced practitioners all of whom attempt to pursue this 'alternative' social development practice. The group, comprising in total about 35 people who sometimes come and sometimes don't, has been meeting in this way for about eight years. The idea is to get away from the conventional conference



format with its keynote speeches and presentations and resolutions to a conversation format which encourages depth and the free emergence of whatever insights individuals personally arrive at; there is no attempt at common resolution. The idea is a developmental exploration of the particular theme focused on in a particular year. Also, and as part of the process, a real meeting between colleagues. This annual gathering is called the OD Event (OD standing for Organisation Development).

This year, the frustration experienced by these practitioners in their daily work has given rise to the desire to explore the phenomenon described above. Not every participant would describe the issue, or even their own practice, as I have above; there is rather an acute and painful despair about what is going on. A colleague and I are the facilitators of this year's process. Once again, perhaps no-one else would describe the process and method as I will below. We were attempting to enable the conversation - peoples' authentic interaction - to come to the fore; for this, facilitation had to be as unobtrusive as possible.

### **The Method**

At best we are attempting to engage in a free but focused, intelligent conversation. This means that there is no predetermined or even expected outcome; the emphasis is on the free emergence of observations and ideas from the complexity of conversational, personal, contextual and conceptual interaction. At the same time, the process is not simply 'left to happen'; it is guided, facilitated, encouraged to develop, to deepen, to enlighten. We are investigating a living phenomenon, and our conversation must be as alive as our subject.

So what method informs our facilitation? For, though hopefully unobtrusive, there is method in the madness, design in the emergence, order in the chaos. But the method does not consist of techniques, tools, exercises, procedures; using these, the resultant conversation would become a contrived construction. Rather, there are some underlying principles which inform the process. There are, really, no frameworks or other determinants outside of experience and understanding. Can this be called a method at all? In writing of a similar approach to architecture, Christopher Alexander notes: "... this method ... cannot be used mechanically ... what it does is not so much to teach us processes we did not know before, but rather opens up a process in us, which was part of us already".<sup>6</sup>

What do we understand about the underpinnings of a 'phenomenological conversation'; or, perhaps, of an 'organic conversation'? Our task is to ensure open, free and continuous evolution of the process of conversation; to enable an intelligent reading to emerge. To support and ensure that there is human warmth - which is different from agreement - between participants; to challenge tendencies towards superficiality, jargon, the glib and fast conclusion or the stuckness of a relationship or pattern. Keep the conversation alive and open; yet focused, and always intent. Be awake to where the process is going, where it's been, how it's coming into being. Anticipate, and find the right question to move the conversation on. Work with participants to make meaning of the conversation; be able to draw threads together, help weave the forming tapestry. Prepare thoroughly, with respect to overall design and with respect to the substance of the conversation to be explored; but this is different from planning and developing procedures and set routines to follow. Be aware that anything may emerge. Be ready to let go.

Keep the conversation focused on *what people actually observe*, do not allow it to veer off into abstraction, into theoretical conjecture. Through such focused observation, we may be able to build our imaginative faculties, enhance our seeing in ways which allow us to, as Bortoft describes it, *understand* rather than explain: "... explanation evidently takes the form of saying that something is really an instance of another, different thing. Understanding, on the other hand, by seeing something in the context in which it belongs, is the experience of seeing it more fully as itself. Instead of seeing it as an instance of something else, it becomes more fully itself through being seen in its context. Thus, understanding is holistic whereas explanation is analytical".<sup>7</sup> Always keep the conversation's eye on the phenomenon under discussion.

More specifically, we use the conversation to enhance our thinking so that we may see through - from that which immediately presents itself to the outer senses - to the relationships and movements which also are there; so that the phenomenon is apprehended not only as finished product but in its 'process of becoming'. And through observing its process of becoming, we try to read the phenomenon's *gesture*, the 'action' through which it expresses its meaning, its formative story, its "indication of intention". As Nigel Hoffman notes: "This is not to accord (all organic phenomena) a human-like intelligence, but it is also not to deny that a certain intelligence is working in (life's) formative processes".<sup>8</sup> To read for the formative idea; to understand *how* all the

parts *belong* together.

There is also the dilemma that those who undertake the exploration also participate, even as they converse, in the phenomenon under discussion. So the conversation should include a measure of self-awareness, the observation and growing understanding of ourselves. We should emerge from the conversation 'enlarged' on a number of levels. In the end, this is the only 'desired outcome' which we hope to 'achieve'.

### **The Process**

A brief description of the process - no content - as it emerged over the five days, to appreciate the manner in which the conversation, to follow in the next section, emerged.

Mornings began with a different group each day presenting their "take" on the previous day's process in a humorous, imaginative sketch. After this, a short movement exercise - from the art of social eurythmy, and led by a social eurythmist - to enliven senses, imaginative faculties and a sensibility for underlying relationship. This was followed by an open conversation taking the previous day's discussion further. Thereafter every morning comprised an exercise in observation of different aspects of the phenomenon under discussion, followed once again by open conversation.

Every afternoon began with a further exercise in social eurythmy, followed by a time of individual reflection stimulated with a question posed by the facilitators; the question was always developed on the basis of the morning's discussions. Throughout the discussions there was a continuous movement between individual, variable small group and plenary reflections. In the late afternoons there were 'home group' discussions - these groups remained intact throughout the week - based once again on a question which had emerged as relevant through the day's proceedings; this was followed by a closing plenary conversation (which was continued - after the unconscious processing of sleep - the next morning). Thus observation, alternating with exercises in imaginative sensibility, and sleep, bounced from individual to small group to plenary, always in pursuit of more conscious appreciation.

On another level, we moved from observation of broad context to observation of

practice within the development sector to observation of self to observation of our own practice, thus enabling the phenomenon to stand vividly before us as we built our understanding of the whole.

In what follows, there is no attempt to go in depth into these various processes and the reflections and insights which arose from each. I only want to follow the essentials of the flickering flame of conversation as they emerged.

## **The Conversation**

### *Day One*

On the first morning, partly as a way of getting a first take on the phenomenon as a whole, partly as a way of gauging whether the topic has enough energy in it to focus our conversation, and partly in order for the group to meet each other again after having worked separately during the intervening year, the following question is posed: "Out of your working experience in the last months, what do you see in the world out there that gives you pause?" People are asked to sit quietly for awhile and write a two page reflection on this question, trying to distill the essential elements of their experiences. Then, each person is asked to read three of the scripts, and in the resultant groups of four, each person's paper is responded to by everyone else, by way of really trying to 'listen' to the others' experience and to characterise (portray) it in a central image, or question, or observation, often delivered as a metaphor or image or word picture. The person in question then responds, and together with the group comes to deeper clarity about their own experience. After each person has had their turn, the group converses freely about what has arisen as a whole. In the subsequent plenary all these experiences are used as the starting point for an open conversation.

Obviously a great deal emerged; as with all the conversations on which I will report, it is impossible to capture everything, certainly not individual's insights, and only with difficulty an overall impression. But for our purposes here, the central theme which emerged was the domination of 'resources' - largely financial - over human interaction. Narrow and short term economic 'logic' had achieved overwhelming hegemony over more human, developmental and social concerns; our work was governed by the concepts of quantity, the rigidity of managerial accountability procedures and the power of those who delivered the resources. By the end of the conversation, we all feel

challenged by the compromises under which we appeared forced to work.

Emerging out of this feeling, the facilitators pose the following question for the afternoon's individual reflection time: ""Working under conditions of severe constraint, what inner response is needed to let go of outcomes but not of intent?"

Later, conversation reveals that the question has struck a nerve, and an almost palpable feeling of personal responsibility has gotten everyone thinking in a far deeper and more consequent way than they had initially.

The question we then pose, to the home groups at the end of the afternoon, is: "Are these constraints, which are giving us pause, indicating a broader global reality which we are working within, and what is that?" Evidently yes, though no-one can describe what it is. But by the end of the first day, everyone is fired by the need to research the question. People are engaged on a whole other level; they are *present* to the phenomenon.

### *Day Two*

The morning's conversation is long and intense; much had been stirred the previous day. Gradually, though, the focus shifts from what we are actually seeing to more abstract and theoretical conjectures about what is happening and what could be done. To bring us back to observation, we propose looking in more detail at the development sector. So we suggest that the group divides into five smaller groups, and that each group take one player in the aid industry - the trainer, say, or the evaluator, the consultant, the donor, the fieldworker - and look at what that person actually does (that is, not what they say they do but how they actually occupy their time) and then take the essence of their discussion and turn it into a role play, or short sketch, for the rest of us to observe. This way, we try to bring a very complex and global situation happening in all its complexity 'out there', into the room, so that we can all observe at first hand the phenomenon as it plays itself out.

So discussions are duly had, and the role plays performed. After each role play we discuss what we have seen, trying to deepen our observations, to make meaning of the situations we're observing. The facilitator's role becomes very important here; people

tend to focus excessively on detail, to go off on tangents about their own experiences, to become very emotional as the situations sketched provoke increasing outrage (also humour of course). We help the group to probe, ask itself helpful questions, penetrate the substance of the sketches, see the linkages between the different sketches as they are performed, see the 'coming-into-being' of the situations portrayed and not just the end result, identify the significant relationships, read the gestures of the situations, separate the essential from the non-essential.

As the role plays proceed, the phenomenon under investigation reveals more and more of itself, palpably, so that people are viscerally affected. In the subsequent conversation one dominant image gradually comes into focus. It seems that every 'professional' working within the system is constantly drawn away from their stated - and quite likely honest - intent, towards enacting an agenda that is not of their making. This is not conscious; indeed, it is the lack of consciousness, the lack of awareness of what they are doing, that is so chilling to the observers. Despite the best of (humanistic) intentions, the unspoken habits of the sector hold sway. It can be in a remote rural intervention - where a fieldworker forgets the people she is working with as she gets embroiled in a cell phone argument with the director of her organisation, sitting in an office many miles away, perhaps on another continent. It can be in an organisational setting - where the planning logic of focusing on 'impact', deliverable programme, quantifiable product or intended outcome draws attention towards what is not (the abstract) and away from what is (the actual, the process). It can be found where the demands of bureaucratic procedure take precedence over the logic of that which the practitioner is working with. It reaches up to the most influential institutions - where the remote abstractions of Millennium Development Goals entitle the intimacy of human interaction to disappear completely, enabling the general to displace the particular.

Throughout the role plays, our observations reveal one dominant trend: thinking appears to trivialise. Critical engagement is absent, everyone seems inattentive, unobservant; no-one intends to ignore what is in front of them but everyone ends up doing so; and, as already said, it is precisely their lack of intent that is so striking. Everyone appears to be working to someone else's unspoken agenda. The image emerges of the story of the Trojan Horse. Development practitioners, of all ilks, as the huge wooden horse bearing hidden soldiers into Troy. As if there is an agenda, an intent, being carried hidden, unconscious, by the practitioner, by the development professional; and whose agenda is this, and what agenda is it? This is not about

conspiracy theories; no-one is in charge of anything here; there seems to be something being carried by these people, and what is it that is running through all of these characters, through all of our world? Something is being carried that we are not taking responsibility for. There is a sense of absence rather than presence. And this possibility of being so ... *unheeding* ... seems to be aided and abetted by the numbing prevalence of bureaucratic logic.

In the afternoon, we pose the following question for individual reflection: "What can I do (practice) to stay awake in the face of relentless routine?" Once again this question provokes profound and stirring reflections, and brings participants back to themselves and their own responsibility, as well as gaining further insights into the phenomenon at hand.

The question posed for late afternoon home-group discussion reads: "There seems to be an intention playing itself out, unconsciously for us, through our activities. Can we begin to imagine what this intention might be and think about how it uses us as players. To assist with such reflection, think of the following three possible angles - what are the rewards that this intention gets; to what is it accountable; and how does this intent conceive those it is acting upon?"

This question proves very difficult to come to grips with for many participants, but as they engage, it works almost as a provocation to a far more intense reflection than any previous. Emotions are deeply stirred; growing awareness and insight are increasingly painful, yet relished. It is as if we are waking up.

### *Day Three*

In the very lively and complex morning conversation arising out of reflections on the day before, an interesting ray of understanding shines through the room when someone notes that, in terms of the previous afternoon's question about possible rewards, the diminishing of uncertainty and unpredictability is a huge, if unconscious and unintended, reward. We are increasingly expected to deal with a world where the only certainty is change, and do we perhaps at least collude with this unspoken and invisible 'intent' when it offers us a way out of ambiguity and uncertainty, a reliable *status quo* once more, even though this go against what we have learned about the non-linear nature of change. This may not yet be an accurate distillation of the intent of the

system, says someone else, but it certainly points to our susceptibility to such 'reward'.

While appreciating the point, I, as facilitator, feel myself becoming unhappy with the incremental use of the concept of 'system' in the discussions. We seem to be characterising the aid industry not simply as a system, but as 'the system', as in the kind of dependent conspiracy theories which I am trying to avoid. When we slip into speaking of 'the system', I note, we are slipping into a different discourse. The question posed the evening before was not referring to 'the system' as in a helpless take on conspiracy theory, but rather referred to the idea, emerging from our discussions, that there is a an *activity* here which is playing itself out in all of the role players. The way this 'activity' seems to work, as we saw yesterday, is to get people to focus on the trivial rather than on the real issue at hand; to fall into glib reaction. But what is this activity, this 'formative undercurrent'? The system is a thing, a product, a convenient coat hanger, an abstraction. Focusing on the *intention*, on the other hand - not 'the intention of the system' but 'the intention forming the system' - is to focus on living activity; such intention is a verb, a doing, which produces the phenomenon, which becomes the phenomenon's *gesture*, and it is this that we are trying to read.

The distinction is a fine one, subtle and not easy to make. So, in order to understand it better, and also to address our own development as individuals - to get to know ourselves better as those who are both participating and observing the phenomenon at hand - we propose an in-depth reflection on self, a lengthy exercise conducted in groups of three.

We ask people to look at the people in their lives who have really been significant for them in terms of their own development. So, people who have somehow opened doors for them which would otherwise possibly have remained shut; people through whose (probably inadvertent) 'intervention' they have been enabled to go to places where they might otherwise not have gone (and of course not all of these people or situations need have been positive at the time - some doors need to be painfully shut before others can open). Once identified, look at the spaces and opportunities and new understandings which have been opened up for you in this way. With the other two in your group as speaking partners, try to read for a possible pattern (or patterns) in these openings. If you were to imagine your life as having (albeit unconscious) intention, what is that intention - the story, the thread, the 'more', the meaning of the narrative; how the parts *belong* together *is* the phenomenon of your life.



The exercise proves enlightening, not only revealing aspects of self previously unconscious, but raising a new sensibility for the depth of our own lives, a new sensibility for the underlying activity which gives coherence to every aspect of the whole . As one person so beautifully put it: there seems to be *a wisdom that is carrying us*, a wisdom that is holding me, that is informing who I am becoming; and our task, in the realm of self-development, is to enable that wisdom to become conscious.

For the individual reflection session, people are asked to observe again this (invisible) intention that seems to be forming the development sector - the particular gesture that it has developed - and to observe also the wisdom which seems to guide their own life (their own gesture - as much of it as we have been able to access today). Then to try to portray the meeting of these two 'intentions' , the relationship between them, artistically, using colours or words or a combination of both. These works are then displayed to one another as in an art gallery.

We do not pursue the discussion further in home-groups that day; it turns out to be a day for individual work, and the integrity of the process feels respected by such abstinence.

#### *Day Four*

Now we begin to approach the heart of the matter. It becomes apparent how difficult it is to comprehend and practice a new way of thinking, of seeing. Whilst there is, in the group, a vibrant sense of anticipation and a relentless engagement with the issues taking place, I detect during the morning's conversation a real struggle to adapt to a different way of approaching phenomena.

Remember that the concepts proposed at the start of this paper were not discussed during the process; we were trying to *experience* a new way of researching phenomena as a way of approaching these issues, rather than advancing a theoretical 'rationale' at the outset. Engaging in an organic or phenomenological conversation as we had, raised certain observations that were only comprehensible to a holistic, living way of thinking. But, because people were still grounded in the more analytical mode, these observations were continuously misunderstood (or even, we could say, *not seen*, in spite of their emerging before us with such clarity). We could not easily adapt to a new

way of seeing - the “seeing of connections”, as Wittgenstein put it.<sup>9</sup> Brady notes that: “When we obtain a new image it is not the eye *but the mind* that refocuses”.<sup>10</sup> And Wittgenstein, again, notes that when this happens “ ... *nothing*, and yet *everything*, has changed”.<sup>11</sup>

The conversation was getting bogged down in old, habitual ways of thinking. The talk circled around ‘the system’ as an abstract concept, a theoretical construct which nevertheless existed ‘out there’. We were stuck in an ‘onlooker consciousness’, one which viewed the world as a collection of discrete ‘things’ which were already formed (products), and ourselves as outside of those things. A collection of nouns. We were struggling to enter a living way of thinking, which might read the world as activity, as verb, through seeing directly the ‘coming-into-being’ of the supposedly discrete ‘things or products’. We were thus disabled when it came to seeing ‘active relationship’ as the primary ground for our observations, through which organisms are formed (and through which, therefore, we can begin to understand them). If we cannot foreground activity and background the product, then we are left with the husks of things, and our world is fragmented and little more than dust.

So, where the concept of ‘intention’ arose, it was interpreted as ‘the system’s intention’, which kept bringing us back to the danger of a conspiracy theory angle, and which *did not see* what we had been observing. When we speak of ‘the system’s intention’, we are thinking from the wrong end, as it were. I am trying to approach the phenomenon from the other side - not: what is the system’s intention; but: what is the intention which forms/informs the system? What idea, what activity, is incarnating here; what is the ‘more’, the whole, the narrative thread in the process of becoming, that forms the aid industry as it is? Foregrounding activity, the ‘coming-into-being’ of the living phenomenon. To recall a sentence, concerning intention, quoted earlier: “This is not to accord (all organic phenomena) a human-like intelligence, but it is also not to deny that a certain intelligence is working in (life’s) formative processes”.<sup>12</sup> The experience of seeing the “wisdom that is carrying us”, which we had arrived at the day before, through our own observations, should give us greater ability to think - and so see - the “intention carrying the industry” (which may have become stuck and intransigent in the face of change, rather than wise); but we still struggled to grasp it because our (usual) thinking starts at the other end. It starts with, it foregrounds, the product, rather than the living process itself.

Some of these ideas we talk about, but not exhaustively; the point still is to observe so consummately that our very thinking begins to change in response (though of course we are seeing that our thinking must become different in order to observe accurately - thus Goethe's exhortation to trust our senses even as we develop them to become trustworthy). Of course it is not easy; our imaginative faculties are stunted, and in any case we fear them as not analytical, not objective, not impersonal enough. Precisely. But a qualitative approach recognises that all qualities, and all meaning, relates to our own experience. Would we really wish for a world that did not?

How then to help us observe this 'coming-into-being' of the aid industry more acutely, how to read its gesture? We ask people to engage in the following exercise: We are now more aware of the 'wisdom that is carrying us', as individuals, as we choose to work in this sector and as we go about that work. So think of a time when you were working in the field with a social situation and you came up against a situation where you were being asked to compromise your principles and way of working. Here you come into real contact with the 'invisible intention' that is forming the system we work within - the situation does not allow you to work 'developmentally', it wants to force you away from dealing with the real issues, it wants to force or seduce or simply lull you into distraction. When it was - perhaps in an unspoken way - demanded of you that you work to someone else's agenda, that you not address the heart of the matter before you. What did you feel, what did you do, what did you see, what happened? Form small groups of three or four and work with each others' stories. And let us see whether, in observing such (probably painful) meeting, we can see more clearly what is informing - albeit unconsciously - the system which seems to compromise all of us despite its own rhetoric and stated intent.

People learn many things about their own practice through this exercise; their practice stands more starkly before them. They can observe it more accurately. And this, viewed contextually, exposes a much clearer picture of the 'coming-into-being' of the 'aid industry'. We begin at last to read its gesture. This is not immediately defined by participants; rather, there is a palpable sense of awareness pervading the group, a heightened sense of consciousness, a new resolve, a new energy. By seeing through to what is living, we are all more alive than we were.

And what, indeed, is living here? What is the active intention guiding the development of the development industry? What is its actual, as opposed to purported, gesture?

We observe our own practices more clearly when forced up against compromise. When forced to say “No!”, or acquiesce, we see more clearly what we are wanting to say “Yes” to. Concomitantly, we see more clearly what it is that we are wanting to say no to. We become aware, we become more conscious. “Man knows himself only to the extent that he knows the world; he becomes aware of himself only within the world, and aware of the world only within himself”.<sup>13</sup> And we realise that, when we are more conscious, we are better able to resist compromise. When we know what we are about, when we are alive to the wisdom or intention that is carrying us, when we make that conscious, we are able to practice ‘developmentally’, which we now understand as a practice which is in the service of consciousness itself. Our very practice is the attempt to assist the social to become more aware, thus more autonomous, enabling people to better guide their own destinies, to make their own choices and to exert some influence over their circumstances, rather than simply acquiescing, dependent and forlorn.

On the other hand, we are seldom able to practice in this way, not just because we are blocked by so many factors, but because we ourselves lose track of our own intent, we fall asleep, we become numbed to our own agenda, we get distracted, reverting to the trivial, seemingly to someone else’s agenda, rather than focusing relentlessly on the matter at hand.

Through such observation the coming-into-being of the aid industry is better understood, and its gesture apparent. The very word ‘industry’ - which we had said we would come back to - is edifying. And there is no conspiracy here, everyone is held within the form which has arisen. *The aid industry distracts; it draws our attention away from that which matters.* Critical engagement with the quality of human interaction, with the process of social development, is lost as we grapple with the demands of the industry itself. Its gesture is one of distraction; the disabling of awareness and consciousness is the formative principle, the narrative thread, that guides the forming of the development sector. This is the ‘more’, the activity, that is not a part itself but that can be seen in every part. The material needs of industry take precedence over the human needs of the social. And we, we development practitioners, must be distracted at every turn, lest we wise up to the game. (This characterisation is but a pale rendition of the direct awareness of the phenomenon which now lives so palpably amongst participants. I can do it no more justice than this, in these pages, given that I can only use words to describe for you, the reader, something that you are not directly

experiencing. Nothing can substitute for the experience itself; as Goethe warned: “How difficult it is ... to refrain from replacing the thing with its sign, to keep the object alive before us instead of killing it with the word”.<sup>14)</sup>

I must repeat, this is not the industry, or the individuals within it, acting; this is the activity (intention) which forms the industry. It is a far, far larger gesture than the work of a few individuals.

Are we then left in despair? The feeling amongst the group is neither of despair nor hope, but of alive engagement, a renewal of conscious intent. And this is enough. We are not here to release resolutions, to construct plans of action. These too would be a distraction. We are here to understand, to rekindle a living awareness. So that we can live our own response.

That afternoon we do not engage either with personal reflection or with our home-group session. We take the afternoon off.

#### *Day Five*

We are to close by lunchtime. The morning exercise is a long one, and goes like this: We divide into groups, and ask each group to reflect on the process of the whole week, session by session, insight by insight, interaction by interaction. And we ask them to do this backwards, starting with yesterday and moving through to the beginning. We are trying to become aware of the ‘coming-into-being’ of the conversation itself, and so elicit the gesture which it has described. Working backwards in this way helps to avoid the trap of falling into our usual way of thinking, by breaking the (apparent) cycle of cause and effect. We want to get inside the developing process of conversation, to observe what we have participated in, to experience the gesture of this conversation - its meaning - as it has emerged, through its very emergence. Once again, unbiased observation is key. Is it possible that this kind of conversation itself, an organic exploration of the gesture of the development sector, might lead us closer to perceiving the (invisible) intention that forms a developmental practice?

And then, with a sense for the gesture of a developmental practice and a sense for the gesture of a practice which may only masquerade as development, we ask people not to ‘feedback’ the results of their discussion - which would only result in the production

of an inert summary. We ask them instead to go off on their own, get in touch with the place where they have now come to, and write a *haiku* that may, in its brevity, spareness and tautness of poetry, get beyond the limitation of 'the word', reveal something of the living fire of intent that has emerged for them; that is now, at this moment, forming their future practice.

At the end of the morning everyone returns, and in silence we attach our *haikus* to the wall. A stunned silence settles over the group as they go up, one after the other. The group has reached a depth of perception which reverberates. There is nothing more to be said. The energy in the room is vivid, the beating of a drum, the burning of a flame.

I will record only one *haiku* here - my own. It is, after all, the only one I can take responsibility for:

Wisdom under threat  
Wakefulness is quest and key  
Love and will are one.

### **The Aftermath**

For me, the flame still burns, many months on. I feel alive, and very clear. If anything convinces me of the validity of this kind of thinking, this kind of approach, this kind of meeting, it is this: I am not left with either information or conclusion, but insight and resolve. The process is still alive in me, recreating itself anew as I work. Through a more conscious interaction with my context, my practice is emerging.

Earlier in this piece I wondered whether the idea of social development is "cynical comment or genuine challenge". I remarked then, and I think now, that it is both. It depends what we mean by social development, and how we practice it. I have no doubt, if it is to be genuine challenge, that we have to broaden our concept of poverty to include the way we think and act in our world. I mentioned before that the intention informing the development sector as-it-has-become is a far larger gesture than the work of a few individuals. We are saturated with, and confronted by, a way of thinking which is perpetuating itself, resisting change, and grounded in an instrumental view of humanity. There are other ways of thinking imaginable; they demand the development of entirely new faculties of perception. "Every object, well contemplated,

opens up a new organ within us".<sup>15</sup> If we are not working towards these, then the development endeavour remains a cynical comment in an unforgiving world.

### *An Epilogue: My Father*

#### *Krakadow Peak, Cedarburg, South Africa - August 1933*

*High up on the south face of the Krakadow, a couple hundred feet from the summit, two men huddled, little more than smudges against the grand emptiness of night. Overhead, stars burned with a pagan ferocity. Below, the void opened out before them for thousands of feet, lurching down the sheer rock faces up which they had travailed, then, on the plain beneath, stretching vast and unencumbered through a landscape of rocky peaks and crumbled stone. So far beneath. No solace to be sought or found. The night, and their intended summit, towered over them, indifferent.*

*Their ledge was a few feet wide, sloping slightly downwards away from the face behind, so that they would roll if they slept. Yet they needed sleep, the next day's climbing would be worse still. So they took it in turns, one sleeping while the other sat awake and leaned against the sleeper, holding him tucked in against the rock. Now, in the early hours, the one who was awake sat staring through his boots at the impossible drop which hung as if suspended from their rocky ledge; or perhaps they were the ones suspended, dangling by threads of chance held in the hands of an otherwise occupied god. The night ran on regardless, pushing at the boundaries of his sanity. On the horizon, at the boundary of his vision, he could see the coming storm gathering itself in the folds and crevasses of the distant shadowed peaks. The day which waited in the wings would decide their fate. Either they would master the sheer rock above them, and reach the summit, or they would end broken by the rock to which they clung. There was no longer any return the way they had come.*

*The one who was awake studied the climb again, running through the last few hours in his*

*mind's eye, studying the rock above as if by an inner spotlight - they had tried for hours as the light had failed them, to get beyond those next hundred feet, only to be beaten back each time, to this ledge which focused their pain like an exposed nerve pushed out into space. There were three pitches, and all three had been tried. The smooth face which was so awfully exposed and which ran out of holds halfway up. The crack which was too tight in its lower reaches to permit them egress to the widening chimney which they could see above, tantalisingly out of reach. The staircase which, narrow as a thread, nevertheless gave them most hope till it seemed to dissolve into an overhang against which they had battered themselves in vain.*

*His almost rabid focus gave way to a musing. That there was a way up, he was as certain as he was of anything. That they would find it, he simply couldn't say. He knew only what he had always known, in all his years on rock: that every climb had a key, and that finding the key was, after all the effort and courage and creativity expended, the one moment of supreme excitement which was what, perhaps, he climbed for. Like a jazz musician hitting the blue note. The summit was not it, for him, the climb was over then, and he knew anyway that he had conquered nothing, had merely been allowed into a presence greater by far than his. But, in the heat of battle, so to speak, to find that key, be it a handhold or a maneuver, to wrest the secret from the mountain - or be given it by the mountain, he never knew which - this was what lent his craft its elegance, its solitary grace.*

*He allowed his mind to range, trance-like, over all the days and aspects of their passage. The long trek up from the original camp, up to the cave where they had spent their first night. Threading their way through the narrow and rock-jumbled ravines the day after, interminable and arduous, till they had made camp at the foot of the climb itself. Then the day which had led to this, an exhilarating upward push toward a summit which they had dreamed of for so long now, back there in their gentle beds within the cityscape which they had left so far behind them. Till evening, when they had been beaten back. Three days, each different, each . . . comprising, from a certain way of looking at it, three aspects. He shook his head to clear it, gained a glint of excitement in his eye. Three! The first day could be divided into three distinct slogs on three distinct mountainsides. The second, three different rivers, all linked, forcing their way down three distinct ravines. The third . . . well the third day . . . what . . . there were three pitches up there in the darkness. They had tried each one separately. What if all three had to be climbed together, because this was the story of this climb. What if the key lay in moving from one pitch to the other, using all three ultimately, the one as lever to the next. Where would we start?*

*He did not move, lest he wake his partner on the rock behind. But he could feel the excitement*



take hold, run like sparks of zeal through the his calf muscles, into his finger tips. Who knew whether the climb really came in threes, he had a key now. He could just begin to see a possible beginning, and the first move from sheer face to staircase. His mind was already racing towards the move from staircase to chimney, though he couldn't see it yet.

There were still some hours of darkness ahead, but he no longer minded. Neither the emptiness of night nor the final reckoning to be imposed by the rising of the sun worried him now. He was no longer afraid. It had only just begun to impress itself upon him, that he ever had been.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Henri Bortoft, *The Wholeness of Nature*, Floris Books, 1996, p291

<sup>ii</sup> Steve Talbot, *The Trouble with Qualities*, In Context (Newsletter of the Nature Institute), Fall 2001, p4

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Frank, *Lie down for America*, in Harper's Magazine, Vol. 308, April 2004, p45

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Tina Wallace (Team Leader), *The current procedures and policies dominating the disbursement of aid: are they building strong relationships and enabling NGOs to meet their stated aims?*, Draft Research Document for Discussion (Funded by ESCOR, DFID) March 2004

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Alexander, *A Timeless Way of Building*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1979, p13

<sup>7</sup> Henri Bortoft, *The Wholeness of Nature*, Floris Books, 1996, p291

<sup>8</sup> Nigel Hoffman, *The Unity of Science and Art*, in Goethe's Way of Science, (David Seamon and Arthur Zajonc, ed's), State University of New York Press, New York, 1998, p134

<sup>9</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein (quoted in Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein – The Duty of Genius*, Vintage, Great Britain, 199, p508)

<sup>10</sup> Ronald H. Brady, *The Idea in Nature*, in Goethe's Way of Science, (David Seamon and Arthur Zajonc, ed's), State of New York Press, New York, 1998, p85

<sup>11</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein (quoted in Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein – The Duty of Genius*, Vintage, Great Britain, 1991, p533)

<sup>12</sup> Nigel Hoffman, *The Unity of Science and Art*, in Goethe's Way of Science, (David Seamon and Arthur Zajonc, ed's), State University of New York Press, New York, 1998, p134

<sup>13</sup> JW von Goethe, as quoted by Alan P. Cottrell, *The Resurrection of Thinking and the Redemption of Faust*, , in Goethe's Way of Science, (David Seamon and Arthur Zajonc, ed's), State University of New York Press, New York, 1998, p257

<sup>14</sup> JW von Goethe, *Goethe: Scientific Studies*, ed. and trans. D. Miller (New York: Princeton University Press 1994), p275

<sup>15</sup> JW von Goethe, as quoted by Alan P. Cottrell, *The Resurrection of Thinking and the Redemption of Faust*, , in Goethe's Way of Science, (David Seamon and Arthur Zajonc, ed's), State University of New York Press, New York, 1998, p257