

Several 'Shiny Things' – reflecting on organisation development

*Pay attention to what works, and do more of it, and try to understand the principles involved.
And also: pay attention to what doesn't work, and stop doing it.*

~ Nathaniel Branden, *The Art of Living Consciously*

The weka is a New Zealand native bird, a kind of flightless woodhen notorious as a campsite pilferer. I once saw a weka's nest up in the headwaters of the Ruakituri. Arrayed about it were accumulated shiny things: coins, milk bottle tops, a child's compass, buttons, a buckle, a chocolate wrapper... Each was placed presumably at random, yet in that first moment of seeing, each seemed to have reference to everything else. The best visual art is like this; it seems we encounter a simultaneity of patterned effects as – to borrow a felicitous phrase from the poet Alan Loney – 'a location to be dwelt in'.

My father was a collector of all kinds of potentially useful things. 'I'm a weka,' he would say, storing them in his shed. I suppose I too am a weka. I tend to take an eclectic approach to sources that inform my work – so much so that if I quote others it is in order to 'let them have my say'. I find it useful when others can clarify my own experience, as though in a conversation. So, indwelling the location, I browse for meaning.

This article juxtaposes several 'shiny things' that I've lately found arrayed about my nesting consciousness: the bush regeneration method first pioneered by the Bradley sisters; the organisation development principles of Appreciative Inquiry; a walk in Golden Gate Park; and four soul moods characterised by Rudolf Steiner. I've dwelt in the vicinity of these things for some time, and have decided it is a location to be explored further.

Organisation development is often regarded in the same way in which we think of marriage guidance – we resort to it at a very late stage. When dysfunction is chronic, we turn to some expert who will make it all better. Unfortunately, once problems have become habitual, transformation is very difficult. What is it in us that resists development?

Resistance takes various forms, succinctly summed up as the negations of doubt, cynicism (hatred), and fear. Perhaps it is because these negations feel uncomfortably close to some core reality within us that we do not like to reflect on their significance. Instead we look critically at others, finding fault and blame in everyone else. This is an endemic attitude, typical of early adolescence, and in the wider community promoted in part by the media and politicians; but it seems expressive of a malaise afflicting humanity as a whole. Essentially, I suggest, it is the 'dis-ease' of required development.

The challenge – really an obligation – to develop tends to engender such negative reactions because it demands attention exactly where we do not want to look. Consequently, when some kind of recognition comes at last, it has been forced upon us by extreme circumstances. Daunted, we might prefer to assign the whole shebang to the 'too-hard basket'.

Organisation development processes that concentrate attention on problems, to the exclusion of all else, soon exhaust people already struggling in the situation. The problems escalate –

issues seem to 'issue forth' like real infestations of hostile entities. Who needs it? But I have found these shiny things...

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Walking daily in Ashton Park near their Sydney home in the mid-twentieth century, Eileen and Joan Bradley observed the rampant growth of invasive weeds and the futility of the usual weed control methods. Beginning quite informally, they gradually developed the method for bush regeneration that now bears their name. Three principles essentialise this approach:

1. work outward from less infested to more seriously infested areas;
2. minimize disturbance, and replace topsoil and litter;
3. do not overclear; allow regeneration to set the pace of the work.

These three injunctions could stand as principles for so much else in life. For instance, as a practitioner in organisation development, I have to start somewhere; and the difficult places invite us to swarm like flies to the infected spot. Where should an intervention enter the field of possibilities? The Bradley sisters are clear about this. Begin with some patch where nature is working more or less harmoniously. This is the basis of their hygiene. *Pay attention to what works, and do more of it, and try to understand the principles involved.*

So we look together at the whole organisation, noting the healthy and unhealthy parts. Then we work with the strengths, enhancing and developing their effects, while keeping an eye on the areas to be transformed in the course of things. One way of identifying the strengths and challenges, and also their attendant opportunities and risks, is to do a SCORE analysis⁽¹⁾ with the people concerned. The ethical dimension will be commitment to positive action in accord with agreed values.

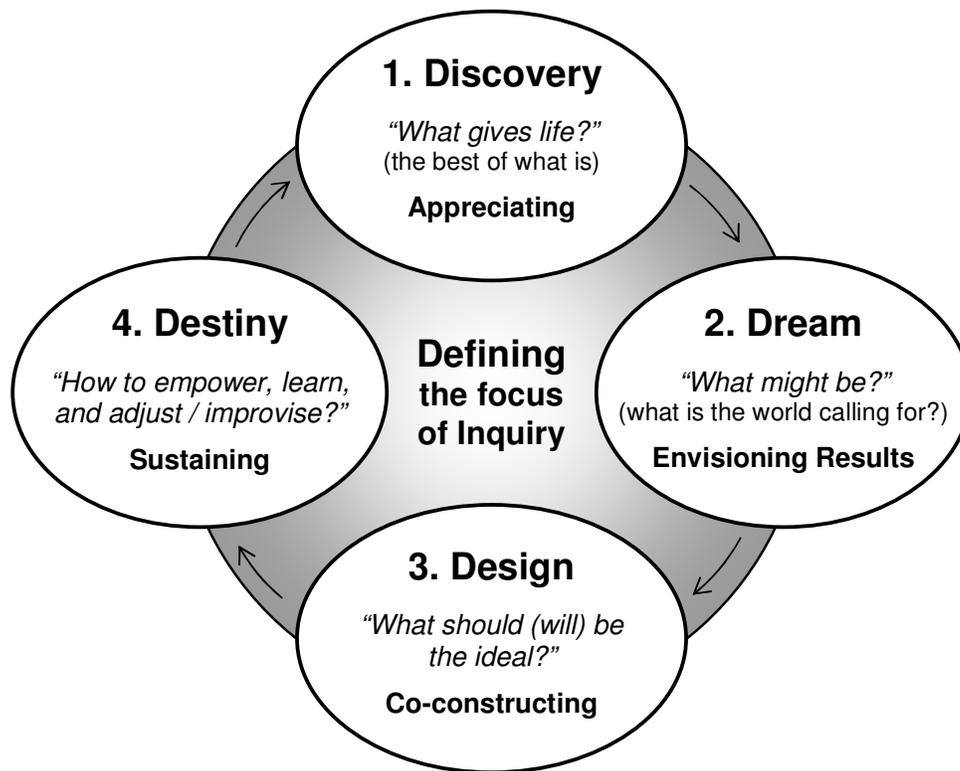
The process of intervention needs to be subtle, not a wholesale land-clearing operation. Not everything needs to be uprooted; people need help to carefully sort and sift their observations and other intimations, to acknowledge that while some things seem blatantly obvious, other possibilities and potentialities are implicit and will only be revealed in time. Nondescript seeds belong to as yet unimagined futures. Working with a U Process⁽²⁾ enables people to sort the essential from the non-essential in the topsoil and apparent litter of the organisation.

The capacity for change varies in each organisation, in each group, in each individual. A true social process will enable everyone to participate; forced change causes further difficulties and resistance. *Never discourage anyone who continually makes progress, no matter how slow*, said Plato. Genuine change is perceptible and can be enhanced; processes, like water, like life, have their own characteristic movements, and set the valid pace. Following a process of Appreciative Inquiry⁽³⁾ can engage people in the emergent future.

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was developed by David Cooperrider during the 1980s as a positive approach to organisation development, through which the focus of attention is shifted away from what isn't working to what is working.

The basic approach is the following fourfold process: Discovery; Dream; Design; Destiny. For those who feel this latter term seems too portentous, the fourth stage could be termed Delivery or Direction. However, more importantly in reality there is an initial step, that of Defining the focus of the inquiry – this needs to be framed in positive affirmative terms, to enable the process to proceed without defensiveness or other reactions occurring amongst participants.



Discovery: appreciating and valuing 'the best of what is'. This is discerned through inquiry (interviews / storytelling) into people's experience of the group, organisation or community, noting where it is most vibrantly alive, reflecting on these highlights, and recognising what it was that made those experiences possible. Thus they discover the positive core of the system. This phase includes clarification of those elements which people want to retain in the process of change, as well as identification of intriguing potentials for the future.

Dream: envisioning 'what might be'. Together people build a vision of the future they want, responsive to their sensing of what the world is calling them to become. They imagine that the best of 'what is' will form the foundation for the way things will be in the future. Together these realisations form their leading image and values. Questions in this phase include: 'What does our positive core indicate that we could be?' 'What are our most exciting possibilities?' 'What is the world asking us to become?'

Design: determining 'what should (will) be'. Participants craft an organisation or community in which the positive core is present, vibrant and alive. They formulate their aims. The design focus is placed on elements that help bring the dreams to life, such as functions and structures, processes, and resources. The task is to develop bold possibilities (provocative propositions) and principles of design that integrate the positive core.

Destiny: taking steps towards creating the initiatives and structural changes needed to realise the future as articulated in the design propositions. This phase needs to be developed in such a way that people remain connected with the intent, making the most of the creative insight of everyone involved, allowing self-selected groups to plan the next steps in the areas they are most passionate about, and which they are willing to take responsibility for.

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At Easter 2004 Bettye and I travelled to San Francisco. We walked in the Golden Gate Park, and then along the Ocean Beach, discovering the chilling fog and wind which characterises San Francisco. In the park we noted many Australian trees and plants, although the general lushness and greenness reminded us more of New Zealand.

There is a story behind this lushness and the exotic flora. Early in San Francisco's history, the council had set aside over 1000 acres for a park, but little could be made to grow in what was a sandy wind-swept wilderness. Then, in 1887 a 29 year old landscape gardener, a Scot called John McLaren, was employed 'to make the Golden Gate Park one of the beauty spots of the world.' By the time of his death in 1943, when he was still the park's superintendent, it had been transformed into a forested and meadowed wonder. McLaren's solution was to observe and respond. He noted the conditions, and sought plants for those conditions, progressively modifying the landscape. Among the first plants he found that could hold their own in this environment were Australian acacias, tea-tree scrub and eucalypts.

So I imagine John McLaren, hunkered down in the dunes, watching, seeing the momentary shifts of light and life, and then travelling about to find their like. He could not *make* things grow; he had to find those plants which could become companions in that desolate place and which would ultimately transform it. A hardy form of life had first to be established, which could then harbour further life.

The cultivation of the ground is always the thing. How often we think the issue is 'out there', and that the solution can be imposed on the world; but the ground of change is first to be cultivated within the human soul. McLaren had first to get out of the conventional mindset – he had to get beyond himself. So too, in organisation development, it always requires some inner work by the practitioner. Accompanying every process are necessary attitudes through which whatever we do may be potentiated. When we keep an open mind and heart towards the field of our work, we can be amazed by what reveals itself to us; and then we can find ourselves responding to both people and situations out of particular soul-moods, which Rudolf Steiner has characterised in lectures published as *The World of the Senses and the World of the Spirit*.⁽⁴⁾ They seem fundamental to a gesture of connection – that is, we cannot remain detached, standing outside the process, uncommitted...

Learning to trust our sense perceptions is always a first step. This is often undermined today. People say, 'That's your perception,' when in reality they are saying 'That's your opinion'. An observational method that enables us to see what is happening is the basis for all inquiry. Suspending our initial judgment, we need to gaze in *wonder* at the phenomena of the world, experiencing all that presents itself to our senses. Repeated observations lead to a sifting of the data; significant impressions emerge and array themselves like those things placed about a weka's nest.

An organisation can be seen as a mechanism or an organism. If it is a mechanism, it will be dead and deadening; but if it is the latter, then we need to respect it as we respect all living things. Life is mysterious. If we decide not only to look *at* it, but to participate *in* it and know ourselves co-existent with it, then we begin to feel our consciousness is in touch with that mystery. We sense the rhythms and patterns, the pulse of the place. We get the picture. We cultivate *reverence* for whatever lives and breathes in the world, and which we want to see grow and flourish in a healthy way.

Every group or organisation is more than alive; each has a particular mood, atmosphere, or character. In entering into relationship with what we find through inquiry, we feel the quality of each encounter, and how it seems to be expressed through characteristic gestures and attitudes. As we identify these, and recognise how an intricate web of associations is woven throughout the organisation, we become aware of a pervasive *wisdom-filled harmony* that speaks to us out of the situation, an essential *lawfulness* in what is playing itself out in each unique constellation of self and world.

Then, we want to serve development, in such a way that within it we may find meaning and purpose in life. We relinquish ambitions and personal concerns in seeking answers to that question: 'What is the world asking us to become?' There always is a particular moment in a process when this turning occurs, from 'want' to 'need'. A letting go, in order to let come... We then feel in touch with reality. Sensing intent, we can give ourselves to development in a mood of *self-surrender* to what is needed. We then love what we do.

So these are some of the shiny things I've found about me as I reflect upon my organisation development practice. They nestle in my nesting consciousness, in some kind of association that seems co-resonant. I'm convinced that if we take such an approach, from any of these perspectives, then forests and parks may grow themselves rightly, and organisations become true organisms in which humanity takes root.

References:

- (1) SCORE analysis is a form of SWOT – with an Ethical dimension applied to the quadrant of Strengths / Challenges / Opportunities / Risks – developed by Inspired Outcomes
- (2) The U Process is a diagnostic process tool first developed by Glasl and Lemson of the Netherlands Pedagogical Institute (NPI)
- (3) I have adapted this characterisation of Appreciative Inquiry from a report by Pioneers of Change on the CDRA website at <http://www.cdra.org.za/>
- (4) These lectures by Rudolf Steiner can be found on the web at <http://www.rsarchive.org/Lectures/>