

**Boundaries, Possibilities and Constraints
amongst NGOs in South Africa**

The Story of an In-depth Conversation

Stanford Valley - June 2008

Facilitated and Told by The Proteus Initiative

**Sue Davidoff
Al Kaplan
Liz Smith**

Earlier in 2008, an invitation went out to leading practitioners in the NGO sector of South Africa, sent collaboratively by The Proteus Initiative and Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (EED), who funded the Conversation. The following contains extracts from that invitation:

For many of us who have participated in the evolution of a new South Africa, the diversity, resilience, innovation, creativity and sheer gumption of a vast and prolific NGO sector has been an integral aspect of the terrain of increasing individual and community freedom. As more citizens have gained access to resources and influence over choices, NGOs have been both in the forefront of change as well as in the background. There was a time when the health of the NGO sector seemed assured, unquestioned. But times have changed.

It seems that the NGO sector is currently weakened - become less than it was - to what extent is unclear, but significantly. Weakened both internally - in terms of individual capacities, organisational cultures and practices, collaborative values and sense of purpose - as well as externally, with respect to strategies, funding, impact and achievements. Of course this is not true of all NGOs, many of which have grown in capacity and stature. And the South African NGO sector may still be a matter of some pride for social activists confronted by developments in other countries. Nevertheless, compared with the robust 80's and breathtaking 90's, the sector could well be said to be struggling.

The nature of social struggle itself, of course, has changed dramatically. NGOs have battled to come to grips with and to adequately adapt their own strategic intent and role in the light of a rapidly changing society. Lines between different approaches are increasingly hazy and ambiguous, and strange bedfellows colonise each others' values and approaches - sometimes cynically, sometimes unconsciously - complexifying the field of social activism enormously.

NGO financial resources are stretched and funding is increasingly attached to the preferences of a global world order. South Africa adopts a concomitant socio-economic order increasingly underpinned by a centralising political order, with both of these conspiring - perhaps inadvertently, perhaps not - to limit choice and alternative whilst requiring assistance from the very NGOs who may have been focusing on these. Perhaps, globally as well as locally, it has become increasingly difficult to take a stand, to present a viable alternative, to differentiate and to focus.

Perhaps NGOs simply are no longer sure what they are about, exactly. Perhaps internal conflicts are somehow linked to this. Perhaps external pressures and the lack of capacity to deal with them are part of the picture. Perhaps, after all, the picture is not a negative one but rather a necessary realignment and adjusting of a once too bloated NGO sector. Perhaps society is developing other priorities and other mechanisms.

Whatever the case, and to achieve a closer reading of what

exactly is the case, The Proteus Initiative and EED invite you to apply to be one of 20 participants in a very intensive one-week conversation focusing on the state of NGOs in South Africa today. ... this is not a conference or a workshop, but rather an intimate conversation in which participants will be encouraged to share openly of themselves, their experiences and their observations in order that together we may reach deeper levels of meaning and illuminate this particular social situation both for ourselves and for others. Such illumination may assist in lighting a way forward, but the underlying intent is primarily to *understand, at a deeper level, what is happening*. Whatever might follow will become part of another story.

The conversation that ensued proved to be a valuable method of inquiry and observation, leading many of those involved to new understanding and inspiration. The conversation - both its products and the form that it took - proved to be worth sharing amongst all those interested in NGOs in particular and social activism and change more generally. This document shares the conversation to the extent that it is able.

Three people collaborated in facilitating the conversation (one of whom focused mainly on movement exercises to illuminate process itself). When coming together later to document the process, we realised the formidable challenge of such an undertaking. Given the nature of the conversation and the nature of this task, we decided to take an unconventional route. Rather than risk reducing the conversation by trying to find a common response to it, we have decided to write three complementary pieces that attempt to capture essence from the point of view of the individual writer. Such an attempt at articulation mirrors, we hope, aspects of the conversation methodology itself.

Thus you will find in the following pages three pieces. Read one or two or all three; and choose your own order. Each illuminates from a different vantage point.

* * * * *

bedrock

by al kaplan

So here we are then, those of us who made it. A venerable group of NGO leaders, activists, facilitators,

donors. Yes, venerable - turns out that those who chose to arrive have put in many years of dedicated service to social activism through the medium of the NGO. As someone remarks almost at the outset, this is the oldest bunch of people he's ever worked amongst. Too true, brother; we realise we are, in some ways, elders, with certain responsibilities, then; not every one of us, but enough. As we look around we recognise people we may not have seen for some years, people with and also without whom we have come a long way, people of some standing and stature in the NGO community (and not only in South Africa). People who, it turns out, have dedicated their lives ... without necessarily having intended to, but the years have turned over and the commitment has intensified; though the field has changed, the terrain is different now. Now there are feelings of disquiet, unease, even horror, certainly confusion, at the way our world is turning. And at the truth that, in spite of all we have worked at so hard, there are few places left for us, or anyone, to turn; and the NGO, our vehicle and medium and hope, has turned strangely in on itself in ways that we cannot fathom. Not yet, anyway. So here we are then, to engage in a conversation, over a few days, which may be both transformatory and revelatory, or neither.

I approach the conversation in a slight haze. This is an august group of peers, at the very least, and the inquiry is a profound one and so open-ended that I cannot begin to fathom what may emerge. As facilitators we are not to participate as the others are, and we are not here to teach, or bring to conclusion, or reveal alternative paths, or read what others cannot see. We are here to be 'not-here', so that the conversation is a free flow between participants. We are here to hold by 'not-holding', so that the open-endedness is not prematurely boundaried. We are here to guide through 'not-guiding', so that the conversation can go where it must. We are here, really, to be present in such a way that everyone is enabled to be present to each other, to the phenomenon of our inquiry, to the conversation and to themselves. We have the task of finding the right questions that, at every twist and turn of the unravelling path, can help people dig deep enough to find the wellspring of true idea once more. Possibly, we have enough authenticity to permit trust without imposing limits.

At the same time, the process is not simply 'left to happen'; it is focused, facilitated, encouraged to develop, to deepen, to discover. We are in search of something. Equality, creativity and openness in

conversation is only part of the mix; the point is to listen not only to each other but, more accurately, to listen to the phenomenon whose meaning we are searching for, to listen so intensively that the phenomenon is able to speak to us. It is not our opinions or analyses that are of ultimate value but our *seeing* (or observing) of the phenomenon in question. If, in this instance, the archetypal story of the NGO in SA is revealed through our own observations, then we have found what we are looking for. We are in search of an accurate portrayal, not an explanation.

so here we are then

We start in the late afternoon, sharing openly from where we come. The next morning we undertake a whole day exercise in an attempt to situate ourselves within our context. In groups we look back at the events that stand out for us over the last 14 years, or since approximately 1994. We know that the world that preceded 1994 - the world of apartheid that we cut our teeth of struggle on - still has influence over whatever has happened since, but 1994 was a death and a birthing, and we have to start somewhere. We detail the events and then think them forwards and backwards, linking them inside our thinking in an attempt to feel the living quality of the evolving process. We withdraw and on our own feel how these events affected us at the time, gathering the heart qualities of their impact on us and of ours on them. We return to our groups, sharing now our own visceral and emotional involvement with the things that have taken place. So the sense of evolving process deepens, as though we are entering a flowing river that forms its banks even as its banks direct its flow.

Although there is a sequential aspect to this forwards and backwards flow - we keep moving our minds through the events, even as the events move through our thinking - we are careful not to confuse sequence with process; process has a deeper, more spherical and three-dimensional quality of invisible connections that generate the narrative or story that we are in search of: the becoming, and the emergence of what has become. Two questions that come to our assistance are: 'What are we enabling that is carrying us into the future?' and 'What are we allowing that is propelling us into the future?' We share with each other the results of our explorations in creative ways, and this opens up intense conversation, which takes us ... well ... close enough to the picture that follows.

Clearly whatever we thought we had done to enable a society of choice has not been enough. Perhaps it has even been harmful. The story that emerges of our last years as a country is one of tragic dimensions (and although unique it is not confined to South Africa but is part of a global shaping). The dying of the apartheid era (accomplished with minimum violence) was accompanied by authentic and rigorous NGOs working alongside mass movements of democratic discipline and consequence in the simultaneous struggle for political, cultural and economic liberation. We were a proud nation, we were a rainbow nation. And perhaps that pride was our downfall; perhaps our rainbow colours were a chimera. There is little pride now, and our rainbow is torn ragged; an apocalyptic future is hanging in the present.

Our political leadership, and the movement that overcame apartheid, appear bitterly tainted with the ravages of pride: corruption, disrespect (even amongst comrades, even for principle), arrogance, an overwhelming culture of denial. Our financiers and merchants - peppered now with the erstwhile struggle leadership - have joined a mass movement of global capital and argue the fate of our (their) money as the arbiter of the fate of our land ... and the gap between wealth and poverty has become obscene. On the margins, grown increasingly ragged, pain and violence and an increasingly unassailable exclusion erode respect too. There come crime, and violence, and illness, and despair, we beat others in the deepness of our resentment and betrayal - and we all resent and we all betray. Levels of human degradation are appalling. Social movements cohere and dissipate, protest and succumb, battle to find real common ground, ebb and flow. Few care about the ravages to our environment; the beloved country, as earth, is secondary. Everything is secondary, we *all* are secondary, to a violent disrespect on the one hand and, on the other, to the bland veneer of normalcy proposed by the global discourse - consumerism, corporatisation, commodification, development, aid, monitoring and evaluation, strategic planning, sustainability, change management, outcomes. We are in the process of losing our humanity. And NGOs of losing themselves.

For NGOs the game has become increasingly technical, the name of the game longevity, the language dictated by the times. NGOs may have become biased

towards places that exclude, may have turned their eyes and ears away from the periphery towards their new sources of accountability; they may play to a world order that has demobilised society so as to maintain a veneer of normalcy. Exceptions? Of course there are exceptions, but the rules of engagement are tight, and the rewards insidiously subtle. No-one is radical anymore.

We are losing our humanity. As NGOs we are losing the practice of being human - and this was our practice. Why, and how may we rekindle it? What are we enabling, what are we allowing? We don't talk truth anymore; and truth exposes, truth names the void - says what is really there. But we cannot speak because we no longer listen, we no longer listen to the silenced voice, the silenced person, the silenced position, the silenced idea. There is need of a new practice in the midst of our loss of humanity.

We cannot listen, we cannot afford to, we have to deliver! - thus the NGO, thus the claim. No time to stop and think about *what* it is we deliver so assiduously. No time to speak amongst ourselves, no time to listen. Perhaps what we are really missing, at heart, is the kind of conversation we're having right now, perhaps the lack of such conversations is what enables us to succumb, to speak untruth and to not really listen. Perhaps here is where our practice is lacking.

what are we allowing?

Next morning, infused with the previous day's images (percolating like a dream, thrumming like a nightmare), we move on to another full day's exercise, an exploration of the NGO itself. We will try to arrive at a portrayal of the NGO in SA today. We go about this in a number of stages. In the first stage, working in groups, three people bring examples of NGOs they know intimately. They are asked to speak about facts only (or, to put this differently, about the immediately observable aspects of the organization which are accessible to any observer). These three NGO descriptions are shared within the group, and individuals sit on their own for awhile with the information, bringing these three arbitrary and synchronous descriptions together.

In the second phase the stories of the same three NGOs are told from a different perspective; now, the speakers are asked to share - as disinterestedly as possible - the relationships that they experience with regard to their chosen NGO. They speak of relationships internal and external to the organization, and relationships between one time and another, thus enabling a biographical picture of the NGO to emerge, a picture of the organization in dynamic movement. How is the organization inside itself and how does it relate to relate beyond itself; what's really happening. They try to generate a qualitative picture of the NGO in its world.

Once this has been shared and individuals in the group have had time to integrate the three pictures within themselves, the group enters a third phase. If the first phase had a 'factual' orientation, and the second called for a level of discernment, this third phase demands the use of imagination, an attempt to see through to the whole that is enfolded in the parts. Not to go back now to the individual NGOs, neither to construct a composite generality, but to look for the essential NGO - or the essence of NGO - that is manifest(ing) in all three. Here is an organizational type that stands in the world in a particular way (at this time, in this context). How does it stand in the world? How does it manifest? Perhaps this must be described metaphorically, rendered artistically - what is the essential gesture of the NGO in SA today?

The groups and the individuals within them, most of them, feel at the end of the day as though their soil has been turned over from within, as though fields have been ploughed. They share their metaphoric images of gesture, of the passage that NGOs have traversed and where the NGO is now. It's the butt end of a long day, the images are diverse, the metaphors run the full range from precise and illuminating to obscure and confusing ... at the end of the presentations we are all very present as to it all, but frustrated as to whether anything coheres. The question we are left with as night falls is - this was a remarkable day, there are some remarkable pictures here, but so what? Does it all add up to anything substantial? The next morning we collect to face the situation once more. The night, as well as the group's trust to stay open in the presence of its unknowing, help. There appear indications of coherence, pictures fall into place, a gesture emerges. The story goes something like this.

NGOs are organisations of contradiction at the best of times. And these are the worst of times. Where contradiction used to tauten the disciplines of practice, now they fragment.

Powerlessness in people is driven by an absence, and NGOs bring a response, they bring something to that absence; but NGOs are not the fire, they can and should only be stokers of the fire, in service ... but power dynamics are fuelled by their bringing something to an absence, and who then is leading whom? So NGOs can be both agency for, and obstacle to, social change ... and at the same time. Do they work with, and accompany, or do they work for, or on, or do to - the unease goes with the territory. NGOs need to be rooted amongst, within, the people they work with, yet they need to flow, be flexible, an alternative, a response, a leader. As NGO practitioners we are, at our best, led by that which lives inside of us ... but does this always and easily cohere with the accompaniment and empowerment of others?

These contradictions are the stuff NGOs are made of, but now they fragment rather than tauten the disciplines of practice; the normal stresses and strains of organisational life are ratcheted up. The metamorphosis of the accurate pioneer into the one unable to let go, the metamorphosis of leadership into management and governance ... always these strain capacities to ride the contradictions, but now the emphasis on governance and the (contextual) need for institutional stability all but annihilate those capacities. The NGO either grows corporate or gets trodden underfoot; and in growing it no longer tends the flame but concentrates on survival. It can end up dousing the flame in the name of sustainability ... supposedly so that it may continue to stoke the fire.

But what flame is now being spread? As it grows, supposedly taking on bigger and bigger forces - because affairs are now complex and interdisciplinary, intersectoral, and the parameters are dictated by global collusions - the NGO risks morphing into the forces it is taking on, it risks pursuing a project of exclusion. It turns towards the centre (if it does not, its own marginality becomes untenable). The demands of finance and formality, and the organisational cultures and strategies they give rise to, eat the heart out of

accountability ... they eat the heart out of that erstwhile ability to flow and function on the edge. The NGO turns away from its path, it becomes institutionally rooted, and bland. Its heart is eaten away, and it becomes institutionally anonymous or ridden with conflict and confusion.

Finding our way back to the 'old 80's model' (of car, with its own language - mechanical rather than computerised? - and too high consumption levels in a world of oil scarcity, a model that may still appeal to those of us here but not to a new generation) is not an option. Something else is needed, a new form. We are at a crossroads, unable to articulate a clear direction, a viable destiny ... in the worst of times and in the worst of places ... because we find ourselves in strange and inhospitable terrain, a countryside of leaderless chaos ruled by the anonymity of industry ...

The development industry has usurped our very language. All the old words, concepts, no longer work. Yet language influences and defines who we are. At this point of transition, we can no longer say what we mean. We ourselves no longer know what we mean. What *must* we let go of? What must we hold onto? None of this is unique to SA, we're part of a global framing - (but SA is, also, unique ... a dream feels as though it has become, somewhere along the line, a tinder box ...)

The NGO, inconsequent, suave, conflicted, mute, its activism and honesty sold for a mess of pottage ... is here with us now, and it's hard to know which way to look ... for we are it.

perspectives on flame

Not that participants cohere into any approximation of collectivity, and the conversation bumps as well as flows, there are flashes of insight and disagreement both; this is a very fierce and diverse collection of individual hearts and minds. And not that the picture presented above could be regarded as a true likeness of any individual NGO. But a very clear image of the underlying gesture of the NGO at this time has emerged. And the portrayal, the story, infiltrates every NGO; like branches of a single tree.

The picture that has emerged is a stark one, and we only really get it once we have generated it. The day that

follows is a grappling with the reality of what we have generated, with the possible consequences, what it all might mean. It is a hard, sometimes brittle, always engaged and volatile couple of conversations; we are all very alive, intent, earnest. And we flail, disagree, find tracks that seem to take us somewhere, lose the plot, get inspired once more. There are two main conversations that take place this day. The first follows on directly from the portrayal presented above. The second takes place later in the day, in response to the question: As we move into the future, what do we have to let go of and what can we not afford to let go of? In between the first and second, we undertake an individual reflection and development exercise, which helps us centre ourselves in our own dreams and histories and strivings, so that the personal aspects of our activism and development over the years are fused into the life of this conversation about social organisation. It could not be otherwise, given that we are now inquiring into the real essence of what it is to be an NGO. And this is a contentious idea - there are as many different types and foci of NGO as there are people, perhaps, and much specious labelling goes on by too many pundits. And yet, and yet, is there a way of sorting the wheat from the chaff?

The following rendition tries to capture the flavour of this set of conversations, rather than the details or the long winding road of it. We have all been intimately affected by the portrayal we have reached, and much of this day constitutes attempts to integrate the edginess of it all.

There is a question about the very human struggle that has been waged over these years, through the 70s, 80's, 90s, and what such effort has bequeathed - the waves of transformation seemed much bigger than getting rid of apartheid; yet what has emerged is an increasingly divided society. How did a mountain bring forth a mouse?

Often as we go through social life it passes beneath our notice, but we are living a fundamentally different society than we might have anticipated. For social justice activists, there is no mass movement in the sense that there was before, to which we can align. Before we could work alongside the working class, but now to do the same thing we must work with the underclass, with those in extreme poverty - and there is little cohesion here, little

vision around a future society. Few NGOs know how to work with and give hope to the underclass.

Others come at things from a different angle, wondering why these kinds of arguments gain a kind of moral hegemony when in fact there is as much 'struggle' morality in working with business and opinion makers because it is here that change needs to be effected. Can we do so without insidiously adapting the message?

So the debate turns for a while around working with centre or periphery in order to liberate the social order. And service delivery? Do we deliver goods and services because of the privations caused by privatisation? On the other hand, has civil society had to take up and focus on its historical political role of opposition because there are too few other viable loci of political and economic opposition that have arisen in the country? Perhaps NGOs are caught up in both politics and economics to the detriment of their role in cultural life. What of the broadening of space for cultural life, for the work of soul enrichment? Surely the basis for the building of an humanity, for the building of community, is cultural and artistic life?

Two connected angles emerge at this point. NGOs are nothing if not places of free association - surely this is one of their benchmarks. Some may be politically aligned, but not all NGOs have to be politically aligned or even overtly political - whilst activism may be a benchmark, we cannot thus restrict the forms of being activist.

Activism is one thing, goes the second angle. But we have become a culture of fragmentation. Everything is split into pieces - our organisations, our relationships, our values, our time, different aspects of our work, different aspects of ourselves; the underlying connections between things is missing, as though a sense for landscape (perhaps human landscape) had disappeared. We do not really talk, or listen, or take time to respect the way we are with each other. We don't pay enough attention. There is an intelligence missing, an observing, a real meeting. We have lost a sense of heart, of soul connection to each other and to our society. And as NGOs we do little to work on these things, our time is taken up with so-called delivery. But what is it that we are delivering - a dumb and callous and

mercantile society? The spaces that are missing are the spaces of conversation.

Again it comes back - the NGO is the place where contradiction must be held. The NGO - by definition? - embraces contradiction, holding a free space open. Which means we can never rest in any one place of conviction. We tend to want to choose, but the essential thing is to flex our inner muscles to be able to hold the polarities, and to build organisational forms capable of holding them even without resolution.

Which means that the NGO is an organisation that - underlying all else that it does - stimulates and encourages itself and the people that it works with to *think*, above all else. Whatever else the NGO may do - different NGOs pursue objectives that stand even in opposition to each other - the NGO must be a thinking organisation, and must stimulate clear thinking in others. Without this, the intelligence needed to handle the contradictions that arise - out of its very essence - is lost. The NGO cannot afford to sink into jargon or discourse or boredom or routine; a formidable seeing, and the awakesness to respond to that seeing, is the radical project that every NGO must undertake.

Perhaps. Yet it is noted, somewhat wryly, somewhat bitterly, somewhat realistically, that money too remains a constraint and truth in all of our lives, that for both younger activists and older it constitutes a real gravitational force pulling us towards the centre. But still. But still.

qualities of doing

All these words, too many and too few, do not capture the underlying movement and heartfulness of the conversation. We have been immersed in a horrifying picture of humanity at the edge of an abyss, all but betrayed by NGOs who have sold their birthright and thrown their legacy overboard in a bid to outride the storm. Through looking the beast in the eye, though, without flinching, we have won through to a picture of the inspired NGO once more. It feels almost as though, in the heat of battle when all has felt lost, we have managed to raise the flag for one more rallying towards freedom, integrity, conviction.

The next morning we awake inspired, energised once more. Getting to the heart of the matter has generated heart.

Everyone is asked to sit on their own and, imagining that they have been asked for advice by a young person intent on starting an NGO, to sit and write a letter in response. The atmosphere becomes intensely reflective, honest, quiet, responsive and responsible; in the stillness the scratching of pen on paper is all that can be heard. Everyone is moved as though by a higher force - perhaps the collective force generated by the conversation itself. At the same time the individuality of each person is palpable and profound in the midst of their silence, in the haze of words spreading on diverse sheets of paper.

Afterwards in small groups, people read their letters to each other and take the conversation further, and then we all come together for a final attempt to gather, in all simplicity, what has emerged through this process. At this point we are guided by a particular question: From all we have written and spoken of now, can we distil the 'qualities of doing' that must characterise the NGO emerging into the future? Not to focus on the NGO as 'thing' but to qualify it as 'activity'. As a 'quality of doing' which should inform its choices.

The first and last thing is - no compromise. Of course the NGO holds the polarities of contradiction, and of course the NGO facilitates - it tends and nurtures the flame in others, this is *its* flame - it negotiates, and works alongside others, and is rooted and flexible at the same time ... and yet, and yet, the injunction to 'no compromise' holds. This particular contradiction can only be understood at the moment of choice.

The quality of relationship between and amongst all the NGO's parts and members and memberships is the quality of the future that we will bring to ourselves. When all is said and done it is this that the NGO will 'deliver' to the world; it will, willy-nilly, deliver a world through the quality of its doing. The future is not something we plan for and then operationalise; the quality of doing in the present will become the future that we inhabit.

Listening, with humility, beyond the audible, for what is seeking to emerge; listening deeply to people, patterns, power dynamics. Listening for the whole that is trying to express itself through its parts; listening in order to really understand. Such listening is an integral part of what we bring; whatever we bring enables a bringing from others

rather than curtailing it. Listening is very far from being passive; on the contrary, it is an active receptivity. It is a capacity, a disciplined and practiced faculty. It is a capacity to see the dynamics of a situation, to hear the grass growing. An ability to read the signs of our times.

Quality, excellence in what we do, is the benchmark of the NGO. This is not achieved merely by skills but by internal organisational processes and insisting on internal integrity. Inside itself, the NGO must be alive and constantly re-inventing its creativity.

Our practice must be underpinned and shot through with self-reflection. Anything less and we succumb to the forces that we think we are so very different from. Self-reflection is the only real protection against such (perhaps unconscious) betrayal. This includes both personal as well as organisational reflection. We have to reflect on the spectacles and lenses that inform our practice, and we have to critique these. Critical self-reflection is core not only to our quality of practice but to our ability to withstand processes of rusting and erosion.

It is through less tangible but more intrinsic forces that organisations are evolved. The less tangible seems to be the more meaningful. Our processes should bring soul to the intellectual - the heart becomes mediator, the heart becomes thinker. We cannot afford, for one moment, to let go of the human way in organisational life

So many of our social institutions - even churches, even political parties, even football clubs - have either declined or become corporatised, distant. Could NGOs become places where people could begin to live their social lives? NGOs demand a level of commitment to a cause which has vast implications in a world that works very differently, where such commitment is often seen as a sign of naiveté or dangerous individuality and freedom. The NGO, and its members, cannot be anything if not dynamic, in a state of becoming; the static entity cannot be the NGO. The NGO must contradict the values which the bureaucracy holds dear; the quality of doing of the NGO is on the other side from the quality of doing of bureaucracy - where the bureaucracy assumes, through its rules and regulations, a mistrust of the

individual motivation and ability, the NGO thrives on such freedom and personal responsibility.

The doing of the NGO is an activist, an alternative, doing. The NGO that is worthy of the name will always deliver its message with a quality of thinking that goes further and deeper than the prevailing thinking that is taking place around it. And it will stimulate and kindle the flickering flames of thinking that make up its constituency and context. The NGO can never become bureaucratic (or it slips into another organisation's way of doing and being). It can never become doctrinaire; its very reason for being is to help the human project evolve beyond the point it has reached.

So - it can never stop thinking, and challenging the previous thought; it can never stop reading and studying; reflection, silence and conversation is as much part of fostering change and movement as anything else it may 'deliver' ... and there is no bastion of learning or repository of power that is sacrosanct so far as the mobility, flexibility and challenge of NGO thinking and action is concerned.

The NGO straddles worlds in its holding of the tension of contradiction, not least the worlds of past and future; it both follows and leads, and is constantly emerging. If it is increasingly difficult to maintain an NGO quality of doing in a world that differs profoundly, it is also increasingly necessary.

* * * * *

inside and outside the struggle

by sue davidoff

Could we find a vessel within which to make sense of where we are currently in South Africa: as NGOs, as civil society, as society, as individuals? To stretch to the limits of our imaginations, yet maintaining fidelity to reality: indeed to bring imagination - daring to see, to behold, to witness, to make conscious and visible - and 'truth', reality, together as one. This was the challenge, at this time. A sense, perhaps inchoate, as yet unexpressed, that things are not as they should be,

as we would like them to be. Easier to see this in a global context, even in a national context (how many myths and dreams and senses of possibility have come tumbling down in the last few years?) but in the NGO sector - it has felt, for some mysterious reason, as though those questions, that quest for meaning - have been silent/silenced for a long while. How could we possibly enliven those questions, look at ourselves quizzically, go where it is difficult to go, be our own uninvited guests to our own search for meaning?

And so ... a Conversation among Elders. Well, it wasn't really intended that way in its conception, but that is how it turned out. Not the Conversation itself: that we really wanted, knew that it was the right form for such an earnest consideration. But the Elders - yes, those of us present who have a sense of history, of the subtle shifts and changes and contextual challenges that have caused us to deviate, to fall asleep to our deviations - we were (primarily but not exclusively) the ones who came, and who found ourselves, each other, and our way into a Conversation over four days (altogether); which allowed us the inner and outer space to waken together (and individually) to where we find ourselves now, where we have placed ourselves (without intent) over the past few years to arrive at this juncture.

We chose the form of Conversation because we felt that such a form would enable us to find our stories and to tell them in such a way that we could weave and illuminate meaning through the emerging (individual and collective) pictures. A container which takes on a life of its own, which starts to breathe and simultaneously creates and shapes meaning while providing the form within which that meaning can find expression. True Conversation offers a space where form and intention become one; where a living process emerges, where we are able to step inside this flow, inside the process, read the signs, discover the underlying narrative thread, make meaning. To allow a stream of consciousness to reveal itself as each person's contribution creates the direction of the conversation; as if it were one thought form emerging from the current of meaning that is being made through the Conversation itself. To create the Conversation at the same time that it catches and collects our thinking and gives new form and meaning to it. To provide a reflective space which can enable us to see (into) the situation. True Conversation enlivens, enlightens, enables, shapes, becomes. It is the meeting place where people are invited to listen and to hear, and where through the meeting and creation of shared meaning,

it draws the form beyond itself to further illuminate - through meeting, through meaning.

And so it was in this created and creative space that our exploration began: *Boundaries, Possibilities and Constraints amongst NGOs in South Africa*. Why? The German donor agency, EED, who had been largely responsible for activating this conversation, had expressed concern over the past few years (this conversation had been thought of some years previously) at the shifts that have been occurring within the NGO sector in South Africa. Post-apartheid NGOs seemed to have lost something 14 years on. What is it that has been contributing to a seeming loss of purpose, clarity of intention, and a sense of overall malaise - a lacklustre quality, a lack of rigour, of vigour, of animated intent? This is not to say that the picture is entirely negative. The overall sense was that something vital has been lost, and that something needs to be recovered, redeemed, resurfaced and redefined. And this seemed the time and the way in which to open up a robust exploration into where we are currently - we as the NGO sector in South Africa. And more than that, EED was reflecting on its own donor practice during this period and wanting some broader perspectives on this - have its strategies over all these years been failing in terms of making some kind of significant difference, addressing some of the critical structural and poverty issues facing this country at this time?

Within the Conversation, there were three interweaving elements throughout the process: the form (this was not a workshop, a conference, a meeting, a discussion; rather, the form was set to enable the real meeting of ideas, perceptions, feelings, responses, as described above); the content (the issue(s) that we came to converse about) and the specific exercises which provided the scaffolding to enable the content to unfold and to reveal itself.

the struggle I: post-apartheid south africa: where are we now?

The history of South Africa has been characterised, quintessentially, by the notion of 'struggle'. 'The struggle' has been such a powerful defining feature and sense of identity for our country: indeed, through the myriad forms of 'the struggle', fought over many decades, we won our liberation, we founded our democracy, we stunned the world with our remarkable redirection of energies, of possibilities. We were the miracle that made that which was deemed impossible possible.

Yet, over the years since 1994, quietly, almost unobtrusively, that razor-sharp critical edge which enabled us to cut our way through the most daunting of repression and brute opposition to change has slipped into obscurity. Into an eerie silence. And in its wake, the most unseemly trail of realities which seem to have created a monster. A monster of violence, of lack of form, lack of accountability, of corruption, of the disintegration of public services, of increasing poverty and increasing restlessness about this poverty, of a president known best for his denial of any of the major issues facing the country, of a failed education system, of unmet promises, of ethnicity, of massive unemployment, of the politics of fear, of the loss of the politics of inclusion: "We accomplished a peaceful transition to a society shot through with violence".

As a way of exploring the broader context of South Africa we asked each person to place themselves at 2008 and in their minds move *backwards and forwards* between 1994 and 2008, feel themselves inside the flow of event and movement which had shaped the contours and textures of this time, allowing the movement to speak for itself. People were asked to share their stories in small groups, and to try to see, through each person's narrative, into "what's really going on here?" "What patterns can we find in the individual pictures/stories, and among us in the bigger picture?" "What have we *allowed* and what have we *enabled*?"

We discovered, most potently, that we have lost our humanity. That failing systems of government have contributed to a fragmented and alienated society; that few are 'struggling' for humanity, but rather that there is a scrabble for power and riches; that there is an exclusive process taking place which is ignoring the marginalised: that we have lost the politics of inclusion in order to "keep something going"; that we live in a predominant culture of denial; that opposition and dissent have been demonised. That we are breeding a new kind of violence, where gangsters and criminals are the new leaders, and where "a 45 year old 'youth' in a Gucci suit chants 'we will shoot and kill for Zuma!' " We saw that South Africa is a very powerful microcosm of a new world order: "[The] apocalyptic future is hanging in the present". And that the major casualties in this scenario are the courage to mobilise and the ability to tell the truth. That we have lost the space for public dialogue in a society governed by self-interest.

Deep disappointment and a sense of betrayal are overarching. The proud history of struggle as we have known it has disappeared.

the struggle II: the diminishing voice of NGOs

So what about the NGO sector? Where is it in the context of the rather bleak emerging scenario of South Africa today? Where are we? And how can we enable that picture to become palpable for all of us as part of the bigger conversation, the bigger picture? We went through an exercise where small groups worked towards sharing stories about NGOs (which they know fairly intimately) in order to illuminate the *archetypal* NGO. This was done by looking (in their small groups) at three different ways of seeing: through working only with *factual information*; through exploring all aspects of the *quality of relationships* within the organisation, and looking at the organisation *in movement*; and through *imagination*, trying to pull out the *gesture*, the 'whole' that is sitting embedded in the parts. And through these explorations and portrayals, to look for the essential NGO that is manifest in all three: here is an organisational type that stands in the world in a particular way. How does it stand in the world? How does it manifest itself? This is a dream picture.

What is the intention of the NGO?

From this exercise we arrived at a very powerful and foreboding picture. What we discovered, uncovered, was lack of clarity of intention and purpose in post-apartheid NGOs. A very busy, rather weary and often wary sense of vague nostalgia for the 'old struggle days' where we knew who the enemy was and the battle lines were clearly drawn. A sector looking backwards with a kind of mesmerised longing and therefore not seeing what is standing right in front of its eyes as the current struggle; a sector falling asleep to the current forces which are assailing it from all directions. A sector which has not sufficiently been able to read the shifts of the time, and so has in many ways become part of the problem. The sector has begun, in its organisational form and perhaps even unintentional intention, to replicate the problems 'out there'.

We became aware of the movement of the NGO over time: shifting from a deep sense of inspiration, of values-driven organisations with dedication and commitment, working towards what really matters for people, to a

state of chronic crisis, operating in survival mode. An absence of creating spaces for others to act meaningfully. A 'corporatised' NGO.

Its identity? Perhaps that was the most sobering reflection. No longer any clear sense of struggle. Voices have become whispers, and the messages are neither clear, nor congruent with one another. Part of the disparateness, the fragmentation that divides our country along other lines now. We're no longer sure who are the good guys and who are the bad guys. There are lots of us, still; but who is fighting the good fight? There is a hiatus: a lack of articulation of what the current struggle is.

A time of uncertainty.

the struggle III: inner and outer

We discovered, as we proceeded with this unfolding conversation, that there was another dimension to the struggle: the loss of our humanity in the service - among other things - of global socio-economic forces. It would seem that our individual (and organisational) faculties for critical self-reflection, for recognising the need to nurture the inner life in the service of outer deed, for seeing the bigger picture, for being able to anticipate what is coming towards us: all these have been impaired. The inner - that which nurtures and enables the outer - has been neglected as we busy ourselves with compelling outer necessities. The inner has died to the outer. Organisations (NGOs) have become functional entities addressing fragmented 'needs' and desperately trying to survive in an increasingly NGO-unfriendly world

Living in a culture of fragmentation as we do, of high-speed technology, of immediatism, we have forgotten that things take as long as they take. We do not have the time to really think, or to reflect, because we need to 'work'. So what is 'work'? We found ourselves exploring new boundaries of what we call work: that in all of life there is a rhythm - of breathing in and breathing out, of action and reflection, of inner and outer. And to honour our work and the quality of our work, we have to honour these rhythms. A real challenge in the present context. We discovered that we leave little time in our organisations for meeting, for conversation, for hearing one another, for knitting the fabric of our organisational life, at the heart of which are the relationships within the organisations, and the

organisations and their worlds. We came to see that there was a need to redefine what is 'necessary' - and what is work.

We explored some of these inner dreams, possibilities and necessities at an individual level: what compelled us, inspired us, captured us in terms of envisioning our ideals when we were in our youth? And currently? And what have been our real night-time dreams during the course of our lives - those guides which have helped to point the way for us? And what is the narrative thread which links these three together - what do we learn about our lives, ourselves, our callings, our wonder, our intention? And within this context, of course, how our *intention* might connect with our current work - where we find ourselves now and how that shapes what we do and how we do it, and the world that we live in. These pictures brought us close to the heart of our yearnings, reconnected us with a profound sense of meaning, of wholeness in a fractured world, a country rent deep by its own failure to read its own challenges - and possibilities - with depth of intention.

beyond the struggle ...

So where to from here? We discovered that facing and naming our despair was necessary, but could lead us into a state of paralysis. Not naming and facing our despair has all but crippled our sense of possibility. How can naming something liberate us from that? Isn't it easier to turn away, and continue as before? Through the depth of encounter that was offered in this spacious time, we found our way into a state of alert and interested wakefulness. It became obvious that we have become seriously stagnated. And that it was now time to gather the dust, release it and look towards the future - beyond nostalgia, beyond fragmentation, beyond inertia: new forms are needed. How do we find them?

We created an inner circle and an outer circle: only those in the inner circle speak, and one chair to be left open at all times - so that movement of speaking and listening could flow easily and freely among the participants. We were talking to the questions: "What do I need to let go of? What can I not afford to let go of? Imagine it is the NGO emerging into the future having a conversation with itself".

Yes. We need to build a new sense of practice. "...an NGO is a group/ association/number of people that thinks

further and deeper than the thinking that is done around it. We need to hold on to our role in stimulating thinking that gives rise to a stance - we can only get an 'eye' when we are thinking." We need to develop faculties that will enable us to read our world and respond creatively; to apprehend wholeness, to *be whole*, create wholeness.

There was a remarkable congruence of thinking and of feeling at this point. The central motifs that participants gave expression to related to the following:

We call forth the future in the sense that "we make the path by walking it." Our practice in that walking allows the future to emerge. It is not just *any* kind of practice; a *certain* kind of practice is needed where we can hold on to the fact that 'every person matters' as a principle - this is the core of our humanity; that it is not just every person, but every moment, every thing we do that matters; that we need to let go of things as a means to an end. If everything matters, then everything we do is an end. Within all of this, we need to allow a sense of patience to enable what is there to emerge. Things take as long as they take - we need to develop the faculties to notice what each process, what each intervention needs in order to unfurl itself.

We need to hold on to humility, generosity, social solidarity and our humanity, and we need to let go of dark, toxic conspiratorial politics amongst competing NGOs. We need to become exemplars of a new kind of NGO politics - a generosity.

All this brings the question of reflection - as we walk we look at where we are, we reflect on things; it is like *thinking* alongside - part of our function is to create space for both reflection *and* contestation. And also, we need to go *beyond* reflection on practice and rigorously embrace theoretical work, reading, reminding ourselves of the theory.

We need to continuously search and provide support for emerging leadership - look and listen for leadership sparks; embrace mentoring young people. Plough back consciously: the greatest pioneers have had an eye for where potential lies and nurtured that. We need to develop the eye for new leadership and build on what is there.

We need to distinguish between our own views and the ability to raise awareness and input around the existence

of choices; we need to state our position/values strongly and give others the power to agree or resist. Integrity, honesty, trust - being true to ourselves, our authentic self; this helps others to discover their authentic self. In the NGO it is the *quality of relationships* between people - their authentic selves - which enables the vision to come alive. This is what we need to nurture about all else. We sometimes avoid confrontation, we are willing to back down. We need to be brave to move towards the unknown. An important lesson from the 80s was that we had a stance. We need clarity about our stance - we should not be ambiguous, but rather have courage for this stance.

If the life of an NGO is over we need to let go of its institutional shell, its form, resources and memory in a graceful way - let go with care. And we need to let go of the mentality of fear that we internalise and that is at its worst in our silence. We are too silent for fear of offending each other. We need to let go of victim mentality and seize our own power. Is our silence only because of our fear, or is it we don't know what to say, we don't know how to respond anymore?

Through much of what we spoke about, what became deeply resonant and quietly urgent was the need to infuse ourselves and our organisations with a deep sense of humanity, of possibility; to redefine the boundaries of our endeavours so that we may become more reflective and foster wakefulness and deep learning into the lives of our organisations: to tend the inner garden. To understand that the very nature of the organisation, how *it is* in the world (and how it *thinks about itself*) as much as *what it does* is what makes our world what it is. Our present is building our future: if we are able to become more whole, apprehend wholeness, create wholeness, understand wholeness, we are already halfway towards creating a more consciously chosen future.

... and towards the future

And so, as we approached the end of the week, coming to closure with the Conversation, we framed a question: "We are at a place of choice, listening to the organisation as it talks to itself, as it emerges into the future: "What is the NGO that is emerging into the future - its salient features? Not what *should* it be? But rather, what does it *have* to be? A question of necessity".

We asked participants to write a letter, as Elders, thinking about South Africa and where it is today, to a young person who wants to start an NGO. Share with them what you know, what you have come to understand; the dangers, the pitfalls, what to watch out for, what to encourage and what would enable this NGO to be really strong. What really matters at this time.

Once people had written their letters, we asked them to read each other's letters, and to distil and discern from across the letters the *qualities of doing* which characterise the NGOs emerging into the future. And to have a conversation around this. Once again we witnessed a profound congruence of focus and thinking ... focusing on the founding and grounding of conscious values and conscious intention. Thus:

Listening - with humility, beyond the audible for what is seeking to emerge. Listening deeply to people, patterns and power dynamics. Listening deeply to the community and working not only *for* but *with* the community.

Look for our own contradictions. We need to change our language and allow our language to be congruent with and reflect our intention.

Pay attention to the internal processes of the organisation: there needs to be a big emphasis on quality, excellence in what you try to do. This is not achieved by skills but by internal organisational processes and making that integrity internally. Inside it must be alive and re-inventing its creativeness - learning (leading?) from the inside, not just responding to the outside.

Learn from the sector and country; learn from present practitioners; help our own learners through example, so that they can create a vision for their own life development. Thus: create new forms for yourself - go forward. Take reflection and learning to a much wider audience to build new conversations and constituencies for social justice in the public at large.

Linked to this: self-reflective practice. We need inner personal reflection as well as organisational reflection. Reflect on the spectacles and lenses that inform our practice and critique this. Critical reflection is core to our quality of practice. And within this we need to honour what really matters to us: something less tangible, yet more meaningful. We need to bring soul to the intellectual - the *heart* as mediator and thinker. All

this emphasises the very real need to look after ourselves - 'time out' to nurture and look at one's sources of inspiration. Else we become overwhelmed and burnt out. Live with contradictions, paradox, possibilities: weave, wind and be open to the contradictions.

The successful NGO also needs *skills* in order to read the context in which we are working. We look at government, business sector, but we are not always aware of what is happening on the ground with the people. We need capacity to see *the dynamics* - to hear the grass growing. We need the ability to read the signs of our times - thinking practitioners must have this as a skill.

Form follows focus; doing follows Being. Think of the organisation as potential - its process of becoming, its dynamism. It is not a static entity.

And so, we came to the end. This Conversation held and gave form to people's contributions. The specific exercises enabled people to tell their truth, to offer their gesture, to reveal the narrative thread: a place and time where form and intention came together. A space where the many voices were woven into a composition of living, connected thinking and ideas. And a place where an implicit picture of the NGO of the future began to emerge.

We saw a new form of NGO become visible - one which brings integrity of form and purpose, a practice which brings together clarity of intention, method, content, focus and the faculties required to bring all of this into being. We saw a return to the enlargement of people, of humanity as the core and primary intention, as the beginning and end of whatever it is we choose to focus on as the medium of our work. We saw the NGO as an organ of cognition, stimulating thinking and understanding, and envisioning a future possibility through a new language; through the recognition that *who* and *how* we are *now* creates our future. We saw a movement from the past (nostalgia) to the future (possibility).

going home

And how was this process for the people who came and participated in, created this Conversation? For many people this was a new form, and there was a certain and legitimate curiosity and scepticism. How were they going to leave this extraordinary and gracious thinking-and-

connecting space and go back to their own worlds? Can Conversation really shift practice? Can Conversation really shift thinking? Can Conversation really shift Being and Becoming? We asked the question: what on a personal level you will be taking away with you into your future? Some responses:

A clearer picture of the nature of the NGO sector and my place in relation to it; as though I have been getting new lenses.

I am going back to an organisation: how am I going to wake everyone up without them feeling blamed? I woke up this week and I need to share my *experience* with my colleagues, not just *information*.

A question of re-inventing spaces for learning and debate and how to do it in a new way to create more possibilities.

Process - I wondered where we would end and couldn't see it. We're here now - a place of great enrichment - awed by the quality of people in this circle. Thought - to seed my own thinking.

This process reminds me of the learning model - so what? We've come through the cycle entirely and we do have a 'what' - the privilege to discover some of that 'what' together. We have been privileged to see more deeply the world of NGOs. Participation has been with trust, risk and confidence. Meaning has emerged out of a process of conversation in rhythm; I have an enhanced appreciation of this as a process.

This was HUGE and yet a soft thoughtful, responsive way of taking us through a particular process guided by questions. I am left with a renewed respect for the importance of questions and finding the right question, as well as a deep listening and deep responsiveness: not to the obvious.

This process engaged all my faculties - felt this in the letter writing as I could have written for hours because I didn't have to 'think' - it was all there - it worked.

This process forced me to go beyond - moments of need to push for cerebral sharpness. I take away appreciation for space for other parts of myself to emerge: an appreciation for the depth beyond the cerebral.

Renewed connection and hope in the sector - maybe all is not lost.

Process - I end with some anxiety. I want to see outcomes. Not sure what eventually is captured in a conversation and how it helps to have a bigger conversation out there - we're not the only ones.

I now have a richer, more current understanding and analysis of what's going on in the sector with a certain sense of urgency. I am struck by a sense of crisis around the question of NGO/civil society - I was not aware that this was the predominant feeling. I also feel a certain sense of optimism - a forward-looking open spirit amongst leaders and activists here. New possibilities and new forms, and seeing crisis as a transition to something different that may build on the old.

This has been a process of ritual immersion - like a natural pool, organic, and with depth. I feel enriched by the level of both intellectual and emotional engagement. We visited our own humanity.

I came with questions and now leave with contradictory questions. On the precipice, but I quite like the point. Process - it was wonderful to experience a contained process - and I have appreciated the deep value of process.

It's a good thing to feel contradictions and to feel comfortable with them and learn to engage with them - they are necessary. The ability to interpret the signs of the times - to see what is emerging, emphasises that doing follows being, but it is equally important that 'becoming' is a focus. I will encourage this use and will continue to use the methodology of conversation as it allows flexibility.

An acknowledgement, at the end, that EED pushed the need for this - bringing many aspects of the sector together: this conversation has had a quality of absolute equality - everything has been drawn out of everyone here - equal and different.

And we go back home: hopefully different in our being and our understanding; infused with renewed hope and a sense of possibility. For if Conversation is true, then it works like an alchemical process of transformation. The end is a fundamentally different place from the beginning, and finding our way to the ending has been a journey which everyone participated in and created

simultaneously. We were the journey, and emergence out of the process provided the possibility to understand and see with new eyes and therefore to find a new stance in the world. An opening up journey, with unending vistas and possibilities. It is really up to each one of us.

* * * * *

speaking a-new

by liz smith

We sat on the banks of our conversation, those of us who had come, contemplating the plunge. Some were ready to jump, looking forward to the immersion, the tussle and the shifts that it could bring. Others came thirsty, looking to drink from the communal cup, missing this form of sanctuary in their busy lives. Some felt deeply connected to this busyness, struggling to be still and feeling self-indulgent in the attempt. Others, dragging their heels, felt ambivalent, but open to what may come. Some came curious - who would be here and what multifarious initiatives for social change would they represent? One expressed a fear, *"There may be nothing more dangerous in SA at the moment than a roomful of NGO leaders as an obstacle to social emancipation."*

All were immersed deeply in the common work of striving for social and economic transformation in South African society. All were struggling to take a step back and make meaning of the shifts and changes happening in this time, their questions welling from deep down. As NGOs, what is our place, our role in South Africa at this time? Do we still have a place or are other forms of organisation required? Why do many not know what an NGO is? Are we part of the problem, actually getting in the way of social and economic transformation? Why is there a dearth of leadership in civil society and where are the development activists? What is civil society? How does government see the sector and why - when we relate to government - is our voice so weak? Can we say we are part of civil society if we are doing delivery services for government and acting as corporate agents for change? Why is there this shift in the way we define ourselves, from 'non-government' to 'non-profit' organisations? What is this movement towards money as the definition of value in place of human qualities, this corporatisation of

service? Why are we constantly having to chase after money and funders - what haven't we done to help donors understand? How do we respond to this tinder-box time in South Africa where, in the words of Leonard Cohen:
Everybody knows that the fight is fixed/The poor stay poor, the rich get rich/That's how it goes, everybody knows.

Is it possible to move beyond this form of knowing, which is complicit by nature, and really see what's going on here? This is just what the group of 20 or so social development practitioners, activists, leaders of NGOs and local and international donors set out to do in the thatched and lime-washed environment of the retreat centre outside the small town of Stanford in June 2008. The task at hand was, *"to look at where NGOs in South Africa are today, listening, not just to each other, but on a deeper level to the world of the NGO which we will bring into the room. Listening to what is happening in this world. Allowing this world to speak."* And to do this through the form of conversation.

In preparation for our journey the first to enter the stream of conversation were our feet. We used the language of movement to explore what it means to both follow and create a conversation - where no one is in control - and really listen for, and articulate, what is trying to emerge in the space between. We practised trying to be present to what the other was saying, to follow the other's movement accurately and to respond appropriately. We discovered how easy it is to speak at the same time, to be unsure what the other was saying and how difficult it is to listen. Above all we discovered that learning a new language is difficult, hindering understanding and the ability to generate a flow of meaning between us. But even in our common tongue, how often in our daily exchanges do we manage to generate real, transformative conversations? Not very often. So what, then, is the language of conversation?

Within the roots of the word "conversation" itself, there live the concepts of change, versatility, emptying, poetry and skill. A lively activity which requires so much more of us than the mere swapping of information, thoughts and opinions that so often get passed off as conversation. In a sense true conversation can be seen as a new language, a language of imagination and transformation.

In order over the course of the week *"to get under the skin of the NGO world and make sense of it"*, to see, make

visible and then articulate what is going on, a methodology was used which in a sense was like learning a new language. A language whose 'vocabulary' is born of acute observation of the phenomena, of - as far as possible - things as they are, and not as we assume or believe them to be. A 'grammar' built on an ability to see relationships and inwardly follow streams of movement which give rise to the outer, visible phenomena, and to follow these movements both backwards and forwards. A language that goes beyond a linear, sequential thinking in terms of cause and effect, but enters the realm of living process which is more spherical, and three-dimensional in nature where things happen simultaneously at various levels, and where links between things are not directly visible, nor immediately obvious.

This is a language that does not seek to explain (which carries the implication that something other than the phenomenon, something 'out there', is responsible) but seeks, in a structured, disciplined and objective way, to allow the phenomenon itself to speak. It can be seen as the language of phenomena - the voice of the situation, relationship, organism or organisation itself striving for expression through us. By its very nature conversation happens in relationship, in the space between, where something new can emerge. Perhaps if we could master this language our conversation could enable not only the expression of what is, but also a birthing of what is wanting to become.

coming to conversation

"How have we got to where we are at this point in 2008? Can we trace the story of the NGO sector and South Africa as a whole all the way back to 1994, recognising significant points, events and movements, and get inside the processes of what gave rise to them? Once there, can we inwardly follow the movement, the flow all the way back to the present? What patterns do we see arising?"

With this first task the conversation focused through intra- and inter-personal reflections, taking everyone deeper into the waters as they re-lived the past 14 years. We could, at this point, have listed the main events and significant movements of which there have been many. We could have looked at them chronologically and debated their relationships, causes and effects. With the knowledge, experience and intellectual capacity of those in the room, we could have built up some very valid arguments as to why we are in the position we find

ourselves in and some plausible ideas as to future courses of action. But we did not, for this would have resulted in a conversation *about* the past, keeping it at arm's length and generating opinions and theories in language that - in its primarily intellectual engagement - would have kept us separate from the phenomenon.

What we chose to do was to have a conversation *with* the past, bringing it into the room and alive between us. In order to do this we needed to use a methodology and awaken a language that could engage the whole of us; that would allow all parts of ourselves to resonate and speak. So the structured exercise asked that we stay with the movement of the unfolding story, follow this movement inwardly, backwards and then forwards again, getting inside the processes that gave rise to outer events and movements, and then to put ourselves into that story, revisiting the joys, the sorrows, the frustrations and the fears we felt, inwardly re-enacting what we did and how we thought. Having been re-imagined, the story was then given voice in whatever way it needed - through picture, word, action and song. We were graced with a multi-faceted narrative of our young democracy in all its dynamic, contradiction and depth. This movement of entering deeply, with our whole being, into a conversation with the past created a countermovement of lifting our perspective out of the here and now and illuminating the path that brought us to where we are. And it spoke to us, deeply. Not just to our heads, but to our hearts and souls.

This immersion enabled us to see what we as a nation had been and what we have become, and to acknowledge collectively the feelings that this evoked. It brought forth the cry: "*We have lost our practice. We were so gloriously human!*" It enabled us to acknowledge that the euphoric Rainbow Nation of the '90s is no longer, and to mourn this passing of lost promise. We saw that the myth of the rainbow, although perhaps necessary at the time, may now be entrenching ethnic divides. We were confronted by the reality of a society still built on exclusion and privilege, and our anger was raised at the politics of denial and fear that has emerged to maintain this. We grieved at the demise of truth and the fact that "*we accomplished a peaceful transition to a society shot through with violence.*" We felt scared at this time of disintegration and almost apocalyptic uncertainty, where the xenophobic wrath of the desperately poor is juxtaposed amongst an absence of leadership and a scramble for riches and immunity. We experienced at gut level the very real possibility of the school poster that

read, *"Our fear and our greed are destroying our future."* We sat with this, experiencing our own pain and that of the deeply internalised wounds of the people of our nation.

But there was also some hope. In the wider civil society context we celebrated the rise of some exciting sparks of activism against privatisation and lack of services, new movements where many women are involved, increased self-reliance, and some of the biggest marches for many years linking protests to world movements. We did, however, acknowledge the fragmentary nature of this activism and its lack of cohesive organisation, vision and common morality.

We also noted the movement in NGOs from idealism to pragmatism. Previously, NGOs were carried by the mass movement embodying the idealism and moral purpose of the struggle against the clear enemy of apartheid. Now they are grounded in *"new ways of seeing and sober, reality-based responses to the times."* At this darkest point, *"facing reality is the new point of light ... pushed up against the wall we are forced to interrogate our core values."*

Looking at ourselves truthfully we were able to admit that we were both flattered and used by international donors who regarded South African NGOs as special, with superior expertise to bring to the dark continent. Glorifying in this role we allowed ourselves to become separated from others on the continent. The dashing of the illusion of South Africa as the springboard to Africa - brought about by the xenophobic violence - was almost a relief.

Entering into our context in such depth, letting it speak, and allowing the pictures to live and resonate within us, brought the phenomenon to life between us. Looking at what we were allowing and at what we were enabling we came to a point of convergence in our conversation between the state of our context out there, and the state of our group in the room. One of the participants voiced it:

"No human being changes until completely up against the wall. We should be celebrating but we are sitting on a razor edge between apocalyptic and possibility. It is an excruciating place to sit."

And indeed, we found it hard to sit in this place, running quickly for the shelter of possible solutions:

"Civil society needs the courage to hold the space for the public dialogue that is missing" - or seeking to explain and blame: "During apartheid we could see the enemy, the oppressive government, and this shifted focus from the real problem of capitalism." We found it so excruciating that we tried to comfort ourselves and soften reality: "The flip side of xenophobia is what civil society, individuals and businesses are doing. There is an outpouring of humanity, we just need to channel this." We floundered in this way for a while, preferring to discuss dehumanising global forces out of our control or possible changes in economic practice, rather than go back to that razor's edge within ourselves and face the shadow of being human.

But gently we were brought back. Through personal experience and story we were brought back. We heard how so many have been displaced in so many ways. We spoke of how important it is for the healing of trauma to be able to tell one's story and how the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was such a small part of this. There are still so many stories which need to be told in a contained, honouring space with an audience to *listen*, where the deep hurt can be recognised and named, if the monster of apartheid is not to constantly come back to haunt us.

"What can we take responsibility for? Truth-telling is sitting with me." But what constitutes truth-telling? "I see so much 'in-depth' research phrased dispassionately and sanitised. And so many stories have been created since 1994 - we have allowed dire situations to happen. We as NGOs are not good at speaking truth ... about our reality now."

"Apocalyptic - It's tied to questions of truth - it exposes the myth that is there to help us to make sense of things. Truth names the void, says what is there. There is a need for a new practice in the midst of loss of humanity. Perhaps the new practice is listening - not necessarily only sympathetic listening but listening as a political act. I wonder if the primary political act is speaking and the role of NGOs is to enable the speaking of the marginalised voice - we don't hear them. That voice exposes the myth ... enabling this is a critical role of NGOs which have been listening to the places of power and control ... our bias is to those places that exclude ... untruths fill the void."

But "How do we give voice to the marginalised without talking on their behalf?"

" ... I am intrigued by this notion of conversation. Very little happens in organisations; we are in the mode of delivery. Conversation would allow for truth-telling to come out ... If we open to these kinds of conversation the humanity and miracles are there." So dawned a recognition of the power of conversation as perhaps a most profoundly human strategy for transformation.

straddling the divide

"Can we take the NGO as a South African phenomenon, given where it's come from, its context and where it is now, accepting all the differences, can we use the NGOs we know to illuminate that which is the NGO in SA today? What essentially it looks like ... and what is emerging."

From the broader context, we were ready on the third day, to move closer to our own experience in the more intimate territory of the NGO itself. Again, we did not want to talk about NGOs. Our attempt was to transform the object of our attention, the South African NGO, into the subject of our conversation in the most literal of senses. To climb inside the skin of the NGO and let *it* speak in its own authentic voice, in the way we had allowed our context to speak, but differently.

In the process we increased our knowledge of this disciplined language of conversation. Rather than try to describe the South African NGO from the outside, gathering a composite of salient features into one generalised form, we wanted it - in all its difference - to resonate and speak through us in a whole way, and then give voice to its essential nature. We started with the facts. In small groups each described the facts of their NGO in as much accurate detail as possible. This in itself required the discipline of discerning facts from opinion and assumption, and bore unexpected fruits. "It was like manna. The de-isolating experience of sharing the facts was great."

We then delved deeper into the movement of the organisation as it expresses itself through its relationships - internal and external, in the present, and over time. Here the challenge was to tell the full story, not to hold back the less favourable bits, but also to resist from judging, blaming or taking sides. This provided a safe space for "brutal honesty from each of us, where we weren't just saying the nice things. It was a fulfilling experience, giving a sense of humanity and a feeling of not being alone in the struggles and challenges." For some this stage was so important in its

cathartic quality that they devoted most of their time to it and discovered that *"coming back to core values was the point at which healing and direction returned, not the vision of the organisation."*

The final step was likened to pulling the rabbit out of the hat. The attempt to see the whole that is embedded in the parts - the essential NGO which is manifest in all particular NGOs - needed image and metaphor and drew on an inner activity and creativity to give it form, to give it language.

For this language of phenomena to truly be objective, for us to enable the NGO itself to speak, the rigorous use of empiricism, discernment and a faculty of disciplined imagination was required. It also demanded that we turn the dispassionate gaze usually reserved for the world 'out there' inwards, becoming aware of our inner assumptions, responses and thought patterns if we were to refrain from judgment and opinion. Even then, allowing the phenomenon to speak required not just the portrayal of the pictures but also the receiving of that portrayal by an audience, giving it time to resonate, and out of this, trying to articulate its essence. So the language of conversation is a participative language involving a recurrent unfolding and infolding of outer and inner until they are one.

The whole process of striving for the essence took all of a day, and some. *"The day was lovely, comprehensive and there was mutuality. It was qualitatively better and less stressful than two hours of debate."* It was also an emotional day for some, even difficult, but a day of deep sharing. So it seems that this language of conversation is a deeply human language, not only based on our humanity, but also building it.

In the striving for the essence, many images of the NGO were brought before us. We saw the picture of a 1980s model car struggling through the harsh terrain of *"a countryside of leaderless chaos ruled by the anonymity of industry"*. We saw a fig tree uprooted by storms but still struggling to grow in its rocky environment. We saw a group of determined and idealistic people in search of Humanity struggling to cross a river of volatile rapids and deep whirlpools, and a pioneer surrounded by people united in purpose but unable to find a sustainable form to grow into the future. We saw a boat navigating the twists and turns of a river, constantly having to make choices. We saw an organisation, responding to and compensating for an absence in the world around it,

living with contradiction and filling in the missing pieces in order to rectify the balance. We saw an organisation charged with tending the flame, but dowsing that flame in the name of sustainability that it may keep spreading the flame. So what is it spreading? We saw that it had come to a time where *"we are between one set of organisational forms from a particular time and something else we are not sure of."* We saw that *"NGOs at the best of times are organisations of contradiction. These are the worst of times and the contradictions fragment rather than tauten the disciplines of practice."*

We saw an organisation straddling broad and contradictory spaces dancing to music, but to whose music is it dancing?

the search for language

"The development industry has usurped our very language. All the old words, concepts don't work. Yet language influences and defines who we are. At this point of transition, we can no longer say what we mean. We ourselves no longer know what we mean."

We had seen in the broader context that, in the name of transformation in South Africa, no fundamental transformation has taken place. We still live in a "them and us" society, but one in which the clear divide between black and white has now been replaced by an increasing number of new fractures between "them" and "us". In places where previously (pre-1994) there was cohesion and solidarity, there is now violence and hatred. The xenophobic attacks and the *"We will shoot and kill for Zuma"* slogan are overt examples of this. But who is "them"?

"Whites, foreigners, fat cats, government, criminals, business, bosses, donors, capitalists, imperialists - anyone but us!"

And who is us? We are a society that is finding it increasingly difficult to determine who belongs to "us".

"They are black but they think like me - are they them? Or are they us?"

Nationalised South African citizens - are they them? Or are they us?"

Tswana girl, Somali shopkeeper - are they them? Or are they us?"

The very act of trying to define who is 'them' and who is 'us' gives voice to the unchanged structure of division and exclusivity on which our society is built. It is a

nation form that has been *"tinted slightly"* since 1994, whose content has changed, but whose structure has essentially stayed the same. A structure that is being fiercely guarded by the demonising of the political voice of dissent, the demobilisation of civil society and by the use of NGOs to prop it up and keep it going. And yet the structure seems to be crumbling. The rise and growth of the criminal sector to which we are losing our young leaders and entrepreneurs, the scramble for riches and power, the lack of an economics of care, and the loss of values based on neighbourhood care and responsibility all contribute to the fact that the struggle for survival is becoming an individual struggle.

"No-one is fighting for humanity."

In reflecting on our story of the past 14 years it was the erosion and loss of our humanity that was mourned the most. This pain hurt the more because it is a particular feature of the South African NGO, and of many individuals who were in the room, that their roots lie deep in the dark and rich soil of the Struggle, the life-blood of which was the fight for humanity. So how is it possible that the moral fibre of a society, who just 14 years ago was the beacon of light for the world, can so quickly turn into a source of shame?

"How can a mountain bring forth a mouse?"

Confronted by the images of the South African NGO today, characterised as it is by crisis, its struggle for survival in an increasingly hostile environment, its loss of voice, its loneliness and its uncertainty as to the next step, it is not surprising then that there arose a kind of nostalgia in the group for the *"Golden Age"* of NGOs, an inner harping back to the glory days of high idealism, the cause that inspired them and the role they played in the fight against apartheid. *"In the past we were motivated by the 'cause' - what's wrong with that? Can't we revisit the past in order to go forward?"*

One language that defined the NGO of that time was the language of resistance, of confrontation, of fighting against a *"them"*, a language of combat. It was notable that this language was still apparent as we spoke in terms of *"weapon"* and *"enemy"* and *"victory"* and of *"fighting about inequalities"*. The danger of glorifying the past was voiced, of hanging onto the myth of the Golden Age of NGOs which has led to both *"a sense of victimhood and an entitlement that we deserve more than we are getting."* But has this danger been recognised? In the unconscious perpetuating of this myth, is the NGO

in a bigger danger of allowing itself to continue to be defined by this language of confrontation? In its own struggle for survival in an extremely harsh environment, and in its search for the new "Cause for Humanity", is it becoming yet another "us" standing for or against a "them" and so itself contributing to our culture of fragmentation?

Is it possible to fight against something without in the end becoming the very thing against which we fight? Is it possible to fight for humanity and still remain human? *"We need to confront what encourages the destruction of humanity but not in the same dehumanising way. We need to find a human response."* That is on the one hand.

On the other hand we need to be awake to how the language of development has been corporatised. How the language of strategic planning and reports, and words such as 'sustainability', 'change management', 'outcomes', is forming us and making our practice. *"The question of language is very important. The power of language makes us who we are. To understand this power requires us to deconstruct. We need the skills we used in the darkest of struggle times, the tools we used as Marxist activists to understand how these forces are linked to power. They are useful now to help us listen."*

So what is the new form our striving for humanity needs to take? What is the new language that will define the NGO of the future? And in all this, what is the role of civil society?

"It is as if the roles have shifted; the governmental sector has embraced a privatised economy, and civil society, because of our history, has had to take on a political role of the opposition voice, and is still having to do this. But where is the space for the human, cultural life of soul enrichment - surely this is a role of civil society? Perhaps we need two aspects to civil society - the social justice side and the building up of the cultural, artistic and communal side."

emptying

We were at a crossing point, a place of uncertainty - and possibility. *"So how do we choose? The old forms don't serve us anymore. We are inadequately prepared to meet the present and the future... Do we stand on the precipice of a new way, or should we leave the stage?"*

Earlier in the week we had looked at the fragmentation of our society, our context, and stared into the face of what was disintegrating, even dying. Then, our first response had been: *"Where is the glue that holds us together?"* Now, we knew better. We had learned that facing death, staying in that place of dis-solving and the in-betweenness of things, of not giving way to our desire to fix and make better, was an essential stage on the road to the coming into being of the new. This time, we gave this place the time it needed. By so doing we enabled many of the old things that we held dear, that defined us and that we were guarding as part of who we were, to loosen and begin to fall away. The old struggle songs and all that they embodied, (*"Those struggle songs have taken years to die, are we trapped in a politicised discourse?"*) the closely guarded language of the sector, (*"The language we are guarding is not the language of youth"*) our picture of the NGO, (*"The political struggle NGO might not fit the present world"*) and even the NGO itself as a form, (*"The challenge of this epoch is not 'Lets form an NGO', it's living with the contradictions"*) - all were questioned, inwardly released.

This letting go, this inner process of emptying without wallowing in emotion or rushing to act, enabled a stillness in which the new, though still inchoate, could gently begin to surface and quicken our interest ... Where is the voice of the youth, the young artists and poets, and what are they activating for? What is the role that we, an older order, can play? What about the search for soul and meaning? *"The spaces that are missing are the spaces of conversation. In part, we have lost the heart ... We haven't brought ecology into the discussion - part of our role is to help champion those causes."*

A wider view of the NGO as a place of free association working in both the political and civic sphere, and embracing many, varied forms of organisation. *"Let's not see an 'NGO movement', let's see a hundred flowers."*

A language of wholeness that *"can embrace the both/and. Dialogue between the differences. How do we embrace the economic beast and the political? Part of either/or language narrows and reduces."*

And a practice that reflects this language of wholeness; *"What is it that we mean by practice?"*

It is the relation between our intention and the method we choose, the content we use, our skills, capacities and faculties and how these all come together. The NGO - the place where contradictions must be held - can never rest. We tend to want to choose one of the fragments rather

than flex our inner muscles to be able to hold the polarities."

With glimpses of the new floating near the surface we went into a time of individual contemplation of our own dreams, ideals and sense of purpose, reflecting on how our own story weaves into the cloth of the new that was emerging.

"... and the end of all our exploring ..."

We gave form to the emerging new through a process of *"the future NGO in conversation with itself, what it has to become out of necessity."* A process of listening and speaking, observing and participating in two concentric circles, where the outer listened to those who were literally moved to speak from the inner circle, a recurrent movement between inner and outer. The guiding question was *"As we move into the future, what do we have to let go of and what can we not afford to let go of?"* Slowly, from all sides, it began to coalesce and crystallise into more or less the following form.

The future NGO or social justice organisation is an organisation with a strong stance born out of its clearly articulated

- Values, the heart and soul of what drives it
- Thinking, that goes further and deeper than the thinking that is done around it
- Collective learning and capacity, its key resource and comparative advantage
- History - both organisational and sectoral.

This stance in the world enables it to engage authentically, assertively and courageously with both government and donors of every ilk (corporate and non-corporate, national and international). It enables a vigorous and creative engagement in order to educate, influence, challenge and share; to say "No" firmly and collegially to donor agendas or delivery on government's behalf, while building credibility for itself in the eyes of the world. The real NGO is generous of spirit, an exemplar of a new kind of NGO politics of humility, generosity, social solidarity and humanity. It builds open relationships with fellow organisations; it accepts that when its life is over and its work is done, it will let go with care and dignity, knowing that others will come after it to carry on the work in a new form.

Each person then, as an elder, used their (collectively enhanced) wisdom to write a letter. To personally share

with a young person wanting to start an NGO in the present context, what they know and understand; the dangers, the pitfalls, what to watch out for, what to encourage and what would enable this NGO to be really strong. From these letters we found that the qualities of doing of the NGO of the future were deep listening, with humility, to people, patterns and power dynamics; the ability to read the signs of our times; a leading from the inside and not just responding to the outer; a working not only for, but with community; a learning from the sector, the country and present practitioners as well as an internal aliveness and creativity to find new forms and go forward. A quality of doing that is always self-reflective, critiquing the lenses through which it sees the world, with an emphasis on excellence, practising internally what it is trying to do in the world. A quality of doing that is open to contradiction and paradox, being transparent, authentic and accountable while embracing the principles of personal consciousness, creativity, responsibility and freedom. A quality of doing that begins to change reality by helping to arouse a genuine activism amongst people.

And so we found that the emerging NGO of the future was not unlike our language of conversation itself.

It is a place that holds the ultimate contradiction of knowingly entering a state of not-knowing. A place of human engagement that through disciplined practice and courage holds open a space for the new and creative to emerge. Its practice based on the premise that there is time for every person and every moment, and that everything we do matters. It has an authentic stance to which it remains true, even in the face of challenge, born out of an active thinking and seeing that goes deeper and further than the thinking that is done around it.

It has a quality of doing underpinned by deep listening and a critical understanding of its reason for being. It understands that it is through *"the less tangible but more meaningful, intrinsic forces that organisations are evolved."* A doing that is based on the language of conversation that we had learned, a language that *"brings soul to the intellectual and listens deeply to the thinking and mediating of the heart."* A listening that enables a *thinking into phenomena*, and a speaking that enables *the phenomena themselves to speak*, rather than a thinking *about* phenomena and a seeking for explanation somewhere else.

Personally, through our days of conversation, we found ourselves in a place of greater wholeness, where we had reconnected with neglected parts of ourselves, used parts of ourselves we are not wont to use and stretched ourselves in the using. We had broken through our habitual ways of seeing to find a new clarity and lightness of being which quickened and awoke us even as it excited, challenged and affirmed us in the work we are doing and the new we could bring to it. The immersion in this language of conversation brought a renewed connection and hope in the sector, new relationships and a certainty and vigour that could state, *"this is a legitimate sector with future and purpose."*

* * * * *

We had come to a place of deep responsibility, a place that was at the same time profoundly serious and filled with joy. For we knew that if we indeed became this NGO of the future, then this would be the society, this would be the future, that we would foster. And we are all, after all, and always have been, agents of change. We saw that if we succumb to other forms of organisation - or to the pressures imposed by other forms of organisation - then we would entrench a society which does not reflect our intention. Ironically, while we are organisations of contradiction, it is only these very 'qualities of doing' that will enable the task of living with contradiction without ourselves fragmenting. How we are now is the future that we will inherit.

* * * * *
*