

So what *does* art have to do with development?

A piece written for the Community Development Resource Association

In its characteristic stand against the mechanistic view of development as a process of combining quantitative inputs with controlled throughputs to achieve desired and predictable outputs, CDRA has consistently engaged in and experimented with artistic activities as part of their own development process. These activities also form part of the courses they run and what they offer their clients, associates and fellow development practitioners. This engagement with the use of the arts as part of their development practice has, over the years, resulted in a deep realisation that these creative processes are far more than the bits on the side which provide light relief from the serious and 'real' work of development. Rather, the qualities and approach required, and developed, by artistic creative processes are core skills and capacities for any development practitioner wanting to intervene in a respectful way into the lives of others.

Working in the field of development means working with the nature and intricacies of the human being. The thoughts, emotions and impulses that drive and motivate us are interrelated in obscure and unpredictable ways. The life of an individual is just that – a complicated living process of ongoing and evolving development that, when brought into relationship with others in whole communities and organisations, forms a highly complex and multi-layered web of living and evolving relationships. These relationships, with all their particularity and idiosyncrasy, in turn form the unique life path of that community or organisation. This complex field of human interactivity, of which the community or organisation is itself only dimly aware, is the great unknown into which the development practitioner steps when s/he enters a new situation and brings the further complexity of his/her own evolving life process.

Stepping into this field of human relationship is not unlike entering into a process of artistic creation. A process of getting to know your medium, discovering the qualities of the different colours, tones and textures, the intricacies of the different moves and dance-steps, the surprises of the different meetings. A process of coming up against the hard places that require working with, warming, kneading and making pliable in order to start to shift and move and take on a new form. A process of learning respect for your medium, of not taking it at face value but opening yourself to it that it may begin to work on you and thus reveal its many secret possibilities. A bumping against your own shortcomings and the frustrations of not achieving what you had set your heart on, but having to bend to the intractable will of that which you meet. A meeting with your own deep fears and secret shame at not being the person you thought and hoped the world would think, you were. A confrontation with that fear and, in spite of it, the courage to risk all at just the right moment to make your mark for all to see.

An immersion into artistic process gives expression to hidden places of one's being resulting in growing self-awareness and discernment. An ability to hold back and to open the space for the new; to observe, to see what is already there and to move with it, following and supporting what is coming into being. It is a listening deeply to the harmonies and the discords to find your tone, your authentic voice that augments the whole and lets it sing. And it is to lose yourself in the song which is so much bigger and more powerful than yourself. It is to become humble and revel in a new-found honesty and freedom of knowing that while your contribution is significant, the

outcome does not depend on you alone. It is to play, to dance, to dab colour with a light and joyful touch and to feel invigorated and alive with possibility. To befriend and draw close, to feel comfortable in the knowing and the increasingly familiar. And in the ongoing doing of it, it is to face the choice of falling into self-satisfied habit or challenging yourself to reach out towards the next new frontier of your learning and being, the next high note to be mastered.

And in all this, it is to come to the sudden and surprising realisation that art is not a specific work to be created, nor is development a specific state to be achieved. But that development, if practised with the sensitivities of an artist, is a continuous and ever-evolving, ever-unfolding process of relating and creating which grows, stretches and transforms us all – artist, development practitioner and community alike - even as we strive for that elusive masterpiece, that mythical state of social perfection.

The deep, experiential learning and self-knowledge gained from such artistic processes can be transferred directly into grounded developmental practice and specific faculties and skills for the social and community development practitioner. Some of these can be articulated as follows;

- Respect for the independence of the individual, the sovereignty of the community and the constraints and inherent lawfulness underlying any living process of development.
- Discipline of practice, of learning from mistakes and striving to improve skill and technique despite disappointments and setbacks.
- Self-awareness and growing mastery at all levels - physical, emotional and mental - leading to an increasing ability to discern when one is acting in the best interests of the whole and when out of unconscious compulsion.
- Imagination grounded in an open attentiveness and ability to listen and see what is, and what is wanting to become - and the courage to act on this insight.
- The paradox of holding a clear intention while letting go of control in order to engender a truly creative response to the challenge of our times.

Working with the arts in development practice is itself a living, growing, creative process of development taking both artists and social practitioners on a journey of discovery, the fruits of which will nourish the community it is their intention to serve, in creative and unpredictable ways.

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February 2009

