

A Delicate Activism

A Phenomenological
Approach to Change

Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff
of the Proteus Initiative

A delicate activism
is truly radical
in that it is aware
of itself,

and understands
that its way of seeing is
the change
it wants to see.

in that it is aware
of itself,
and understands
that its way of seeing is
the change
it wants to see.

in that it is aware
of itself,
and understands
that its way of seeing is
the change
it wants to see.

in that it is aware
of itself,

A Delicate Activism

A Phenomenological Approach to Change

“You must change your life.” RAINER MARIA RILKE

OUR ECOLOGY IS SO FRAGILE, and our social fabric so fraught, that every step we take towards enhancing life risks knotting the skein. Already our footprints are everywhere, but we simply seem to trample our own best intentions underfoot. There is something we may be missing – because many attempts at working with change snag on their own assumptions. How can we approach the world differently?

This short book explores a way, a practice, we’re calling ‘a delicate activism’, a path that demands a thorough reappraisal of the role we actually play in social change. It seems that an activism that emphasises action to the

diminution of reflection, that rewards outer effect and ignores inner awareness, that focuses on the other but occludes the self, that extols results (almost as commodities) without sufficient regard for the process of getting there, cannot succeed in following the actual complexities of social change. Ironically, it renders us onlookers rather than participants, and actually retards change. A delicate activism is truly radical in that it is aware of itself, and understands that its way of seeing is the change it wants to see. This heralds a seismic shift towards a more social and ecological form of activism, towards a future that supports life.

Delicacy

(A prefatory note)

“There is a delicate empiricism that makes it self utterly identical with the object, thereby becoming true theory.” JW VON GOETHE

THE PHRASE ‘A DELICATE ACTIVISM’ arises as an intuitive paraphrase of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s concept of ‘a delicate empiricism’.

The understanding, approach and methods developed by Goethe in his search for a way of knowing, for an epistemology more in keeping with a participatory and holistic ‘seeing into’ the world than our current technological and instrumental thinking is able to achieve, has led us to attempt to practise Goethe’s approach ourselves in our search for a way of working effectively with processes of social change. This translates into a specific and phenomenological approach to social change.

Goethe used the phrase ‘a delicate empiricism’ in the sentence quoted above. The phrase, and the sentence to which it belongs, has been the subject of many learned conversations and treatises; it forms the basis

of a phenomenological approach, which we will come back to later. There is something, however, that stands out immediately.

An empiricism that makes itself utterly identical with the object sounds as if it destroys, or goes beyond, our usual separation between subject and object, between the perceiver and that which is perceived, between the actor and the action, or that which is acted upon. Either this is simply untenable, an unsustainable assertion, a fantasy, or it points to the possibility of a very different way of being in the world.

The phrase highlights the enormity of the challenge facing a truly radical social activism in a world of unprecedented complexity, and goes to the heart of the struggle for justice, and for freedom.

In Broken Images

He is quick, thinking in clear images;
I am slow, thinking in broken images.
He becomes dull, trusting to his clear images;
I become sharp, mistrusting my broken images,
Trusting his images, he assumes their relevance;
Mistrusting my images, I question their relevance.
Assuming their relevance, he assumes the fact,
Questioning their relevance, I question the fact.
When the fact fails him, he questions his senses;
When the fact fails me, I approve my senses.
He continues quick and dull in his clear images;
I continue slow and sharp in my broken images.
He in a new confusion of his understanding;
I in a new understanding of my confusion.

ROBERT GRAVES

The Enigma of Activism

“... we risk seeing, and yet seeing past a thing.” JW VON GOETHE

The Ground on which we Stand

WORKING IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL CHANGE and activism brings us face to face with contradiction, not as anomaly but as the very ground on which we stand. This ground, where every problem, every issue, every obstacle, injustice and distortion is – contrarily – the seed through which change and the activist’s intervention is born. This ground, where the call for wakefulness – which is the activist’s credo – is so often turned, paradoxically, into a new manifestation of old pattern, the very pattern that we had been protesting in the first place.

There is, so often, a stridency to activism, a conviction of being right, accompanied by such determination to change what is wrong that the determination, turning to stridency, can begin to mimic the very forces that we were hoping to shift. Gestalt psychology called it the paradoxical theory of change: the more you try to change a behaviour, the more it stays the same¹. Rudolf Steiner pointed to the existence of a ‘law of iron necessity’ in the social sphere, observing that activists, in their striving to do ‘the good’, *if they did not maintain a very intentional wakefulness*, almost always end up strengthening the very patterns and behaviours that they have set out to change,

because they get caught – sometimes through their initial success – by an almost imperceptible *turning* of the social situation which leaves them on the wrong side of a turning tide². Owen Barfield points to the danger of the search for structural responses to social and ecological change issues, and asks that we always maintain a quality of *nervousness* in our social endeavours, so that we remain aware, nuanced and tentative, at all times³.

The turning is all but imperceptible. Yet, if we look closely and disinterestedly at the different roles and actions of the many activists and activist organisations that we know, we see that such turning fills the landscape of social and environmental change with a strange and assiduous insistence – yet with such a pervasive subtlety that we scarcely notice – and it becomes small wonder that so little seems really to transform in our way of being and living in the world. Norms entrench themselves, as we appear held captive by our own insistences, by our own assumption that we can change the world *by acting on it*.

We discover, instead, that this very assumption heralds a paradoxical and ironic twist – we discover that *there is something strangely conservative at the heart of almost all approaches to change*. We discover that this is the ground

on which we stand. The question then becomes – how to walk that terrain differently.

An Observation

A number of observations, made across many years and many different situations, have provoked questions sufficient to suspect that all seem to emerge from the same underlying archetype of activism, the very aspect that seems to turn a radical intent into something inherently conservative.

The first thing we observe is that activists struggle to create the time and space to reflect – in an ongoing way – on their own practice. There always seems good reason for this – there is so much that needs to be done, and there are always too few resources, and the people and situations and ecologies on whose behalf we are working have rights and needs that need redress, and there is no safe and understanding space, and reflection appears to be too inward turned, and therefore too indulgent. In short, we are constrained to act incessantly, lest we lose our momentum, for the odds are stacked against us and the work is exhausting and unending and urgent. For many, reflection appears as a waste of time. And oftentimes it might well be, since the

practice of reflection takes time, patience and equal intent to master so that it can deepen and enhance the quality of our outer actions. In working with activists there is a sense that reflection on practice is the very last thing that anyone wants to do.

Of course it's also likely that there might be other reasons as to why reflection does not readily take root amongst activists – perhaps because we really don't want to acknowledge the questionable effects of many of our actions, or because we want others to change but don't think this is necessary for ourselves – because we're clearly working towards the good.

The reasons may be many and subtle, but they all cohere towards a lack of reflection. And this lack of reflection heralds a tendency to hold on, conserve, to deny risk and avoid loss.

A Second Observation

Activists are often convinced (by their own notions of social good). At least we know what's wrong, and we have a pretty good idea of what's right. We know what we're working away from, and we have strong opinions about what we're working towards. We are committed, passionate, vehement, filled with purpose and vision. We have to be determined, and this determination can, and often does, narrow our vision and blind us to the possible flaws or limits in our own understanding. So determined can we become to achieve our goals, that we do not notice that things are changing around us all the time, changing sometimes because of the very success of our work, and as they change new readings must be taken, new meaning must be made.

We, too, change (hopefully); those we're working with change; those we're struggling against change; the situation changes. Yet often we're holding on to the past, unable to let go, stuck with an outmoded vision of what we're doing. So as the situation changes, we become conservative. We hold on (sometimes the struggle itself becomes a habit more important than its resolution). The stronger the forces arraigned against us – the more conservative they are – the more conservative and instrumental we become. It becomes more and more difficult to question ourselves. It may appear self-defeating. Even as we imagine ourselves to be pursuing an increasingly radical path, we are often headed in a very different direction; *indeed, push the radical path to its limits – with certainty and without question – and we arrive at fundamentalism.*

These tendencies increase when ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity characterise our world, as they do. Often our own intention is almost all we have to hold onto. When every solution comes with a problem attached to it, and when cause and effect seem so impossible to separate or sequence – both consequences of complexity – then questioning ourselves, doubting ourselves, may seem like the first step towards acquiescence. Our activism rebels at the thought.

A Series of Contentious Observations

Activists begin by questioning many of the norms which have come to characterise their social world, yet often end up endorsing one of the most normative current practices in our culture – the tendency towards management. The tendency to set objectives, to strategise, to construct elaborate plans, to focus on the shortest way to quantifiable

... Even as we imagine ourselves to be pursuing an increasingly radical path, we are often headed in a very different direction; indeed, *push the radical path to its limits – with certainty and without question – and we arrive at fundamentalism.*

results, to hold to a centre, to insist on bureaucratic forms of accountability.

The dominant practices of results-based management, impact assessment, procedural imperatives, to break ideas up into log-framed planning protocols (that fragment these ideas and their underlying inspirations), the process of bureaucratisation, the normative procedures that assume and thereby lead to mistrust between people, to a culture of fear and conformity – all this becomes part of the world of social activism as well. And it signals the onset of what is really an assumption – that if we strategise and plan carefully enough we will be able to turn the world in the direction we wish it to go.

But these assumptions that underlie the path of management contradict the notions of complexity and emergence that have come to be recognised as central aspects of social process. Under the auspices of management, everything separates into component parts; everything becomes commodified, organised and privatised – even childbirth and child-rearing, even wilderness and the wild. As water is packaged in plastic bottles, as mountains become watersheds which become producers of ecosystem services, as ongoing processes of community development become project-bound and subject to cost/benefit analyses (and so too monitoring and evaluation techniques), so activism risks finding itself caught between an effete service-provision, on the one hand, and an anguished fundamentalism on the other.

The charge of anguished fundamentalism tucks in easily within the first two observations above, but what does it mean exactly, this charge of effete service-provision? It is a particular form of this tendency towards management as solution, towards simplification as a quick fix. It

incorporates the danger of activism as a tool of efficiency, and results in the subversion of activism as a path of deep and transformatory change. Here is the most insidious danger of all. We have witnessed, over the last years, the rise of what we now call ‘social technologies’: exercises and procedures and games and models and frameworks that are learned as practitioner repertoire and regarded as tools for engendering participative thinking and action, and then applied to all manner of situations as techniques that may resolve both our social and ecological dead-ends as well as the paradoxes that come with being human. Such social technologies assume and reinforce – in their uniform application – social engineering aimed at control.

Very few question the use of the word ‘technology’. Very few question the assumptions being made here about human nature, about our uniqueness and difference; about the relevance and specificity of context and the need for ongoing observation and attention (*with regard to the particular phenomenon before one*), and the demand for some response to the vexed questions of freedom, responsibility, and the ongoing process of development. We somehow inadvertently set about further mechanising the human soul. It is the creation of the now ubiquitous model, the framework, the process as bounded technique, that signals the final subversion and acquiescence of activism, that turns a radical originality into a practice of conformity and abstraction, reducing the unique to management’s demands for replicability and uniformity.

The notion of social technologies commodifies the experience of being human, turning activism into a technology and side-stepping the simple humanity of immediacy, presence, intimacy and love.

The notion of social technologies commodifies the experience of being human, turning activism into a technology and side-stepping the simple humanity of immediacy, presence, intimacy and love.

... It is the creation of the now ubiquitous model, the framework, the process as bounded technique, that signals the final subversion and acquiescence of activism, that turns a radical originality into a practice of conformity and abstraction.

A Narrative of Instrumentalism

There is something that runs like a thread through all the observations made above, and it is something that contradicts the essential activist project of freedom, responsibility and consciousness. When we ignore the demand for reflection, when we become emphatic about the rightness of our cause, and when we impose too mechanistic and too facile a frame onto the flow of human process and endeavour, then our project becomes an instrumental project that diminishes rather than enhances the possibilities of what it means to be human. The world, the social world, becomes an object that we, separate and at some remove from, attempt to manipulate through the use of various instruments and tools, in order to change. The shift is subtle, hard to discern, but the agenda becomes a conservative agenda, losing the implications of complexity (the relationship between order and chaos in creative endeavour), of human freedom and responsibility, of the development of consciousness itself, and of the primacy of relationship and process over discrete thing and discrete result. It denies the realisation that paying attention to living process affords us – the recognition that everything is changing all the time, that (and this requires a different eye, and an open heart) everything is connected (so that nothing can be compartmentalised, commodified or ‘managed’), and that therefore *our own awakesness is both quest for and key to any truly activist endeavour*.

The enigma of activism lies in this: in its very commitment to changing society, it risks acquiescing to an instrumentalism that already dominates society, so that activism itself distorts into an inadvertent conservatism (a strengthening of the *status quo*), and the human quest is reduced to a mechanical problem which can be solved

– putatively – without our own inner movements of transformation. *As activists, who we are, and the way we live our lives, is insufficiently challenged. As activists, the starting point for all our endeavours lies in our understanding of the intersection and relationship between who and how we are in the world, and what it is that we do.*

“And yet we know:

Hatred, even of meanness

Contorts the features.

Anger, even against injustice

Makes the voice hoarse. Oh, we

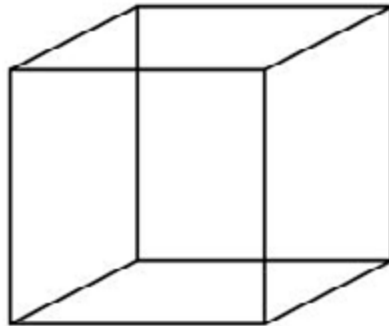
Who wanted to prepare the ground for friendliness

Could not ourselves be friendly”.

BERTOLD BRECHT

Reality Dancing – A Delicate Relationship

“The world is wholly inside, and I am wholly outside of myself” MERLEAU-PONTY



YOU PROBABLY WILL HAVE SEEN THIS BEFORE; still it's as good a place as any to start. A beguiling place, because it's simple, but it's a stepping stone to some rather challenging realisations. We have been talking about activism, but it's hard really to proceed further without getting behind activism to the context within which activism takes place. That context is the world in which we live, and our relationship to it. If we can situate ourselves with regard to this context, we will be in a better position to understand what this enigma of activism is really asking of us, today.

So up there above the previous paragraph there sits a cube. We recognise it immediately. It stands as a kind of archetype for a dice or a box, it has three dimensions

(height, width, depth) and all these are equal. But it doesn't really have depth, for if it did it could not sit flatly on the paper (or on the screen, we should add these days). But if it were really a cube, it would have to have depth; so it's really a representation of a cube. This is what we recognise. Yet even now, we could challenge this – what you actually see is not the representation of a cube at all, but simply a group of lines arranged on a page. You *think* cube, and so there it is, but in fact it's just an arrangement of lines on the page (imagine that you had never encountered a cube before). No, not even this, even this we only say because we *think* 'arrangement', and 'line', and 'page'. What you actually *see* – without thinking – are just dark

marks on a white background. And even this would be hard to *see* if you were not *thinking* the concepts of mark and background.

And another thing – when you look at the cube, does it seem to recede into the paper as though pushing through behind it, or does it seem to emerge as if coming forward at you from out of the paper? If it does one or the other, try to get it to do the opposite, struggle until you can see it the opposite way, and then move between the one image and the other. You'll notice that, as you move between one image and the other, an entirely different cube will present itself to you – yet nothing will have changed on the paper! The change will only be in your mind, in the particular

perspective you choose to take of the cube. Something changes in your consciousness, in your intentionality, and you *see* the cube differently; yet the lines are still exactly as they are. Because you *think* the cube differently, you *see* a different cube; it was Wittgenstein who recognised so powerfully that “Nothing has changed, and yet the entire world is different.”⁴

Quite simply, we do not see ‘things’, we see *meaning*. Which is another way of saying that we bring our thinking to bear on what we ‘actually see’ as raw percept. We live in a world of meanings, and we make meaning of the world. We see only meaning – table, scarf, person, child, plant, mountain, cloud – these are the meanings we give to, we make of, the raw perceptual data that arrive through the doors of our senses. This is what it is to be human. We see ideas, or rather, we organise our seeing through the activity of thinking, and our world arises out of ... well, dust, perhaps. Without thinking, without imagination, we would be no other than animal. This is what Craig Holdrege⁵ means when he *says* that an animal inhabits an environment, whereas the human being lives in a world. To live in a world is to see meaning, not to see things.

Our ineffable world hovers between ‘the thing itself’ and our ‘cognising of the thing’. We recognise this more readily, perhaps, in our grasp of language, and of the written word – the meaning hovers *between* the sound or the sight that reaches us, and our cognising of that sound or sight; it participates in both. Meaning is non-material, the world lives *between* us and what is out there; we live in a world of meaning, therefore we see meaning. (We choose the world we live in, and we create it at the same time.)

The ideas contained here are so obvious that they pass us by. Because the one thing that we do not see, when we

look out at our world, is *the way, how*, we see our world. The one thing we do not see is our way of seeing. And so we misread many things around us, and misunderstand much of what we are doing most of the time, because we do not begin to realise that we are doing it. This is worth staying with for awhile, for it concerns us deeply as activists; the hearth-place of freedom, of our very humanity, may lie just here, in this realm that we seldom even think about.

Owen Barfield⁶ describes three levels of ‘seeing’. On the first, and most immediate level, we perceive without cognising, we perceive without thinking, we simply observe, sensorially, without any overlay or assumption – and therefore also without any recognition or sense of meaning; what we perceive in this way is chaotic, unorganised, and we can make no sense of it (like a two-year old taken to watch a game of cricket, says Arnold⁷). On the second level, we bring our cognition to bear on what we see, we make meaning of it, we recognise it (as we did with the cube). But note – and here lies the key to our misunderstanding, our misapprehension, our greatest and most consequent mistake – the first and second ways of seeing are so closely intertwined, they happen with such incredible contiguity, that it is almost impossible for us to differentiate them, and so we think that what we see – immediately – is the thing itself, whereas what we are really seeing is meaning, the meaning that we make. To discover what is really going on, we must look at something that we do not recognise, and that we need to work with to discover what it is, then we will catch that ‘aha’ moment when we realise, recognise, *see* what it is for the first time though we had been seeing it all along (but not making sense of it).

Quite simply, we do not see ‘things’, we see *meaning*. Which is another way of saying that we bring our thinking to bear on what we ‘actually see’ as raw percept. We live in a world of meanings, and we make meaning of the world.

If we curve the fingers of one hand and look through them as though we were looking through a telescope, and focus on something we can no longer recognise because the field of vision is now too small – then we may begin to get the sense of ‘seeing’ without making meaning (without *seeing*). Or, recall a time when you thought you recognised someone but on further looking realised it was someone else; doing these things may begin to give us the sense of seeing and yet not yet seeing. Imagine a bird watcher – if you are not one – who sees something on a bush and says, there’s a *bokmakierie*; while we know there is a bird there (we are able to recognise this much at least) we have not yet learned to recognise what it is. The birder sees a meaning where we do not. Now if we imagine we’re with someone who has never seen a bird before, and never heard of birds, we may begin to understand what it means to recognise what we’re ‘seeing’. We begin to realise the role of our thinking, our imagination, in our seeing. We begin to recognise that we are seeing meaning. We are beings of perspective, we have a view, a particular take on things; the world is not given to us, we *participate in its emergence*. (Imagine the creative intelligence, as well as the bigoted prejudice, with which we construct and create our world, the world that we see; what we see is never devoid of what we bring to it.)

On the third level, we can think (and talk) *about* the things we have seen, we can seek explanations, or construct metaphors, and in many different ways seek to understand what we are seeing. It is often very difficult to tell the difference between the second and third levels of thinking and perceiving; therefore, of course, also very difficult to differentiate between the third and first levels, because the first and second are themselves so conflated.

So many assumptions creep into our seeing, that we may begin – inadvertently, unknowingly – to inherit a world that has been given to us by others, rather than see a world that is being created through our intentional participation in it in each moment.

(In this way, for example, we may see the human being as a mechanical object determined by prior engineering, or we may see the human being as a potential form for new and as yet undreamed of possibilities; thus also we must be cautious about metaphors taken from one realm being used too glibly and easily in another – when we talk of our memory as a ‘data base’, for example, we begin to create a sense that our memories, therefore thoughts and ideas as well, are really discrete things, like bits of stuff scrolled into an inventory, whereas they really seem to be constantly shifting and moving, flowing into others and metamorphosing almost without boundary, made up of so many intricate redolences that sometimes surface and sometimes don’t, and so intimately interwoven with our beings that they can never be ‘captured’ by anyone else. This kind of ‘thinking about’ through the use of metaphors – such as computers and data bases – almost starts to give the metaphor a sheen of fact or explanation, and we then begin to ‘see’ memory as a data base, and our souls as computers ... and reduce both irreparably.)

So the *way we see* becomes vastly important with respect to the world that we create through such seeing. And the supposed polarity of subjective and objective does not really apply so simply and glibly as we may have imagined – every seeing is always both subjective and objective at the same time, because we are participant in what is seen. (The use of words and concepts such as subjective and objective, or projection, can become very misleading; we

The ideas contained here are so obvious that they pass us by. Because the one thing that we do not see, when we look out at our world, is the way and the how we see our world.

...This is worth staying with for awhile, for it concerns us deeply as activists; the hearth-place of freedom, of our very humanity, may lie just here, in this realm that we seldom even think about.

are participant always, and we are always implicate – our world arises, hovers, immaterial, between what is actually out there and what is in here.) We must, then, become very awake to the way that we are seeing.

To put this without ambiguity: Every phenomenon – all the things that we see out there – is in fact a conversation. So we create the world – our entire world, not just the supposedly ‘subjective’ aspects – as we go. (*Note: we don’t just see it differently, we create it as we go.*)

A phenomenological approach thus suggests that we recognise that our concepts illuminate what we see, inform what we see, but equally that what we see then further elucidates our concepts. We bring something to the world and it brings something to us, and through this relationship both we and the world become enlarged – become more than each was before – and through this dynamic and creative conversation the relationship becomes a sublime and almost magical one (yet real, so very real; this strange *arising-through-conversation* is indeed the real world, at last). This open conversation leads to an increasing wisdom both inside ourselves and inside the world that lies outside of us.

This is perhaps, in the first instance, what is meant by ‘a delicate empiricism’ (we will come to further elaborations later). We have to be true to what is out there, and what is out there is informed, illuminated, and becomes itself, through what we bring to it and how we see or encounter it. Neither one thing nor the other, but both, dancing together in the finest of relationships⁸.

So the *way we see* becomes vastly important with respect to the world that we create through such seeing. And the supposed polarity of subjective and objective does not really apply so simply and glibly as we may have imagined – every seeing is always both subjective and objective at the same time, because we are participant in what is seen.

An Ordinary Magic – A Delicate Story

“What is practice? asked Dogen, and the old man replied

– “everything is open in the universe” RYUTEN PAUL ROSENBLUM ROSHI

(delicate – ‘showing somebody’s skill or craft, especially in producing finely detailed intricate work or gentle or adroit movements’ – definition taken from Encarta World English Dictionary)

HAVING EXPLORED SOME ASPECTS of how we create our world through the meaning we give it, we return to the activist’s thorn. The enigma of activism sits as an archetypal challenge at the heart of our humanity, a core problematic that attends social activism as its inimitable shadow. To rise above this enigma is the stuff out of which the discipline of freedom is really made, and the daunting promise at the centre of the human field – straddling the chasm between belonging and separation. To act (where many others don’t) and yet to question that action – in the very name of that action – *while acting*, is the sublime fulfilment of what it is to be human – to be in open conversation with one’s world at all times. It implies a sensibility that transcends itself, and that therefore has the possibility of acting as the seed of a more conscious future.

The enigma of activism is its greatest gift, for it asks recognition of the sublime and profound relationship – the phenomenological relationship – that lies at the heart of our participation in creating the world that we inhabit. And so phenomenology becomes – potentially – the most liberating and revolutionary change practice of all, for it presents the promise of (the reality of), and the demand for (responsibility for), human freedom. A phenomenological approach, which recognises this reciprocal and creative relationship between human being and the world, demands and promises the kind of wakefulness that lies beneath all attempts at living holistically on earth, and within society. We have to examine the ways in which we think, and learn to think in new ways, in order that we may live in our world in ways that enhance and make it fit for living in.

We can learn a lot from our mistakes, but we would like, at this juncture, to work with the story of a social and environmental change process, which in its route through the pitfalls of instrumentalism illuminates the kind of activism that takes this phenomenological notion of the

relationship between our world and us seriously. Goethe himself, in describing his own ‘delicate empiricism’, wrote that some observations, which seem suddenly to reveal the essence of a pattern or process or phenomenon all at once, are “instances worth a thousand”. This story is such an instance. It is a story of activism as an ecological practice of change.

The practice is formed in Cape Town, South Africa, during the early years after apartheid’s demise. An account of it is offered here, through a conversation with Tanya Layne, who was a pivotal but not lone figure in a process that grew through the collaborative work of a group of social and environmental activists. (In the story that follows, Tanya’s voice combines with this narrative and is reflected in italic font.) This group developed a conscious and intentional approach to practice that emphasises conversation as its primary modality. As Tanya puts it, *this is the ordinary magic that lies behind the remarkable depth of a project, or community and ecological process, that we called Cape Flats Nature.*

A Delicate Story

CAPE FLATS NATURE ASKED HOW we care for biodiversity in a context of urban poverty and inequity, a context of ecological, social and institutional fragmentation. The 'solution' we came to is not a replicable recipe with an accompanying checklist to support roll-out like a ready-made lawn. What emerged, rather, was a practice of seeing and engaging with the biophysical and social systems of ecological and social communities in and around these sites as an integrated whole, in the very same holistic way that natural ecosystems function. The 'magic' lay not in method and design, although these supported it. The 'magic' lay in the quality of conversation we were able to engage in, and the space we created for it – the 'magic' is ordinary . . . yet magical in that it is so often elusive . . . relying as it does on a quality of conversation that asks for a deep level of integrity and trust in relationship that is grown in a myriad of 'ordinary' everyday interactions and activities. The 'magic' of this practice is essential if we are going to conserve our ecosystems and our communities anywhere, and its ordinariness means it is transferable . . .

(The phrase 'ordinary magic' is deeply instructive, providing a sense that the real activist 'shift' here lies in a shift in quality and approach; rather than a different 'thing' being done, a different 'way of being together' is being called for. This shift in quality also emerges from the insistence on the idea of 'practice' instead of 'recipe' or 'guidelines' or 'model' or 'social technology', and in the already present intimation that she is seeing 'success' as elusive practices such as conversation and relationship, rather than infrastructural or material changes. The way people are, with each other, seems to be both means



A Delicate Story

and end with protecting biodiversity itself – a startling departure point.)

The ecosystems of the Cape Flats of Cape Town, South Africa, were once an unbroken mosaic of dunes and wetlands, now reduced to a few highly fragmented and often at least partially degraded natural habitats. These fragments had been identified, prioritised and mapped by conservation planners so as best to ensure the survival of a representative sample of what had been. (Given the fact that Cape Town is situated within the smallest yet richest and most diverse of our planet's six plant kingdoms, this is heritage indeed.)

The Cape Flats, post apartheid, covered a vast area significant for its high degree of social fragmentation. The fragmentation was marked in space by the railway lines designed to separate communities according to skin colour under Apartheid. The Cape Flats starts beyond where, under Apartheid, the 'white' and largely wealthy lived in leafy suburbs on the slopes of Table Mountain. It extends to the outer boundary of Cape Town's largest township furthest from the Mountain and economic opportunity, where residents are most likely to be 'black', unemployed, living with HIV/AIDS and crammed into shacks in sprawling informal settlements with inadequate access to basic services like water, sanitation and electricity. In between these two extremes Cape Town's creole 'coloured' communities live sandwiched both in space and on oft-quoted scales of inequity. The fragmentation is marked in the social fabric by gangsterism, by high levels of substance abuse and pervasive violent crime, by extreme levels of poverty. Since the advent of democracy in 1994, people live in these diverse

communities as equal citizens before the law, but both the spatial and less tangible fractures of discrimination and inequity have proved hard to mend, to bridge, to transform.

The nature conservation sector's work in Cape Town reflected the social fragmentation of the City. Nature conservation practice had focused on conserving the fynbos of Table Mountain and its beautiful peninsula through engagement with the wealthy 'white' communities surrounding the Mountain. *Historically, this practice focused on protecting nature from people, seeing people as separate from nature, and primarily as a threat to nature. Globally conservation practice had an over-emphasis on species conservation as opposed to enhancing healthy ecological functioning.* Thus the entire environmental approach was marked by the absence of a sense for the complexity, interconnectedness and constant movement of living process; it focused on parts rather than on wholes, on things rather than on processes, and on separation rather than integration – effectively maintaining the fragmentation that is mirrored at the ecological and social levels. (The social fabric mirrors the environmental picture – wholeness and care on the one hand, fragmentation and abuse on the other; the one community safeguarded, the other abused and ignored. A picture of the relationship, not just between different communities, but between the community of people and the community of nature; it seems we are not separate from nature after all, even though our actions seem premised on such separation.)

Within this historical and fragmenting context – not surprisingly reflected in the state institutions responsible for managing the natural systems of the area – Cape

A Delicate Story

Flats Nature was originated by social and environmental activists who held the new and radical idea that people are part of nature and must play a role (actively participate) in conserving and enhancing nature. These activists were striving for integration, for wholeness, on various levels – between nature and people, between communities, and between individuals from various organisations and departments who were struggling to find a way to work together beyond bureaucratic divisions and controls. They worked courageously and vulnerably with delicacy, nuance and openness into new terrain where questions took the place of answers.

The intention that birthed Cape Flats Nature was nothing less than fundamental, turning a way of seeing the world on its head – it was not to ‘conserve biodiversity’, which has become a rallying cry for environmental work, but rather to help make nature accessible to (and meaningful for) everyone. For most, the real intent of this activism was not yet seen, indeed, *could not yet* be seen because it was not able yet to be thought; more conservative nature conservation people remained motivated by their assumptions and by the aim of better resourcing biodiversity conservation. For them, the work of Cape Flats Nature was more narrowly seen as achieving ‘buy-in’ at community level to remove ‘threats’ people pose to nature reserves, and at a political level to persuade decision-makers that biodiversity is worthy of investment. Whereas in fact the work was about, as Tanya describes it, *building meaning and relevance in the every-day lives of ordinary people living around nature reserves, contributing to what was important to local people and doing it in a way that*

strengthened local community processes. It was both about addressing community needs through nature conservation and about facilitating conservation action as an ordinary part of community life. It was about building an understanding of how natural systems support life in our cities, understanding that people needed tangible experiences of this; people themselves needed to become something other. It challenged the deeply held notion of ‘biodiversity first’ amongst traditional nature conservators by attempting to facilitate a caring amongst citizens who could understand themselves to be living as part of natural processes and to be improving their wellbeing through developing intimacy with these processes. (An interesting evocation of the world ‘arising-through-conversation’, as described earlier.)

This activist work, the work of shifting consciousness and relationships on many and often conflicting levels, not through attempting to coerce and convince but through offering open opportunities for real engagement, was deeply challenging to every activist bone in the activists’ bodies; the enigmas of activism were their constant bedfellows. Cape Flats Nature began with an alliance in vision between radical conservationists and social activists coming out of the anti-Apartheid and labour movement. It was initiated with a participatory design process and a field practice focusing on stimulating community conservation action that drew on the group’s social organising experience. The process was established around a central living question that others had struggled to find answers for – *how do you conserve biodiversity in a context of extreme poverty?* – which, through being a question rather than an answer or programme, gave it the freedom to approach

A Delicate Story

this work in an exploratory way with an imperative for learning. And again here, the group was able to draw on activist experience in organisations, having to build layer upon layer of leadership in challenging and rapidly changing conditions – locally specific and relevant, drawn on a unique reading of each specific community developed in relation with community role players.

So a rudimentary organisational learning practice was taken into the building of community partnerships. It was also taken into the mentorship of a cadre of young nature conservators employed as the first dedicated managers of Cape Flats reserves, who had previously been trained conventionally to take care of plants and animals, and were now asked to build a practice that addressed both social and ecological fragmentation (as constituting one whole).

In all this, Cape Flats Nature's early articulations of, and engagement with, its practice stumbled upon some of the enigmas of activism. They were deeply committed to a vision and a practice that had no precedent, that they did not know could work, that they did not know how to do (other than intuitively). So they stumbled badly at times. They alienated traditional conservation officials through their outraged and strident criticisms and presumption without giving sufficient credit for these officials' dedication and commitment over many years of caring for the protection and maintenance of healthy ecosystems. This adversarial stance led to polarisation, ironically closing down the space for transformation. They touted themselves, postured and promoted the success of their work before being able to really demonstrate anything significant, for short term political and funding gains. They

drove their agendas, sometimes riding roughshod even over the very community dialogue processes that were so dear to them. The light of their burning convictions revealed also its dark sides – the kind of drivenness that can so easily transmute a radical activism into the kind of conservative fundamentalism it is struggling against.

Also, Cape Flats Nature had not grasped and therefore could not articulate the true value of its own practice. It was so busy demonstrating what was possible, that the more nuanced social organising and learning practices remained inaccessible to itself and to the very institutions it was trying to transform.

Yet each time they overstepped their mark they were saved, and further educated, by the profound levels of observation and conversation that they maintained – as growing practice – both within the team and between the team and any others they worked with. Each time they came back from the brink of being yet another activist attempt that ultimately entrenches the conventional way of doing things (achieving this through thorough and painstaking self-reflection processes) they improved their activist practice immeasurably, enabling them to enter further and deeper into the situations they were working with, so that the ordinary magic of their presence could work its wonders. In this, they were never less than activist and never less than delicate; they trod this fine line even as their way darkened, each time till they came into light once more, stumbling as they oftentimes did to know the real delicacy of the activist path they were treading.

But then Cape Flats Nature used its first evaluation to articulate the practice and intent that was already there

A Delicate Story

in its founding vision – nascent in its initial fieldwork, but itself at risk of becoming lost through the contested institutional framework in which it existed. Key implicit principles – in the practice and in the relationship to nature – were surfaced and expressed; strengthened through the process of understanding. What was foregrounded at this time and through this evaluation process were the practices of listening, internal reflection (not just strategic reflection) and the need to engage differently with the institutions of local government and conservation (these institutions also becoming a focus of the practice, not just community ‘beneficiaries’). This turning point opened Cape Flats Nature up to a more articulate development of a practice that integrated this approach of intervention and responsiveness more consciously and systematically.

With Cape Flats Nature coming to a clearer articulation of its own vision, the space was opened up for innovation and the creation of methods – inside of the group and in relation to community *and* institutional partners – which were congruent with an organic practice that enabled the work at grassroots and in institutions to be pursued with greater clarity, sensitivity and embodied skill.

As the project strengthened in its self-understanding and articulation, so conservation managers increased their abilities to straddle complex polarities between different aspects of their roles as well as between different forms and locations of accountability. They had to be both activists and managers, they had to live with contradictory accountabilities (their communities and employers), they had to work equally with plants and animals and people.

Tanya’s observations of the emerging practice are significant. *It is a very delicate interface, often expressed too starkly as opposites. It is not about a right way or a wrong way, but about finding a way in a particular context in the moment, and adapting this way as time passes and the context changes. It’s not about the search for an applicable formula but rather about the extending of a heightened awareness.*

Our understanding asked us to enter every community with humility, open to people knowing, understanding and valuing nature differently from us and from what was represented on the maps from which our priorities were determined. At the same time it asked us to be honest and explicit about where we were coming from, the conservation mandate within which we worked, and our passion for nature and all it had to offer. Authenticity seemed to lie precisely in this embrace of polarity.

This focus on conversation – between communities and within communities, between communities and professionals, between people and nature, within ecologies that included people and nature – was a magical process, never a technique or technology, never a procedure or exercise. This magical process on the surface is difficult to distinguish from one of achieving ‘buy-in’; indeed, the difference is almost imperceptible, derived from the quiet underlying dignity lent by common intention and respect for diversity in our relationships with community partners. Perhaps the difference has something to do with respect for, and love of, the process itself, instead of the more instrumental flavour indicated by the use of the phrase ‘buy-in’, which emphasises a goal orientation where in fact it became clear

A Delicate Story

that, in social process, the goal could never be anything other than the means. It has something to do with immediacy, intimacy and unmediated presence.

All this is easy to say but difficult to do, especially when one is trying not to achieve anything through utilitarian means – to manipulate the world, however benignly – but instead hoping to work in such a way as to enable a more chosen, conscious and participatory future to emerge. It's difficult, in fact, even to understand the difference between an activism that acts on – from the outside – and an activism that 'draws out, from the inside'.

The complexity was and remains immense. Work has to be done with communities themselves, to help them to even begin to engage. Work must be done with the conservationists and officials and managers, to help *them* to even begin to engage. The status of the nature reserves of the Cape Flats has to change, they must now be protected (known? loved?) and looked after by their surrounding communities (rather than by officialdom); these communities must then participate in the life of the reserves. But this has to be a gradual and often contradictory process, full of reversal and irony, for the communities will not participate until they have learned to do so through participating, and officialdom still has to manage the reserves even as it relinquishes its need to manage. This kind of change cannot be legislated but must be lived, because its intention is to *shift the relationship between people and nature, and between different groups of people and their specific responses to nature, and between different groups of people and their responses to each other; it is all about*

the metamorphosis of relationship, the gradual and almost imperceptible turning of multiple relationships, delicately, from the inside out.

This asked of us and of our partners to really get to know each other, to have the difficult conversations up front, and to work through difficult issues that came up as we implemented activities together. So the practices themselves may have been very ordinary, but there was something in the engagement that happened around them that was magical. And that magic wasn't of the smooth sailing, no obstacles variety, it was hard won in the challenges of working things through, in the depth of engagement this demanded. Ironically perhaps, things were magical to the extent that they were real, rather than contrived in any way. They were, in fact, hyper-real, real not simply in having an authentic and gritty inner life but real in the sense that they were experienced through being present to them (through reflection) instead of simply being passed by, as we miss flowers when our mind is absent because preoccupied with things not present. In this sense as well there was a coming together of the ecological and the social into a less fragmented whole – just as we were hoping that people would begin to see the value and beauty of nature, so in the process they were beginning to see the value and beauty of social process itself as a form of ecological wholeness. They were getting a sense for what it takes to maintain a living environment on all levels through the wonder and challenge of paying attention.

As Tanya notes: *The results to outsiders often appeared magical, like a web of care had miraculously been spun*

A Delicate Story

an 'intentional activity that felt its way forward through inquiry'

TANYA LAYNE

*where before there had been only lone rangers clad in khaki uniforms and despair. We started by listening, we wanted to **understand**. We were not working to a set of principles and guidelines, we did not have a formula or manual to work from. We were doing what seemed to us to make sense in that somehow we knew we had to practise what we wanted to see emerge, and so we practised simple acts of humanity and community – like engaging in conversations, and listening deeply, and paying respect for what was and what had been, and recognising that whatever was, was the seed of what was to emerge from it as well as the product of what had gone before. We dedicated ourselves to paying attention, and paying attention to the life that was shifting and changing all around us all the time, and to the inter-connections between all things. Not because we came with ideas of 'best practice', but simply because we wanted to relate as whole human beings.*

And this spirit of learning and sharing, of constant conversation, of continual return to the phenomena we were collectively paying attention to – so that we avoided glib abstraction and regulation – all this held the very meaning of all that we were engaged in. The community somehow intuitively knew that these processes were going to be crucial to their becoming, to the movement towards social and ecological wholeness – far more so than any management regulations or planned interventions or set objectives or structured frameworks would ever approximate. ■

The Miracle of Simultaneity – A Delicate Dynamic

“ ... we knew we had to practise what we wanted to see emerge, and so we practised simple acts of humanity ... recognising that whatever was, was the seed of what was to emerge from it as well as the product of what had gone before.” TANYA LAYNE

THE THING ABOUT GENUINE OBSERVATION, really paying attention to a phenomenon, is that it always reveals things that we had not seen, or understood, before, regardless of how much contact we may already have had (simple but rigorous observation is an example of ‘ordinary magic’ – there is nothing esoteric about it, yet it plunges us into a vivid world of depth and aliveness that transforms ordinary into magical without rendering it less ordinary). So, when we think about the practice described in the foregoing pages, we may see just another example of good practice, perhaps, with nothing particularly radical about it. But if we observe it more closely perhaps its significance will begin to emerge, something of what ‘ordinary magic’ may mean.

Let’s start by looking at what actually happened on the ground. No-one claims that the communities in question, or the state of biodiversity, or the conservation officials and their departments, experienced extraordinary epiphanies, and that the deep and entrenched problems with which the area is riddled were miraculously solved. No – there is still poverty and drug-abuse and gang warfare and the banality of bureaucratic routines and procedures

and conservation elitism and fundamentalism, and nature herself is still beleaguered. Yet a great deal has changed, and is still transforming, gradually yet now with some momentum, in small stages and phases that affect and are affected by each other, and it feels as though some seeds of a different community, a different approach to life and to one another, may be starting to emerge.

There are changes taking place in communities, in their relationship towards each other and towards the natural world which they live amongst; they are gradually taking responsibility for the pockets of nature that they still live with, and they are doing so through paying attention, through starting to appreciate these previously marginalised and disregarded worlds in their midst. And, in the process, they are finding a new respect for each other. People who are participating and engaged are starting to regard other people with the kind of respect and appreciation that has been missing for a very long time; its apparent that the ‘web of care that has miraculously been spun’ is in fact being spun by the very people who are thriving in its ambit.

And the conservation officials, through their interactions with the community and through their work alongside the local ‘community conservation managers’ have begun to transform as well, in themselves and in their practices; in the way they see their mandate. The very notion of conservation begins to shift its meaning in recognition of the growing observation that life does not thrive through being preserved, through trying to keep things as they are, but rather through being open to change, through being allowed to evolve, through interaction and the forming of new relationships ... nature does not need to be conserved but rather to be *seen*, to be *recognised*, to be *honoured and respected*. So the entire relationship between conservationists and nature has begun to shift as the community’s relationship with them and with nature has begun to shift – everything is breaking open, revealing new possibility; a sense of freedom and mobility of relationship begins to manifest. All elements become porous to each other.

In all these shifts, the natural world is as central a player as any other in this wider community

of relationships, and nature has been one of the central facets of the shifts that are taking place across the board. Throughout the life of this process no-one has regarded nature as a ‘thing’ to be ‘saved’; rather, nature has been regarded as alive, as a whole organism – as many organisms – with its own integrity and dignity, deserving of respect, of being listened to, having intention (the ability to intend) as every organism does. Treating nature in this way has not only shifted people’s approach and relationship to nature, it has enabled nature to reciprocate, to give back, and to help in building the communities that are engaging with it. It has become obvious to all players in this story that the natural world is not something that passively sits out there needing our protection. Nature protects us, it is active in granting us a way of being that changes us ... everyone, everything, is *touched* – at the same time.

And that last phrase – *at the same time* – holds the key to one of the most radical and magical aspects of the process of transformation, the surprising and challenging notion of *simultaneity*. Because in this story that we are now in the heart of, everything is happening at the same time. There is a sequence over time, of course – we speak about gradual transformation, after all, and certain things that came before others – but we refer to simultaneity in the sense that every shift that is taking place at any one time is taking place not as a result of other shifts but *at the same time* as these other shifts. As the local community conservation ‘managers’ interface with their own communities and with the

As the local community conservation ‘managers’ interface with their own communities and with the official conservationists, so all three change in a miraculous dance of simultaneity, because each is affecting each other, each is both the ‘cause’ and the ‘effect’ of the others’ change at the same time. And so they are neither cause nor effect – as each is seen differently by the other they become different and so see the other differently. This is the dance that we are asked to participate in, because this is reality dancing, this is the dance of life, this is the only way that transformation occurs – simultaneously.

official conservationists, so all three change in a miraculous dance of simultaneity, because each is affecting each other, each is both the 'cause' and the 'effect' of the others' change *at the same time*. And so they are neither cause nor effect – as each is seen differently by the other they become different and so see the other differently. This is the dance that we are asked to participate in, because this is reality dancing, this is the dance of life, this is the only way that transformation occurs – simultaneously.

This radical nature of change is highlighted and vividly illuminated by the process played out in this story – as one thing changes, so does the other; as one party sees the world differently, so the world changes, and so the one who saw it differently changes as the world changes; and all this is gradual, taking place over time but taking place all at the same time. The world changes through our changes and we change through the world's changes. This is a phenomenology of change, and reflects the remark made earlier, when we were speaking of the phenomenological understanding – 'we bring something to the world and it brings something to us, and the relationship is so full of seeming contradiction and complexity that it becomes a sublime and almost magical one', and yet ... 'this strange *arising-through-conversation* is the real world, at last'.

What does this mean, then, for the activist, for the one who intervenes? We see how 'magical' the change process is – it does not belong in any one place, but everywhere; it does not belong to any one protagonist, but to everyone; as anything changes

so everything changes, and equally those who resist change hold the situation moribund for everyone, not only for themselves. How does an activist work with such complexity, with such living dynamic? Well, according to the story above – through engaging, not in *attempting directly to change* the world or any particular part of it, but through in the very first instance paying attention to how the world is, noticing it as it expresses itself, and then *attempting to engage the world in dialogue with itself (and ourselves) so that it reveals itself to itself, and so changes through seeing itself differently*. In other words, through encouraging the very ordinary and sublime art of conversation.

Coming in as the 'expert' who knows how to organise interventions to achieve particular outcomes – this would deny the very phenomenological foundations of change that we have been speaking of, not least because this group of activists would then not be an equal community amongst the others (open to change, to engaging in real open-ended conversation, to shifting perspective, to paying attention, to learning through observation); their relationship amongst all the other relationships might be one of the most recalcitrant to shift. Coming in to work on a certain aspect or community amongst all the others – either the nature reserves or the surrounding communities or the conservation officers or their bureaucracy – would deny the simultaneous nature of change in a living whole, and would assume linearity and cause-and-effect processes of change. Coming in to provide resources or engage in particular time-bound projects aimed

at material change would not acknowledge that it is not in the parts or things but in the relationships between members of the whole that the locus of change lies. Coming in to do research which may then be used to provide lobbying and advocacy support to shifts in policy frameworks and methods of implementing those policies would assume that the situation can be changed from the outside – by way of the activist, the structure, a particular set of rules and regulations, of organised interventions.

Yet, as activists, we do in fact engage in all the actions mentioned above. So what then did this group do differently? Well, they did all of these things at one time and another – none can be left out, after all – but always in response to a particular understanding that informed a particularly ecological way of working. And this understanding is not easy to 'get behind of.'

(Once grasped, we seem to see simultaneity everywhere. Profound learning may come as a revelation, but it is also always a confirmation of something deeper within us that we had not known we knew.) It seems that the group began with certain hunches around the terrain that they were entering, and these hunches, acting as seed-like intentions, worked like a leaven enabling a practice to emerge which then reflected back on the original intuitions, deepening them and becoming more robust and alive through this deepening. One of these hunches was that, because they were dealing with a complex living world of intricate relationships, and because in a living whole everything is affecting everything else, and everything is in

What does this mean, then, for the activist, for the one who intervenes? We see how ‘magical’ the change process is – it does not belong in any one place, but everywhere; it does not belong to any one protagonist, but to everyone; as anything changes so everything changes, and equally those who resist change hold the situation moribund for everyone, not only for themselves.

How does an activist work with such complexity, with such living dynamic? Well, according to the story above – through engaging, not in attempting directly to change the world or any particular part of it, but through in the very first instance paying attention to how the world is, noticing it as it expresses itself, and then attempting to engage the world in dialogue with itself (and ourselves) so that it reveals itself to itself, and so changes through seeing itself differently. In other words, through encouraging the very ordinary and sublime art of conversation.

a constant streaming process of change – basic ecology, really, for people working with processes of nature – then they themselves were part of the complex whole that they were ‘intervening’ into, and so the whole will respond to (will ‘emerge from, rise up out of’) the very way that they worked in the process. That is, they could not do anything to anyone to effect change, the future would emerge from the way they acted in the present, how they went about their work, what they focused on, especially how they saw things. As Tanya said, *we knew we had to practise what we wanted to see emerge, and so we practised simple acts of humanity ...* In other words, they determined to practise ‘humanly’ (though of course, they had to figure out what this meant, that it meant listening and respecting the other, acting out of and towards dignity and integrity, and so on).

Not knowing quite what it meant to ‘practise simple acts of humanity’, and not knowing really how to deal with the complexity they were facing, they knew that they had to soak themselves in an *attitude* of observation (and learning). Every interaction, every deed, every relationship was the subject of intense scrutiny. They knew that they could not go in simply with an attitude of trying to change others, that instead they had to go in with an approach that saw them open themselves to learning their practice from the very situation they were practising in. This seeming contradiction cannot be wished away if one wants to work with complex processes of change; it has to be held, with integrity, by the practitioner.

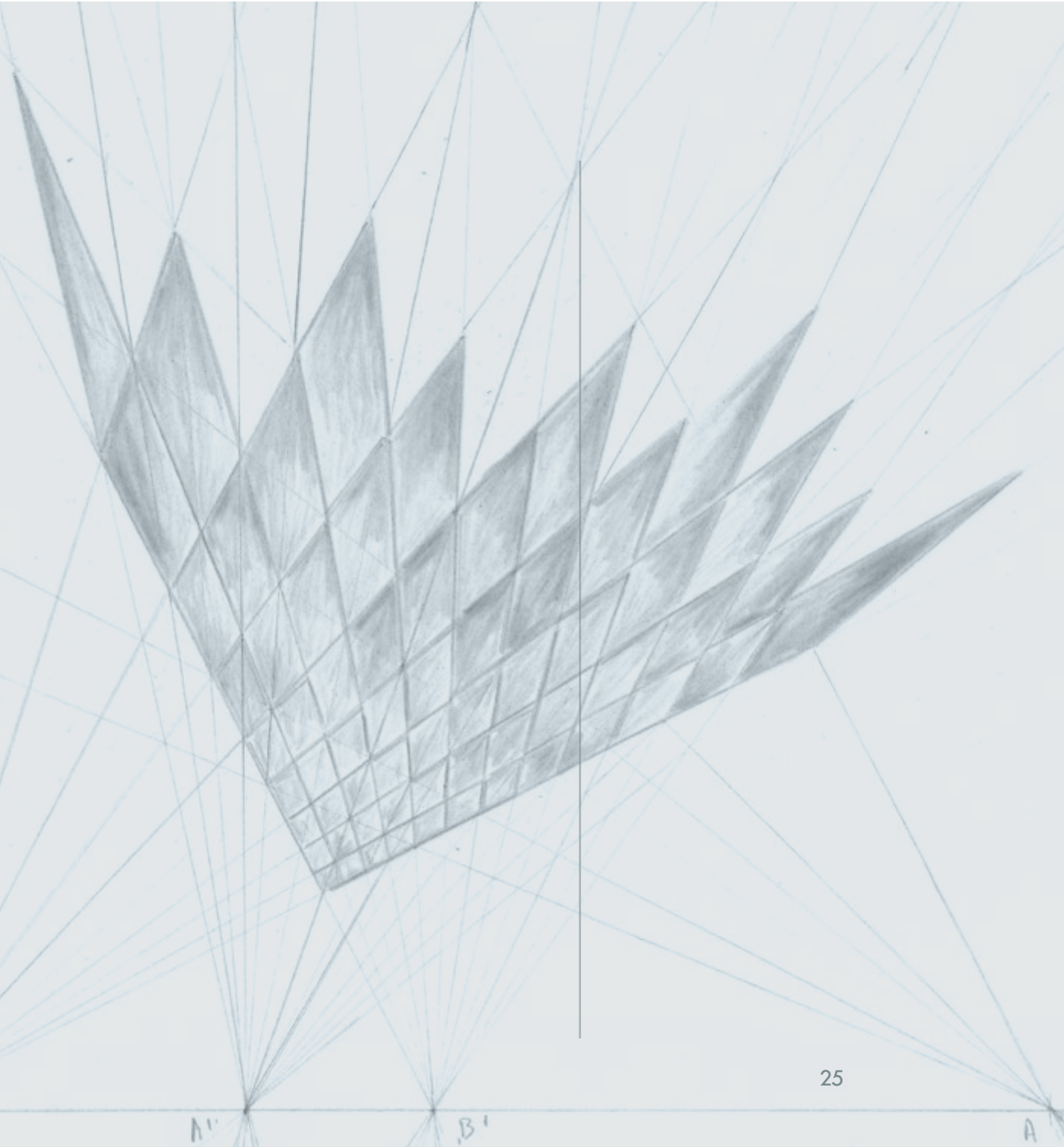
For every situation is utterly unique, and every situation is alive. So, they knew and yet what they knew most thoroughly was that they did not know. They dedicated themselves to observation, and to conversation. Everything they observed they shared with each other, everything they learned shifted the next thing they did, they kept changing as they saw a fresh aspect of the phenomenon, of the situation, in front of them. Their deepest striving was to be both open and intentional (simultaneously). So, rather than working in a planned way towards a goal or an objective, they worked responsively yet out of the deepest of intentions – to enable the whole to find its integrity, whatever that might look like. (Tanya notes that they could never be too certain, that the richness of the practice lies precisely in the place of doubt; they were constantly enquiring as to what their practice really was, and they eventually saw it as an ‘intentional activity that felt its way forward through inquiry’.)

Knowing that they were working on the whole meant also that they never took their eyes – really, their observational faculties – from all the myriad relationships that make the whole what it is. Their senses became attuned to *shifts in relationship*, many shifts in many relationships; and they learned perhaps what they intuitively knew, that all relationships shifted if any shifted, and that the webs of relationship were all interwoven and that it was impossible to tell cause from effect, and so they had to keep their eyes on all of it at the same time. This highlighting and foregrounding of the relationship element, means that the transformation

of relationships becomes the essence of the entire activist practice – and it transpires, in fact, that indeed transformation *means* the changing of relationships. It’s all so obvious and unexpected; our tendency is to keep our eyes focused on things, whereas it’s the invisible relationships usually seen inadvertently out of the corner of the eye that are both means and goal of activism towards change.

Cape Flats Nature also, in their intense observational practice, focused not only on where things had gotten to but always on the way that they got there; on the processes and not just on the products (or quantifiable outputs or outcomes). And, because from the start they ‘knew’ that their own ‘way of being and ways of working’ – their own practices – were going to have a significant role in the shifting (or not) of the whole, they observed their own processes most intensely of all. Cape Flats Nature was up for scrutiny by Cape Flats Nature, constantly and unfailingly. And the rigour and courage of this disciplined practice of self-observation stands out as one of the central practices that enabled them to do what they did. Coupled with an (uncanny) understanding of observation itself – that it is not the learning that may come from observation that is of primary importance, but the fact, the practice, of observation itself. It is the *activity of observation* that transforms (the learning lies in the *act of observing*, even more than in anything observed). It is in the activity of observation that one changes.

Perhaps this was the active ingredient in the ‘ordinary magic’ that enabled transformation: here an activist practice primarily derives its



Every interaction, every deed, every relationship was the subject of intense scrutiny. They knew that they could not go in simply with an attitude of trying to change others, that instead they had to go in with an approach that saw them open themselves to learning their practice from the very situation they were practising in. This seeming contradiction cannot be wished away if one wants to work with complex processes of change; it has to be held, with integrity, by the practitioner.

power not from what it does *to* a situation but through how it observes that situation (and itself in that situation). There is intervention, yes, there is activity (observation also is a ‘doing’) – but the activity is an *active receptivity*, the very reversal of what we usually imagine to be at the centre of an effective intervention. Of course many activities are entered into, but at the heart of it all is this active receptivity, this observational quality, this reversal of approach. This openness to *be changed*, on the part of the activist, rather than the hammering insistence on effecting change in the other or in the situation.

And right at the heart of this miraculous transformation, another observation, about the power of observation, struck the activists of Cape Flats Nature after awhile. They noticed that, with more and more people and groupings actively observing, paying attention to themselves and to the other, the quality of adversarial boundedness that had characterised relationships before, fell away, dissolved, evaporated like mist. This was revelatory for the practitioners – that, as they expressed it, *for the person who is really paying attention there are no adversaries!* If it’s all about relationships, and if you’re striving for wholeness, and *if you really want to see what is going on*, then every element, every aspect, is part of what you have to listen to, nothing can be ignored, and then – there is no place, really, for adversaries, or for an adversarial approach! This is a different way of seeing activism.

Instead of a constant reactivity taking place, if one takes this understanding of simultaneity seriously, the delicacy of the dynamic with which parts are related within the whole means that each part and each moment is, in some sense, sacred, related – and implicate.

Given this picture of simultaneity, of the miraculous delicacy of the dynamic that unfolds the whole, the real ‘intervention’ that opens the situation to change is the very human and simple art of conversation. As conversation is entered into, each protagonist is called upon to open themselves to seeing the situation differently, to learning about the other, and as they do so the situation changes (in fact it’s already different as soon as it’s seen differently), and as the situation opens, so each protagonist opens, and the situation begins to transform. Conversation – a kind of *living reciprocity of observation* – was, and is, at the heart of Cape Flats Nature’s activist practice (though as a project Cape Flats Nature no longer exists, its practices continue, and continue to transform the relationships between communities and nature on the Cape Flats). This is the ‘ordinary magic’ of a reflective, delicate activism. Not that every conversation will enable a situation to change, or that conversation as such will always change situations, but that, if transformation is to occur, it will occur through all relationships changing simultaneously (however imperceptibly) – which is the situation in conversation with itself.

Perhaps this was the active ingredient in the ‘ordinary magic’ that enabled transformation: here an activist practice primarily derives its power not from what it does *to* a situation but through how it observes that situation (and itself in that situation). There is intervention, yes, there is activity (observation also is a ‘doing’) – but the activity is an *active receptivity*, the very reversal of what we usually imagine to be at the centre of an effective intervention.

Delicate Activism – An Inescapable Reciprocity

“The kind of attention we pay to the world changes the world we pay attention to” IAN MCGILCHRIST

IN OUR DESPERATION AT THE STATE OF THINGS around us we try, desperately, to change it. A (justifiable) sense of urgency and outrage accompanies the desperation, as well as an enthusiasm for life in a society more closely aligned with our own values and outlook. From out of a deep sense of necessity, passion and conviction, we set out to change the world. And right here lies our own greatest challenge, our potential undoing. As we noted in the early part of this booklet, our very enthusiasm, passion, urgency and desperation unleashes, in an act of terrible irony, the potential conservatism that lurks in the depths of activism. It perpetuates the instrumentalism that inadvertently presumes a mechanical world, and leaves us outside the very field that we are working on (so that we come to ourselves last, if at all).

But what alternative is there – should we acquiesce, relinquish our conviction and our outrage and our humanity by accepting an unjust and unsustainable world, and simply succumb? No, this is no response at all, because it simply espouses a non-activist stance, it does not get to the heart of the activist challenge. It does not get to *the other side* of activism, and so leaves the field to those who see social and environmental issues as mechanical problems to be solved rather than as challenging moments in the

evolution of our humanity. As activists, we cannot avoid the irony of these charges of conservatism and instrumentalism; they are the keys to the evolution of activism itself, and so to the essence of the human ideal. Because activism lies at the heart of our humanity; our striving for a better future *is* the essence of our humanity.

Some years ago, in an address given to the World Economic Forum in 1992, one of the most remarkable and powerful of modern activists, the Czech playwright, dissident, political prisoner and eventual president Vaclav Havel, said:

“We are trying to deal with what we have unleashed by employing the same means we used: recipes, new ideologies, new control systems, new institutions, new instruments to eliminate the dreadful consequences of our previous recipes . . . We treat the fatal consequences of technology as though they were a technical defect that could be remedied by technology alone. We are looking for an objective way out of the crisis of objectivism. Everything would seem to suggest that this is not the way to go. We cannot devise, within the traditional modern attitude to reality, a system that will eliminate all the disastrous consequences of previous systems . . . What is needed is something different, something larger. Man’s

attitude to the world must be radically changed. We have to abandon the arrogant belief that the world is merely a puzzle to be solved . . . we have to release from the sphere of private whim . . . the ability to see things as others do . . . things must once more be given a chance to present themselves as they are, to be perceived in their individuality . . . We must try harder to understand than to explain . . .”

Havel eventually retired from politics, before his time (though his time was also dedicated to his practice as artist) and he remarked, when he did so, that he was saddened by the growing sense that even his own government was now beginning to perpetrate the very things that he had resisted and fought against so assiduously in his days as activist and dissident rejected by the former Communist regime . . . his own activism was beginning to turn conservative, to turn against its own ideals. At this stage (and age) he no longer had the energy to resist this turning, which was so imperceptible to those around him. It took an artist’s sensibility to even perceive the turning.

This turning will continue to take place until we understand the truly radical nature of an activism that gets beyond its inherent tendency to slip into its own shadow of conservatism. Such understanding can only come through recognition of the phenomenological nature of

a truly radical activism. Such recognition has to do with seeing that the very way we think affects and changes the world that we see ... not subjectively (only for me because I see it that way) but in reality ... the world becomes the way we see it, it changes, because it arises in the first place through the way in which we see it ... it's this meeting that constitutes the phenomenal world, the world of phenomena that we live amongst.

A truly radical activism, then, will take seriously this idea – that how we think about our world, how we see it, has more power to transform or hold captive than any overt action that we take (all actions, anyway, being premised on the way we think). A truly radical activism then will approach the world with its sensibilities for simultaneity wide open, and will recognise that it cannot simply act on the world but in fact is the very world that it sees, that it confronts. A truly radical activism then will not fail to recognise that it lives inside of the world it is trying to change, that any change will entail its own change and will follow from it. A truly radical activism will recognise that it is the world it is trying to change (that, as Jung noted, “what if I should discover that I, myself, am the enemy who must be loved, what then?”¹⁰). A truly radical activism will not flinch from self-scrutiny, will regard it as central to its very activist credo, as impossible to do without (not least, as Wittgenstein notes, because “If you are unwilling to know what you are, your style will be a form of deceit” and “If anyone is unwilling to descend into themselves because this is too painful, they will remain superficial”¹¹). A truly radical activism will realise that it is always working from the inside, out, and that the way it sees the world will become the world that it sees. A truly radical activism will understand that the world that

...Such recognition has to do with seeing that *the very way we think* affects and changes the world that we see ... not subjectively (only for me because I see it that way) but *in reality* ... the world becomes the way we see it, it changes, because it arises in the first place through the way in which we see it ... it's this meeting that constitutes the phenomenal world, the world of phenomena that we live amongst.

A delicate activism cannot do anything in the world that it will not have done to itself; it cannot expect anything that it cannot expect of itself; it will never find anything that it does not bring. There is no world other than the delicate reciprocity that arises from our inescapable relationship with the world...

arises-through-conversation is the real world, and that conversation is the central activity of the radical activist (and, that conversation takes place not only between self and other but within the self as well). A truly radical activism recognises that it is how we see and how we think that transforms, far more than what we proclaim. A truly radical activism recognises that how we are is how the world becomes, and so deepened self-understanding is at the heart of this approach. Genuine conversation entails both self-reflection and open-endedness; and genuine conversation is the way through to the truly radical side of activism.

Goethe used the phrase ‘a delicate empiricism’ in at least two senses, and we follow these meanings when we speak here of ‘a delicate activism’. First, empiricism is delicate when it recognises that respect for the empirical – knowledge from experience or sensory observation – cannot eschew the meaning that we make of what we sense and experience, and that at the same time this meaning cannot ignore the basis, in the sensory world, for what we experience and sense. In other words, there is a delicate relationship between the world ‘out there’ (the sensory, phenomenal world) and the sense-making that we bring to that world; that the phenomenal world we live in arises from the conversation between sense and sense-making. We are participants, therefore, in the arising of the phenomenal world in which we are at the same time immersed; there is a conversation happening between outer and inner, between world and self – and this conversation is the real world.

We bring ourselves to our world, and we open ourselves to what the world brings to us. We are intentional beings, and we must be disciplined enough to intend our own

openness or receptivity, else we impose ourselves in a way that elicits a presumption, a closing down, a boredom, a conservatism and fundamentalism, a laziness. A delicate activism, whatever else it does, intends its own openness and receptivity as much as it does its desire for change. It seeks to change the world through being open to being changed by the world.¹²

Second, “a delicate empiricism . . . makes itself utterly identical with the object”. We enter into the object – the perceived, the other, the world – so thoroughly that we find ourselves identical with it, and our usual distinction between subject and object (and between subjective and objective) falls away. We are at one with our world. On a second reading, and at this point in our story, this second sense of the phrase is not really a second sense at all, but a natural and logical deepening of the first sense. The world arises through us, as we arise through the world. This is, perhaps, the true meaning of empathy; and it implies that our approach to the world cannot be filled – in the first instance – with judgement or assumption. Again, Brentano: “The world is wholly inside us, and we are wholly outside of ourselves”. A delicate activism cannot be anything less than a way of life, recognising that everything it touches is indeed touched by it, and that it is touched by everything it touches. A delicate activism takes these philosophical niceties seriously; it recognises that its philosophical understanding is a picture of the world that will arise from it. A delicate activism cannot do anything in the world that it will not have done to itself; it cannot expect anything that it cannot expect of itself; it will never find anything that it does not bring. There is no world other than the delicate reciprocity that arises from our inescapable relationship with the world.

We are intentional beings, and we must be disciplined enough to *intend our own openness or receptivity*, else we impose ourselves in a way that elicits a presumption, a closing down, a boredom, a conservatism and fundamentalism, a laziness. A delicate activism, whatever else it does, intends its own openness and receptivity as much as it does its desire for change. *It seeks to change the world through being open to being changed by the world.*¹²

There are many different practices that we can engage in, so that we may strengthen and broaden and deepen our thinking. For now, however, there seem to appear just a few gathered considerations that lie at the heart of the phenomenological approach to change, that underpin all these specific practices.

Really paying attention means paying attention to the whole. It means always looking for the larger integrity within which the parts find their meaning. It means seeing simultaneity rather than cause and effect. Paying attention to the whole means looking for meaning, it means finding the interconnectedness, the relationships, the necessities of becoming, the dynamics of belonging and separation, that lie between things, as the activity, the flow, that unites them.

All this also means not asking why, not looking for explanations, or for causes. All explanations are attempts to reduce something to some other thing that is not it, but causes it; we are thus taken away from the phenomenon and our thinking becomes abstract conjecture¹³. It becomes instrumental, mechanical, linear; it extracts in order to use. When we leave aside explanations then the phenomenon itself remains our primary source of information and understanding, and then the phenomenon begins to be seen for what it is, within itself; it begins to reveal itself as an 'open secret'.¹⁴ And then the phenomenon is revealed as standing in its own depth, as arising out of itself – as everything that is alive arises out of itself – and, when the phenomenon is seen in this way, it becomes its own theory. If we do not look with a 'why' question on our mind's lips but rather simply pay attention to 'what' is going on, and if we persist in this endeavour even as old habits cry out for us to end the observation by coming to

an answer, an explanation, a conclusion, a solution, then the world gradually comes alive for us again, and we experience wonder, and accuracy and a new kind of rigour and discipline; through paying attention we enter the field of love. Through paying attention to the 'what' and not reaching addictively for the 'why' we exercise faculties that allow us to re-enter the world that we have become separated from.

We cannot really pay such attention other than by being present. And being present is facilitated through reflection, self-reflection. Not the kind of reflection that we employ in order to look back at past deed to ascertain whether it was good or not (so that we may then draw learnings out and improve our action in the future) but instead the kind of reflection that we undertake in the present, simultaneously with our attention to the world out there, at the same time as engaging with the world out there. It's a strange, even paradoxical thing – we would think that such self-reflection, in the moment – witnessing of the moment, of ourselves in the world, as it were – would take us away from being present; but the opposite is true. Here lies the exquisite irony, that we enter the world more fully through being awake to ourselves. The delicate flowering of an activism that takes change seriously enough to shift the world.

Because "there is no world other than the delicate reciprocity that arises from our inescapable relationship with the world". We come finally to the real understanding of participation, upon which a phenomenological approach is based. We have seen – we have born witness in these pages – how we participate in the arising of the phenomenal world. When we take this participation seriously we cannot avoid the recognition that a radical activism

demands, before and during everything else, that we look to our own thinking (and actions) for the true source of change. It is just that we hesitate to take our participation in our world's arising seriously. If we could, some huge realisations would fall from our skies like life-giving rain. The distinction between inner and outer begins to take on a different meaning. We realise, as Owen Barfield¹⁵ notes, that the relationship between inner and outer is in the nature of a self-evident observation and understanding – quite simply, that every inner has an outer. With this, the world turns over, and we can begin again. ■

Authors: Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff
of the Proteus Initiative



Allan Kaplan and **Sue Davidoff** are social practitioners, teachers and writers. They are the authors of *The Development Practitioner's Handbook*, *Artists of the Invisible*, *The Developing of Capacity*, *Dreaming Reality – The Future in Retrospect* and *The Learning School, The Courage to Lead, Changing your Teaching* respectively. They founded The Proteus Initiative (based in Cape Town, SA) as a vehicle for developing the organic and holistic methods of JW von Goethe into a new understanding and approach to the sphere of social renewal. Their work is an attempt to realise the full consequences of true participation, of socio-ecological complexity, and of an emerging consciousness which holds freedom and responsibility as a generative polarity in the quest for wholeness. Together they have also established the Towerland Wilderness in South Africa as a space for nature and for the learning that may come through immersion in, and communion with, nature.

A Delicate Activism is published in 2014 by The Proteus Initiative

ADDRESS:

5 Rose Way
Constantia
7806
Cape Town
South Africa

WEBSITES:

www.proteusinitiative.org
www.towerlandwilderness.org

CONTACT:

Lela Rabie - Portal Person: people@proteusinitiative.org
Sue Davidoff : sued@mweb.co.za
Allan Kaplan: alkaplan@mweb.co.za

Acknowledgements

We thank, with gratitude and appreciation, Tanya Lane, Sue Soal, Tania Katschner and Paula Hathorn for the work they did in reading and responding to aspects of the text, the telling of the story and the drawing out of its meaning; Tanya and Sue particularly put in many hours of work during pressured times. All four of these practitioners have been integrally involved in the life of Cape Flats Nature and in the practice we try to illuminate here. We would also like to acknowledge the many people involved in the process of Cape Flats Nature, from idea through to project and now as more ongoing practice. We thank, too, Peter Westoby for an early reading of the text, and for his encouragement not to be daunted by the nature of the challenge.

References

- 1 In A. Beisser's *The paradoxical theory of change*, in J.Fagan & I Shepherd (eds) *Gestalt Therapy Now: Theory, Techniques, Applications*. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books, 1970
- 2 In Rudolf Steiner's *Spiritual Science as a Foundation for Social Forms*, Anthroposophic Press, 1986
- 3 In Owen Barfield's *A Fresh Light on Present Discontents*, in *The Rediscovery of Meaning*, The Barfield Press, San Rafael, CA, 1997
- 4 In Ray Monk's *Ludwig Wittgenstein – The Duty of Genius*, Vintage Books, 1991
- 5 Craig Holdrege – *personal communication*, upstate New York, 2001
- 6 In Owen Barfield's *Saving the Appearances – A Study in Idolatry*, A Harbinger Book, Harcourt Brace & World Inc, New York
- 7 In Arnold Freeman's *Self-Observation*, Anthroposophical Publishing Company, London, 1956
- 8 In Allan Kaplan and Peter Westoby's *Foregrounding Practice – Reaching for a responsive and ecological approach to community development*, in *Community Development Journal*, Oxford University Press, 2013
- 9 In Vaclav Havel's *Address to the World Economic Forum*, 1992, available online at <http://www.compilerpress.ca/competitiveness/Anno/Anno%20Havel.ht>
- 10 In Carl Jung's *Collected Works of CG Jung*, edited and translated by G. Adler and R.F.C. Hull, Princeton University Press, 1970
- 11 In Ray Monk's *Ludwig Wittgenstein*
- 12 In Rodney Smith's *Stepping out of Self-Deception*, Shambala, 2010
- 13 In Henri Bortoft's *The Wholeness of Nature – Goethe's Way of Science*, Lindisfarne Press and Floris Books, 1996
- 14 In JW Goethe's *The Maxims and Reflections of Goethe*, Penguin Classics, 1999
- 15 In Owen Barfield's *Participation and Isolation*, in *The Rediscovery of Meaning*



A Delicate Activism

A Phenomenological
Approach to Change

Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff
of the Proteus Initiative