

On accountable innocence

- Anjet van Linge -

Sometimes when we work, when we experience, we discover patterns in these experiences. And then from these patterns we deduct rules that we apply consciously at first and then nearly unconsciously, moving from so called conscious competence to unconscious competence.

As I grew up in my work as adviser and listener, I discovered many such rules: always ask open ended questions; when you hold silence for long enough someone else will speak; determine the primary task of your event and always focus your interventions in the service of that task; attend to boundaries, authority relations, roles and task; find at least three sources of data above the surface before you try interpret what is going on below it; work with the shape of the space; a circle is a circle for a reason; when something gives you sweaty palms, a tummy ache and shivers, speak to it... and more recently: attend to what happens in each cardinal direction and why, look for what happens at the other end of the axis N-S or E-W ... or even: whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened; and, the law of two feet ... these are rules too.

They have served me well, these rules. And they have helped me in teaching others, in helping others find their own ways of being and working with a working community.

More recently I have started to wonder whether that was just it, whether I could write up all these 'rules', or patterns or lessons. On reading Christopher Alexander's *A Timeless Way of Building* he invited me to discover many patterns or rules that determine what gives a building what he calls 'the quality without a name'. I may call that soul or spirit, or the potential to develop fully and learned that most if not all of what he says applies to organizations and working communities too. Every page in the book offered me many 'yes!' experiences. Towards the end he says – so now I have told you all these rules, the most important thing is not to apply them but allow yourself to be innocent.

And then he really made me think. Because perhaps innocence is what I risk losing when I attach too much importance to what I know.

A year ago with three dear friends and colleagues I hosted a collective consciousness conversation – a two-day event co-created by nearly 30 people and guided by us on the basis of love and trusting that what would happen was the right thing. We were afraid, curious and trusting all at the same time. It became a wonderful experience in which we explored the sources of our leadership and collaboration together and discovered depths that we did not know were possible. Yet, in a sense we were innocent – we believed collective consciousness might exist, we believed it was possible to be present in spirit without physically being there but we did not yet understand what that might mean. But we trusted our innocence and our intentions. Two months ago we hosted a second conversation. It turned out to be difficult to let go of the first experience. What we had learned from the first time about the importance of creating space, about anchoring group work through meditation, about the cardinal directions and creative flow, and about the use of the elements earth, wind, fire and water – all these things nearly had become rules to us. While we had every intention of being with whatever happened, of trusting that this mix of new people and those who had joined us last year might generate exactly what was needed for our collective learning, I found it hard to let go of these ‘rules’, and so did my colleagues.

Re-thinking this experience recently, and going back to Alexander’s book, it made me wonder whether what he is talking about is not baby-like innocence but the ability to be fully accountable yet innocent at the same time.

In my years of work I have learned a thing or two about group development and creative processes. I cannot un-know these things. Yet in order to allow a creative experience to really flow from source, to spring from the energy of the working community gathered, I need to invite myself to this space of accountable innocence. It feels like a space that is both an immensely spacious field and a very narrow ledge at the same time. The space from where I am accountable for what I do, yet innocent in how I do it, accepting what I know and have learned, yet detaching from that so I can be with what is happening in the experience, accepting my

accountability for what I create or guide, yet without any attachment to the outcome. When talking to one of my colleagues, we described it as 'simply being fully present with whatever happens' and allowing ourselves to feel the beauty and the pain of it, being accountable for what we create yet innocent in our approach to it.

As I write, I realize how hard it is to capture this space in words, yet how essential it is at the same time. In my quiet space away from work right now, I find I am reminded just as often of the need to allow myself to not know what I will do next spring, as I am reminded to allow myself to know. Once I become too attached to the not-knowing, that can become just as much a rule as need-to-know-now can be a defense against the void I am finding myself in.

Very dear friends are moving to the US tomorrow. Between all three of us we know that our love will hold the space across the ocean. We know that somehow in this separation new learning and being will emerge that we do not yet have words to comprehend. Yet, if we would set out to discover this, make it our firm intention to spread the net and learn the rules of communication across the distance, we may lose the innocence in which what we do not yet know can emerge.

The poem that called me into the quiet space reminds me of the wandering wondering. Perhaps that is the closest I can come to accountable innocence right now.

to wander
to be still and to be moved
to see me in you and you in me
to be
to walk beyond the seduction
of the familiar known
into a field of wonder
to risk consciousness
of where I am,
where I might go

to find fear
and courage
to move
to be

Leiden, 14 July 2010

This is one of a series of working papers we are currently offering as work-in-progress through the Group Relations International website, www.grouprelations.org . Your thoughts or reflections are very welcome.