

Turtles dance differently – a story on noticing

- Anjet van Linge, Zachary Green -

Some time last year with others we guided a community conversation in Wales that explored what leadership is asked of us in this turbulent world. The first day had been both beautiful and painful, exploring how we ourselves were restricting our capacity to make a difference, how we held back for fear of hurting, missing out, appearing silly or many other reasons. At times it felt harsh and unsafe. On the second day, the members of the community found in themselves the collective strength to work from source, to bring their love, their being human to the work they did, and to open to their ability to really impact this world, one encounter at a time. This caused tremendous joy -'I believe I can fly'. There was a sense of being united in the possibility to lead change in this world from a place of love, not of fear (or restraint, competition, control). One of us was deeply in touch with that joy, and guided the exploration of what small actions members might take to lead from this discovery in their own working environment. The other of us saw the joy, yet felt throughout this work a raging undercurrent, a very fast moving energy that whirled through the circle of small groups which were engaged in very productive work. As guides, we briefly met, we spoke, yet our experiences of what was happening in the community were very different and we could not find ways, words to connect. After the work of the day had finished on a high, a spontaneous party broke out, people danced, jumped and sung; until one of the members jumped and broke his leg. Prior to the dance he had been part of a small group of three who had been quietly talking about the edge of the joy: the fear of flying solo, the worry about how to sustain this different leadership without the direct presence of this community. He had asked someone who knew a lot about the spirits of animals to draw a turtle on his arm, as he felt this might guide him. Then he danced, and fell. Members of the local host team helped him get to a hospital and he returned the following day, on crutches, with a wheelchair. In the circle that morning he sat in the east chair (we work with the importance of the four cardinal directions and the seats that are at each point). People who

had recently or were still experiencing some significant physical fracture held the other three cardinal points. We sensed the shared pain, noticed the pattern, owned some of the pain as our collective hurting, and did not quite know how to invite any sense making of it with the community. Later we realized that the whirling feeling one of us had experienced was the presence of the also-fear. In Native American teachings, the turtle is the oldest symbol of mother earth and is a reminder of the cycle of give and take, of honoring the creative source and of grounding. The joy and the potential was real, yet so was the fear of stepping into it, of feeling the accountability that came with this new potential, and the desire to slow down enough to dance with the fear, so it would not remain an obstacle. And we had learned that turtles dance slowly.

A first few words on noticing

Over the past few years what we have come to call noticing emerged as a practice that appears core to the collective development of the communities we work with. Noticing is the process of allowing ourselves to be fully present to what is offered by the community, to sense it, notice how or where it is expressed, to honor it by owning it as ours, and then, but only sometimes, offer to the community what we notice, as a way to invite members of the community to also notice and make sense, to maybe notice otherwise, so that collectively we can honor what is and invite what may need to be next.

It differs from what we have learnt as process consultation in that it works from the basis that whatever happens is what needs to happen, that sometimes stuck is good, and sometimes movement is. Guiding that flow of emergence requires of us as guides to merely and simply be fully present to what is, and notice what is – however un-simple that is oftentimes.

On community

Noticing starts from the principle of the undividedness of us and them, of you and I, of it and us. That is not to say that you and I are not differentiated. In many ways we are differentiated, we live in different bodies, we have different families,

we each do our jobs and projects, and we the authors now live on different continents. Yet in another way we are part of the same community, of the same field that holds our community, we are the same field, the same humanity. At times we, the authors, feel part of the same person – noticing how we are connecting, across a distance of a continent and an ocean, like both finding a flower in the sand of the beach, or we experience two different aspects of the same feeling towards our work, at the same time. In a close working or learning community the experience of this collective consciousness is sometimes tangibly present too. It can be expressed by simultaneous identical developments in different parts of the community, by experiencing a collective vision, by pictures or poems offered from various corners of the community unexpectedly expressing the same story, and in many other ways. Yet it can also be expressed by what appears to be acute polarization: he feels the joy and she feels the pain. She feels total clarity about the task at hand and he feels the fear that comes with the accountability. The field of energy that is held by a community, and that in turn holds a community, is a space that does not belong to anyone, yet is held and felt by everyone, albeit sometimes unconsciously. Within that field it matters to pay attention to who is holding, expressing, feeling what on behalf of all of us in a community. This is the way in which the collective consciousness in the community makes accessible what is present, and what is also present. The invitation to guides is to be present to all of it, to notice what is being offered, to be thankful for how what-needs-to-be is made available so what-needs-to-be-next can emerge too.

Guiding flow

Since our work with collective consciousness conversations started two years ago, we have been exploring new notions of containing. Traditionally, in developmental work, containing refers to the idea of keeping within the boundaries of the workable the emotions present within a group or system. Where often the image of a container as box has been used, more recently in the field of emergent change, network as container has been explored as well. Working from the principle of undividedness, and from the premise that what is happening is what needs to happen, has made us inquire more deeply into the

idea of containing. Our dear friend Suzanne Bergeron once told us that a Native American elder had stopped her when she put her arms around someone who was crying. This was, she was explained, because the tears and sadness had to flow, and putting her arms around the other person was pushing the tears back inside. It made her question whether she did that because perhaps she herself could not bear the other's tears. When guiding the work in a community, perhaps that is also what we are invited to do – to guide the flow of whatever is emerging, while noticing what emerges where in the communal field. Rather than a container with a lid, the image of a turbulent river comes to mind, where the movement of a stone may alter the course of the water but does not stop its flow. It never could. Guiding flow is not about making things feel safe. It is about knowing that ultimately all is safe, and noticing patiently when it does not feel like that. It asks of us as guides a capacity to be with the flow. A poem that sprung from our work in Wales last year says:

We must join the journey
In order to guide it
Learning the capacity of our fellow
Travelers along the way
And when encountering unfamiliar terrain
Taking care to let it teach us the path
To come jointly to a new vista

Guiding flow may help us do that. Quite how that works, we are continuing to learn. The rich diversity of thoughts, sentiments, intentions, desires and fears that are present within any community makes it nearly obligatory to never guide alone. As guides are human too, when guiding with a collective it is more possible to stay present to what emerges and notice the flow.

Continuity of time and territory

Since the invention of clocks we have a way to divide time in measurable units and clock-time seems to rule our lives more explicitly since the introduction of Greenwich time. Yet we can also think of time as experience, as a continuum, a stream of consciousness, a link between past and present lives perhaps. And we

can wonder whether time has a beginning or ending. In this context, we have started to inquire into the nature of time boundaries as strict moments of beginning or ending. A zone of entering and a zone of exiting feel more appropriate to allowing what needs to emerge within the work of a community to present itself. Of course, as boundary-zones they help us focus our noticing within the time between them. One marked moment of beginning or ending can make that even more explicit. At the same time, we know that work often starts before we are aware it has started, and a field that is held by a community during its work continues to carry the force of that work after the 'official end' of an event.

The same seems true for territories. When working recently in a multi-tribal student village in the city of Iquitos, Peru, it was beautiful to see how for the students designated working territories do not exist. When it seemed better to work under a tree, they worked under a tree, when it was better to work in the community hall, that's where they worked, when gathering in a house was needed, that is what happened. During the same event, it became clear that the dreams and associations of the remote support team (that was also spread across three countries) were of deep relevance to the working community gathered in Iquitos. Of course it paid to notice what happened where. Just as it pays to notice where (ESWN) in a large room parts of a community gather to work, and what we may learn from that. Yet, when working from the premise that the community holds the field it works in (and vice versa), talking about the boundaries of a designated working territory becomes less relevant. When we guide the flow of the work of a community, the invitation appears to be: to create sufficient conditions for creation and unfolding of potential to emerge. Offering specific zones of working space and time can serve that process. To stay with the analogy of the river, boundaries can then become like floodplains, where what needs to flow can flow, and boundary zones can service the capacity of the community, and its guides, to notice.

i do not exist
yet i am who i am now
and who i was before

and who i will be next

and i am not

and i am now

Unconditional noticing

Noticing appears to be a practice. The practice invites us to sense the primary energy of love and fear as it moves through a working community in its many different expressions. As Matthieu Daum once said, it is important to stay with this never-ending turbine of energy, that of pain-passion-fear-desire-love. Our conversation in Wales last year was the second of its kind. We had said we were going to guide from a place of accountable innocence, bringing what we knew yet being open to a totally new experience. Despite our deep desire to find the space inside ourselves from where we could let this be what it needed to be, we struggled with the pain and hardship that was present on the first day. We wanted so urgently for the people present to have an experience that was similar to the eye-opening encounter with collective consciousness that we had had the year before. Somehow as a collective of guides we found the strength to stay with the hardship, and bring ourselves back again and again to what we noticed, to what was present, to the now of the moment. It was a beautiful lesson. We learned (again) the need to also notice our own tendencies towards numbness, madness, aggression and suppression when encountering what we did not expect, when meeting our own fear of the unknown. We learned how our role was not to fix other people's pain, nor even to surface their apparent stuckness. Our role simply was to notice: to sense the pain present, notice when it expressed itself, honor and own it as our own, and simply stay. That enabled the carriers of the pain to allow it to be present sufficiently for it to dissolve enough.

Noticing asks us how wide we can open ourselves to unconditionally receive what is, whatever is. And to give ourselves to the field in order to make accessible what is present. A condition for making that possible is that as guides we nurture ourselves, we feed our joy and care for our pain. By doing that we nurture others, and we nurture our reservoir. While sometimes noticing can

look like doing nothing, it requires a reservoir that is wide and deep, one in which to let flow what needs to be and from which to source what we need to say.

One way of looking at the story of the broken leg, is that it was an expression of the need in the community, in the field to dance differently. Maybe, as guides, we might have prevented it from happening, if we had been able to connect the fear and the joy at an earlier moment that afternoon. Yet, it offered the man who broke his leg some wisdom (and a lot of pain), and it helped a whole community understand the relationship between pain and joy. We do not believe we need to feel guilty for what happened, yet we hold some accountability, an accountability also to share what we are learning.

The practice of unconditional noticing invites us, again and again, to be available as an antenna in the field we guide, to become the field and:
sense what is in us, what is flowing through us;
notice how the energy is expressed (by who, in what patterns, where, when);
honor it by experiencing and owning it fully as also ours;
offer what we notice as a gift to the community;
– and realize that only by offering from a place of ownership can we as guides also offer the invitation for what may be next to emerge.

May we never forget that turtles dance differently.

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.

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