

UKELA Wild Law Meeting.

The Great Work of Transformation

In this short paper I shall explore paths of transformation in which we may participate to bring about a deep shift of focus and activity in our culture, from a position of dominance and control on the planet to one of appropriate participation. Many voices are engaged in this enterprise which has the form of a radical transition, like a phase transition from one state of matter to another that lies a hairsbreadth away but expresses a very different way of being in the world. This type of change has been characterised in the past as an engagement with the Great Work, the Magnum Opus of the alchemists who used the symbolism of base metals transmuting into gold in the practitioner's crucible. However, the alchemist's laboratory was a place of labour and a place of prayer, *labor and oratorium*, since no transmutation would occur in the crucible unless the worker simultaneously underwent transformation from a lower to a higher, more responsible form of participation in the process. It is this engagement with a changing worldview that is emerging in our culture, and the practical work of shifting the focus of our activities in simple, direct and realisable ways, that I wish to explore here. This process involves learning directly from the natural world by engaging in forms of conversation with 'the other', leading to direct insight into appropriate or skilful action in context.

Ways of Knowing

September 11th, 2001 has already entered human consciousness and the annals of our time as a turning point in global culture, the apogee of a particular development symbolised by the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York. They expressed unlimited confidence in the power of democracy, human rights, economics and trade to transform all cultures according to the vision that had emerged in "the West". Their sudden, dramatic destruction in an extraordinary attack by an alienated cultural group that saw these as symbols of an evil power that had gripped the West and was threatening the world was the most dramatic wake-up call by humans to humans that the new 21st century is ever likely to experience. There will be plenty of more dramatic events in this century that follow indirectly from human activity, but no cultural actions are likely to equal this in its significance.

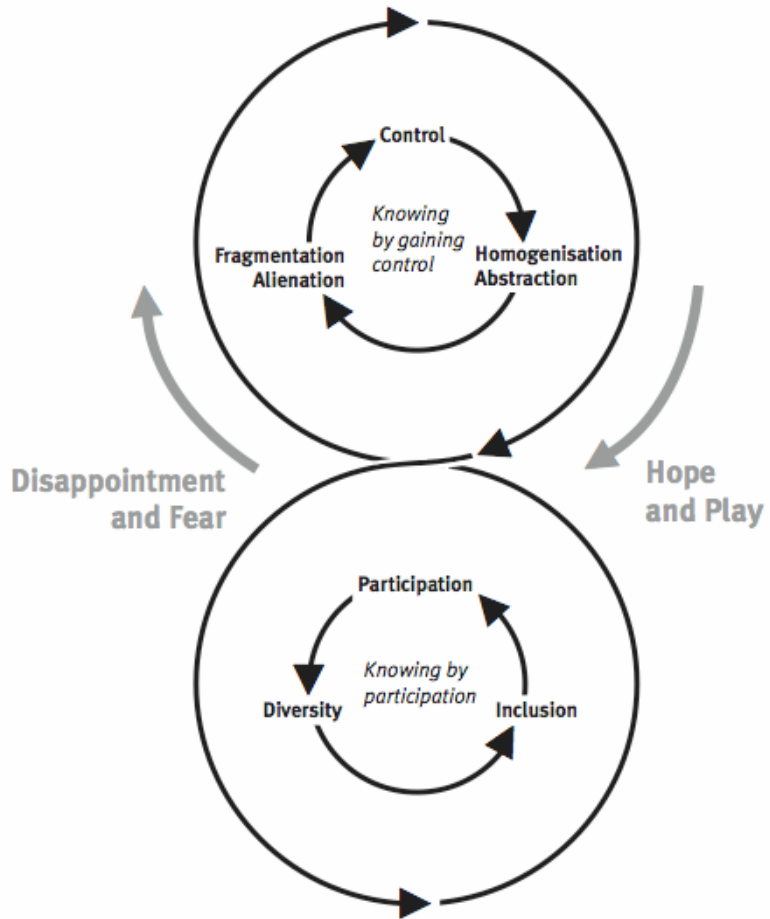
I have a dramatic memory of the news of this event entering my awareness, At Schumacher College in Devon, where I learn and teach, a group of us had been on a field trip that day to Dartmoor, a bit of local wilderness in the south-west, We returned late in the afternoon to the College to be told the news, and then to watch it, shocked but not entirely surprised, on TV. The following morning we gathered, a group of nine students and three faculty participating in the MSc in Holistic Science, for a philosophy class. The leader of the class was Jordi Pigem from Barcelona, who taught philosophy at the College. He lit a candle, read a poem by the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh entitled 'Call Me By My True Name', and asked "How did we get here?", the question that was on everyone's mind. The searching discussion that followed led to an

image that encapsulated the deeper aspects of the questions we had been pursuing in Jordi's philosophy classes, and took us beyond into an emergent realisation. We were acutely aware that the way of knowing the world developed by Western science was a very limited, though powerful one, driven by the desire to gain control over nature. This works, but gains control through abstraction and reduction, which separates the knower from the known and tends to alienate rather than unite them through an empathic relationship of respect and acknowledgement. This is the upper loop in the figure that appears below. The process is driven by fear and suspicion of the unknown.

We realised that there is another way of gaining knowledge of the world that depends on participation. This is the Goethean way of direct knowing that recognises the other as a legitimate and unique being, an "I-thou" relationship as Martin Buber would have described it. Instead of abstracting and homogenising nature into general categories, this acknowledges uniqueness, difference, and diversity as the expression of creativity. The result is a sympathetic union of the knower and the known without losing their distinctness. This process of knowing through participation is driven by love and trust of the real. The loop of fear and the loop of love are connected dynamically, with transitions from one to the other occurring when confidence in knowing by control results in hope and play, which takes the person into the participation through love loop; or conversely, disappointment and fear can shift a person out of participation into control. Fear is a legitimate feeling that needs to be respected and honoured, but mustn't dominate continuously, as it tends to in our culture. Love can be reached and expressed in participation and it can be held as the wider and deeper context of skilful action, but it can give way to fear through disappointment. The loops are reflective of the Yin-Yang dynamics of ancient China or the Brahma-Kali polarity of the Hindu cosmology, which inevitably arise in cultures and have emerged in our own, with its own distinctive qualities.

The practical exercises that we will engage in are based on a union of these different ways of knowing the world, cultivating our capacity to place the attitude of love and trust before that of fear and control. At the same time it recognises the power and the value of the ego in protecting us from what appears to be threatening. When we realize that there is really nothing to fear, we will be free to love.

Brian Goodwin
Schumacher College
Dartington Hall
Totnes TQ9 6EA.



The Nature of Knowledge