Developing communion – one dialogue at a time…

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I can truly say that I have been hoping and waiting for Peter’s and Gerard’s Dialogical Community Development to become more widely available ever since it first appeared a few years ago. This is not because I don’t believe in the importance and relevance of local writers writing for local people and certainly not because I find small presses rather useless. Indeed, the importance of writing with and about and for people in the places where one lives, practices and of sharing it with them cannot be overestimated. And without the small presses, where would those of us without the resonance of past publications and other accoutrements of fame find the encouragement and support – and risk taking - to share thoughts and experiences which are not promising best-seller fortunes for the publisher, mail-order giants and retailer bookshops?

No, apart from showcasing more globally some of the good thinking and practice which does happen in Australia (and in spite of many of its not so admirable facets), there are several quite important reasons why I think this book should be read more widely and why it deserves to become part of a more global set of on-going and hopefully growing conversations and – indeed – ‘dialogues.’

First, the two authors’ own learnings have derived from dialogues in and with a number of countries and are therewith testimony of our growing willingness, capability – and need - to reciprocally learn from one another across cultures and beyond the artificially imposed boundaries of states and formal borders. And anyone working and thinking in the area of Community Development (or whatever other name is now given to our practice) will be well aware of our desperate need to grow beyond our respective provincialisms and the limits they impose on our creativity and bravery… indeed, we need to contribute to the growth of our global commons of knowledge and understanding and this book certainly does so convincingly.

Second, the imposition of rigid modes of thinking and of prescriptive practice modalities presumably leading to pre-determined ‘outcomes’ (associated with present forms of governance and funding a.k.a. ‘economic rationalism’ or ‘neo-liberalism’) has reinforced the recipe-like approach to Community Development many of us have been critically rejecting for a long time, without much success, one may add. As well, savage cuts to tertiary and professional/vocational educational institutions and their increasingly reductionist approach to producing the ‘human resources’ and ‘competencies’ the ‘labour market’ now (presumably) asks for, have gradually robbed important concepts like ‘empowerment’ or ‘participation’ from their ‘depth’ meaning. They have resulted in attempts at imposing - presumably - relevant ‘capacities’ onto individuals, groups and communities who – also presumably – did not possess them or who were deemed deficient in other ways, thus systematically ignoring their strengths and capabilities whilst implicitly blaming them for their assumed absence.
The authors invite us to learn from ‘other places’ how resistance to such impositions can become effective and how good and deep thinking and good relational practices will offer communities as well as community development professionals a more promising avenue for positive social change – dialogically, indeed!

Third, the authors aspire to offer ‘humanising attention to the kinds of relationship that enable creative transformation’. This is an absolutely essential contribution in an age where the dialectic of globalising consumerist ego-centricity and an Orwellian drift towards the ‘digital vertigo’ (A. Keen, 2012) leads us to the ‘big dis-connect’ (G. Slade, 2012) and the loss of personal autonomy in the fake sociality of the ‘social’ media. These ‘virtual’ practice demands ever more information about who, what, how, why and where we are, all the time, but never allowing us to really relate and ‘be’ social. Peter and Gerard focusing on the relational condition of our lives – with others of our own species and with other species – thus join up with several recent attempts at filling the gap between the ‘me’ and the ‘us’: K. Gergen (2009), C. Spretnak (2011), B. Thayer-Bacon (2003), a rather belated but vitally important re-connection with the work of Martin Buber and with the re-appreciation of the essential nature of ‘gifting’ relationships, first by M. Mauss (1925/1990) and more recently by H. Liebersohn (2011).

Indeed, good company to be in!

Fourth, with the authors, it probably is about time to leave the rather unproductive – and often very superficial – debates about ‘left’ and ‘right’ and ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ and where Community Development ‘sits’ in this rather two-dimensional framework and whether it contributes to the preferred societal and ideological arrangements of the respective ‘parties’ in the ‘debate’. As I recently wrote in a contribution in the NCQ (2010:27), given that – at least in Australia - the ‘left-right’ distinction has become virtually iner ted in established politics, both major parties closely adhering to the neo-liberal agenda, we see

... a curious amalgam of people meet in the ‘middle’ and remain ‘true’ believers in the capacity of community programs to achieve anything meaningful at all (even if they often are not sure what…). One will find believers in the small, local community and its capacity to create happy and safe havens against many evils; radical communards and anarchists; and, yes, lots of community and social workers, who, being paid to do the impossible and often seeing the conceptual and practical limits of individualised explanations of ‘social’ problems and ‘deviance’, try to serve two ‘bosses’. They try not to ‘bite the hand that feeds’ (given that they are government employees or employed by government-funded NGOs) and they try to make the people affected by the programs aware that all is not well with the ways in which those who control ‘the system’ treat them and their rights to livelihood and that the choice between acceptance of their ‘fate’ and resistance to it is not straightforward – and certainly not without dangers. Not to speak about the rather cavalier way in which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is often used to justify about anything which comes to the mind of ‘developers’ of any persuasion!

How refreshing and promising, therefore, is a book which invites practitioners and others interested to re-imagine community life and work, soulfully, critically and with depth; an approach which focuses on transformation and care, rather than on offering a ‘cure’ for
situations not of the community’s making… and certainly beyond the community’s reach (in spite of the global and the local being ‘one’ and inter-penetrating). A book which does posit our personal and collective responsibility to the planet (and therefore is critical of the very concept of ‘development’, replacing it with *hospitality*) and evokes ways of being and working in *solidarity* with others and calls for *humility* rather than the well-worn phrase of ‘leadership’ and its – implicit – assumptions of superior skills and knowledge…

Finally, *fifth*, the theoretical and philosophical strength of the book relies on a collection of teachers and writers who appeal and contribute to our reflective thinking and to the further development of our attitudes towards those we live and work with, two emphases which somehow feel counter-cultural to what is going on in the so-called ‘mainstream’. When universities advertise their ‘wares’ by promising prospective students they will ‘get there faster’; when funded programs promise – or expect - fail-safe steps to achieve pre-determined ‘outcomes’; when *leadership* can be hired by the highest bidder for the required ‘expertise’; Peter and Gerard present their dialogical approach to Community Development in a similar vein to what we came to call (in another time (the 1970s) and another working context (then West-Germany)) a ‘working principle of community work’ (Boulet et al, 1980 and Boulet, 1985):

“A *working* principle, consequently, implies that, like a *working definition*, the principle is not yet ready, not yet completely elaborated; it is continuously in the process of refinement, of re-direction, of being *en-acted*. As societal reality proceeds through human action and interaction, the *working principle* becomes part of that process, is dialectically related to it; it is preliminary and yet orients and directs action and is simultaneously changed by it. While working *with* or ‘imbued’ by the principle, it will prove its *truth*, its *validity*; it will be reflected upon, transformed and further verified as it develops in the relational practice it is applied to. Hence, a *working principle* of community development … is a general *maxim*, which assists in orienting professional (or ‘service delivery’ or policy-based) action(s) or practices in and across the most differentiated fields of practice. A working principle thus should offer *integrating* power in several ways. It should assist in integrating *theory* and *practice*; different methodical/technical approaches; diverse (social) scientific disciplines and the ‘on-going-ness’ of daily living of those we relate with in the course of our work…

And so, dear reader, is the call of *Dialogical Community Development*… it invites to experiment, to allow community to *emerge* and our solidarity to become embodied and ‘real. I hereby warmly recommend the book to you for reading, reflecting on and for adding your own practice wisdom to … in further dialogue with all who strive to contribute to ‘the wealth of (a new local and global) commons, a *world beyond market and state* (D. Bollier & S. Helfrich, eds., 2012) which we desperately need to work towards, if ‘only’ to assure our very survival on this planet…

**References**

Keen, A (2012) Digital Vertigo: how today’s online social revolution is dividing, diminishing and disorienting us Constable, London