

## Participation, in writing, carving and teaching

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Over the past few months I have been using freefall writing as a discipline to explore and attempt to deepen my experience of living a participatory worldview. In freefall, one 'writes without a parachute', allowing the process of writing to unfold. I *know* when I have dropped into the freefall mode these days, as I feel a Zen-like sense of calm and spontaneous deliberateness, letting go of control and settling into what Natalie Goldberg (1990) describes as 'wild mind'. At these times I notice acutely how the pads on my fingertips make good contact with the keyboard and enter a moment of time when I can directly experience the words coming through my bodymind and onto the screen.

In this state I find a heightened sense of being part of a wider whole. Just now I notice that my mouth is tasting the aftermath of a grape. I can describe the grape easier than the taste—for it is a green grape, quite large, with a musty dew-like patina on the skin.... I put another grape in my mouth. As I squash it between my teeth a flood of juice squirts into my mouth, just sweet. Then a pip has to be dealt with, sticking first between my teeth and then, almost without my willing it, finding itself between my lips.... I squeeze my lips and allow the pip to come into my fingers, and by the time I have done this another pip has got between my teeth—the reality of the grape's demise happens faster than I can write it. The pip makes a click as it falls into the wastepaper basket. The aftertaste is so difficult to describe. There is almost a rough taste or feel left on the inside of my cheeks, and a roughness in my throat where the grape juices ran down. I clear my throat with a growl, and then burp... I am fascinated by the sheer difficulty of describing the sensuous detail of the world without moving off into fantasy or metaphor. Just to stay with the phenomenon is always surprisingly difficult...

I noticed a similar feeling of participative presence as I started woodcarving again. The other week I picked up some of the carving pieces that have been around all summer while I have been busy with outdoor things—a bowl which a friend turned for me on his lathe, leaving a blank of wood around the rim for me to carve oak leaves into; and a green-man candlestick which I started for my niece and put aside in some disgust.

That disgust was because it was not perfect. I felt I hadn't done the research, got a clear image in my mind as to what I was carving, and in particular hadn't studied the kind of leaves I was building into his face. The disgust held me a-part from the work, until Elizabeth said to me, "I like that green man, it's OK", so I took it up and looked at it with some renewed affection. Most of the face and the sides of the head have been roughed out so you can see the features and how the leaves sprout and spread around, it just needs the design finished at the back, where the leaves from each side will meet, and then it needs careful finishing and tidying up.

So I took my pencil and boldly drew some outline leaves, following the kind of tri-foil pattern I have been using, thinking more about how the individual leaves would overlap rather than if they were 'correct' as leaves. I cut around the design with the v-tool, getting a feel for how each leaf fitted within the curve of the wood and how it might come forward or fall back in relation to its neighbours. And I cut out some of the background, noticing how boldly I was cutting down the edges of the pattern and moving the gouge round to chop out quite big chips of wood. I felt almost a delight at holding the carving gouge in one hand, the round mallet in the other, having pulled my carving chops out from under the bench and dusted them off. I fell into the design without anxiety, with a positive pleasure at the feel of the wood under my tools.

There is one green man which I carved several years ago now. It is copied from a piece in Poitiers cathedral, and when I first saw it illustrated, I said, 'I want to carve that'. What I liked about the original was his wistful sadness, as well as the riotous excess of leaves which flow around his face. My version, carved from a rather tricky piece of yew, is on the wall at the top of the stairs. He simply delights me, with the same quality as a good piece of writing: it is me and yet is no longer me, a creation that has gone out into the world and now has its own life.

So to chop down along the edge of a leaf, feeling the way the gouge enters the wood, noticing the different quality as it enters softly, squishily, when along the grain, firmly and soundly when across the grain, and harshly and unpredictable at that knot which sits in such an awkward place. My hands, my whole body, notices this feel, this communication between gouge and wood, so that carving in freefall mode simply adjusts itself as if it needs little attention from my conscious mind—indeed it does need little attention from my conscious mind.

But conscious mind does come into it as well! When I was carving the rim of oak leaves around the bowl, following Elizabeth's design, I realised that I was wasting time by cutting the details of each leaf before I had carved out the planes on which they were to sit, with each leaf overlapping the previous and underlapping the next. So I chose consciously to cut over and destroy the design details in order to do that, choosing a strategy and then falling into the skill of practice, coming out again to assess what I had done and re-establish the design, so I can now fall back into the skilled based cutting of the leaves. It IS like freefall writing, in that there is a time for the mind to chose (I will sit down for ten minutes to write) and a time to allow the writing/carving 'without a parachute' to take itself forward.

When I carved the large green man out of yew, I spend a whole weekend at a carving class in detailed, quite thoughtless engagement with the leaves, chopping away, overlapping them, dealing with the grain, finding out what shape each leaf was to have by working on it directly. I brought the half-finished piece home and placed it on the mantle while I had supper, and it was only later, when I went downstairs to get the newspaper, that I saw this emerging creation in a half-light, glancing at me through the curtain of leaves, and realized just how well I had done.

I am reminded of the saying attributed to Michaelangelo that what he did was release the figure from the block of marble. I have always resisted this story, seeing it as a negation of design work, the research, the gathering of information which is clearly needed for successful carving. But now I see that in another sense this allowing the figure to emerge is also true, not in the sense of ‘seeing’ the figure in the block and heroically carving off all the bits that get in the way, but in the sense of participating with the material for what can happen to happen.

And this takes me back to notions and questions about a participatory world. I notice the phrase ‘I had done’ clearly takes the possession back into conscious mind, the assessing, judging, external objective kind of mind. But the mind that did the carving was a mind which encompassed the eyes, my hands, my gouge, my mallet; it enters the wood at that microscopic edge of the gouge—which in its turn has just engaged with the wetstone—moves through the fibres of the wood and expresses itself in those delightful little woodchips that characteristically jump out of the emerging design. The circuit is completed when my eye (the eye?) takes in information about what has been done and joins in the creation of a new carving stroke. ‘We have done it together’ might be more accurate, but falls into a possible anthropomorphic fallacy. It is clear that carving in this freefall mode is the accomplishment of a wood/tool/human participatory mind.

### **Dimensions of participatory mind**

How can we think about participatory mind? Are there some intellectual handles which can help us understand these participatory practices? James Ogilvy (1986) suggests that paradigms consist not simply of intellectual frameworks, but of *moods, myths, models, and metaphors*. To this I want to add ‘methods’, the practice dimension of paradigms, how they infuse everything we do. I have often thought that the way we think is made concrete in our practices, and even more in our engineering and architecture—our straight line thinking is made manifest in the sewers which take our shit out to sea; our hierarchical thinking in the straight lines in which we fix chairs in lecture rooms, all facing the lecturer.

The *mood* of modern times was (is?) a kind of manic depressive attachment—we were sure we were progressing forward to ever more glorious heights of human achievement, marching on without heed to the environment or the wreckage of our immediate health, while at the same time deploring the wars, the cruelty, the lack of culture, the disappearance of the past, which also characterized our times. This mood is captured in our economic policies which insist that without economic ‘growth’ civilization as we know it will disappear. Of course, alternative economic indexes (e.g. Daly & Cobb, 1990) show us that while gross domestic product grew hugely in the second half of the twentieth century, our wellbeing grew much more slowly and arguably has been dropping back these last twenty years. The mood might be described as inflated, grandiose, a sense that there was nothing stopping the human race once we had managed to adjust one or two glitches, particularly the European ability to pull the whole world into war twice in one century.

This mood is in sharp contrast to the medieval mood (to the extent that we can know it) in which all had their place in a hierarchy that stretched from God downward through angels, men, women, animals. A mood that suggested a divinely inspired order that it would be sacrilege to challenge. Or the Renaissance mood, which was, as Toulmin (1990) suggests, at least for the cultured few, one of skeptical pragmatic humanism. A sense that, while man was the measure of all things, he was a measure that had to be carefully monitored to keep it getting seriously out of kilter.

What then might be the mood of a participatory time? Certainly a more modest feeling for our position in the universe and on the planet, maybe a sense of our ability to do harm much more clearly foregrounded while also placed in the perspective of the short time humans have been part of the biotic community. But not that alone, because it would need to be placed alongside our sense of ourselves as one way in which the universe learns about itself in a conscious way. As Thomas Berry puts it "The human has its own special mode of consciousness which enables the universe to reflect on itself. Rather than saying 'humans know the universe' it would be better to say 'the universe knows itself in the human'" (in Reason, 2001). Of course, the danger here is that we will overvalue the human way the universe knows itself, and we must not forget that the universe also knows itself through the quite different modalities of a tree or an ant. But we must not undervalue the human either: it is dangerous to see the human species as a speck of dust, 'just' or 'merely' another animal. If we are just another animal there is not need to aspire to anything beyond what we have and are as it is.

A participatory mood places the human in context and celebrates, delights in, the human in that context. As participants we look at the world with awe and wonder, experiencing what Matthew Fox (1983) calls original blessing and thankfulness for who and where we are; and awe and wonder also at the possible splendour of the human, a splendour that we could safely put alongside the splendour of a wolf or an oak tree, recognizing our extraordinary differences at the same time as a belongingness together.

So the mood of participation shifts from control to participation (Goodwin, 1999), from focussed awareness and conscious purpose (Bateson, 1972a) to entering the cycle of emergence, shifting attention to the heart of the interaction, dwelling in the in-between. The language gets difficult and sometimes simply doesn't exist, and one is tempted into either quasi-scientific phrases like 'cycles of emergence' or into romantic allusion like 'dwelling in the in-between'. You can see why Heidegger and Polanyi got into such difficulty trying to write about this stuff. It is funny how in contrast our everyday 'objective' language seems to right and accurate (although the deconstructive philosophers have done a wonderful job in beginning to shake up the taken for granted polarities which it is full of).

One *myth* of modernism has been the myth of the masculine hero, in a story that divides good from evil and rides forth in support of the good to do battle with evil. This is expressed in modern times as a belief in progress, that western industrial society is a peak of human achievement, unique in the universe, and that we are destined to continue

forever onward and upward. An accompanying myth is that of the supportive woman, with the shadow myth of the treacherous, enervating woman who sucks the man dry. These myths carry with them and either/or, up and down, male or female quality to them: the world is divided into binaries and one pole valued over the other, or one pole seen and the other so denigrated as to be completely hidden.

As Tarnas points out (2000), one counterpoint to modernist myth of Progress is the myth of the Fall, that humanity is in a sad state compared with some original blissful condition. But this is a myth of return to unconscious participation (Barfield, 1957) and is in contrast to the new creation story, which tells of a universe which is self-organizing and self-transcending, creating every more complex forms of order and consciousness from 'primitive' beginnings. This myth is of the universe as a living, developing, evolutionary being and of our human selves as one of its flowerings.

The *model* of modern times was the machine, *mechanos*, as Skolimowski (1994) puts it, or the billiard ball universe. It always amazes me when I hear doctors or biologists speak of the 'mechanism' by which the body defends itself from germs, for example. The model of the machine is built then into our cities, architecture (a machine for living), agriculture, medical practices, and so on.

The model of medieval times is the hierarchy, best expressed probably in the gothic cathedral, and structure which towers from the earth toward a transcendent god, moving from lowly to divine, from dark to light, gorgeously decorated along the way

The model of participatory times is the circle, the feedback loop... but more than that the chaotic/complex self-generating and self-organising living structure/process, the dissipative structure (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), the quantum coherent, autopoietic whole (Ho, 1998; Maturana & Varela, 1987). It is not simply a biological/organic metaphor drawing images from living species, but rather looking at whole systems, species-in-environment-in-wider-context, evolving through time into more complex forms, falling back into the whole as it outreaches itself but in its death supplying new life, in the shape of levels of complexity to life forms that will come after. In this model, which emphasizes relations rather than things, the centre of attention is no longer in 'me' as a conscious, choosing, acting individual, but on the in-between place where the rhythm the eye, hand, tool, and emergent design somehow meet, as in my description of carving, or in Gregory Bateson's famous man-axe-tree example (Bateson, 1972b).

The key *metaphor* of modern time is of the world as material, as matter, as separate, individuated things. Such things are necessarily protective of their integrity, hence metaphors of competition, of battle, of struggle for survival. In contrast, Thomas Berry tells us that we must experience ourselves as part of a universe which is a community of subjects, rather than a collection of objects.

There is a single integral community of the Earth that includes all its component members whether human or other than human. In this community every being has its own role to fulfil, its own dignity, its inner

spontaneity. Every being has its own voice. Every being declares itself to the entire universe. Every being enters into communion with other beings. This capacity for relatedness, for presence to other beings, for spontaneity in action, is a capacity possessed by every mode of being throughout the entire universe (Berry, 1999:4)

The metaphors of participation refer, not to eternal life and an everlasting soul, but to our sense of time and place, of our identity emerging out of and falling back into the cycle of being. But the metaphor of soul remains: the soul in traditional terms is the everlasting heart of the individual, life without end, taking up the soul into the bosom of god for ever and ever; while the soul in a participatory world is an emergent, blossoming forth and falling back, a daemon, a characteristic quality of being (Hillman, 1996). The participatory soul is mysterious, referring to those psychic qualities which express the sacred essence of the human; to deny soul in this sense, I think we feel intuitively, is to deny that we humans do bring some important quality to the universe.

Ogilvy's suggestions that a worldview consists of moods, myths, models and metaphors seems to me to be helpful. By following his heuristic we can begin to identify qualities of 'modern' and 'participatory' paradigms in a kind of consciousness raising exercise. And one can then inquire (Torbert, 2001) within one's thinking and speaking, practice and play, in participatory mood, with the possibilities of participatory metaphors and models, acting out participatory myths.

The *practice* (or, to continue the alliteration, the *method*) of participation is expressed in the examples of freefall writing and carving. It is a discipline which paradoxically involves being prepared, with writing tools and time, with sharp carving tools, and creating space, opening to a wider ecology of mind. In participatory practice you no longer know where you are going to end up, and in a sense the very point is to end up with the unexpected. One moves away from the security of what is known to radical uncertainty, to almost a feeling of vertigo in stepping away from well trodden paths of expression. This applies to interactional practices such as teaching, as much as to writing and carving.

### **Glimpses of Participatory mind in teaching**

I noticed many of these qualities in a graduate seminar—how life emerges if you let it. I had been quite anxious beforehand, not knowing if we had got the right structure, not knowing if my colleague Judi would be happy with what I had crafted without fully consulting her, feeling that what we had arranged would depend so much on the response of the participants. But why did I worry about that? This is, after all, how I do most of my work.

As we went around the group circle, with everyone saying who and how they were, I realized that I had to speak about Ann. In the seminar we were exploring what we call 'first person inquiry', our ability in our work lives and personal lives, to embody and practice an attitude of inquiry (Reason & Torbert, in press 2001). People spoke as we

went around the group of their intentions and difficulties with this practice. And as it came back to my turn, and Judi looked at me in that way which (I felt) told me that I needed to say something about myself personally, not just as facilitator. So I told them about my present, in-the-moment, inquiry. My sister Ann is very ill, I said, this is a tragedy in my life which deeply absorbs me. I don't think she is going to get better. And so my current inquiry is about how I can hold and honour that sense of underlying grief, while at the same time being here, doing my work with you, attending to both the immediate issues and these underlying questions.

I noticed at that moment the tensions taking me in different ways. Do you know how one's face muscles, especially around the cheeks and eyes, develop a curious tension when tears are on their way? Not bursting into tears, but feeling an overwhelming sense of tearfulness which doesn't quit erupt. And at the same time as knowing this, knowing that by speaking this I was offering my full presence here in the group, picking then the moment to move out of the place of tension and, with a shake of my head and a slight smile, move away from that personal statement about back into facilitator role. I told them about how we planned the day and gathered their comments and proposals in response. As I did this, as I made these links between the dreadful background tragedy and the present moment of possibility, I freed myself from the tensions that had haunted me all morning, and was able to open a conversation about reflective practice and what it meant in the context of a doctorate.

So I spoke about first person inquiry as an attention which reaches upstream to our purposes, our beliefs, our understanding of how we place ourselves in our world; and downstream too, to our behaviour, our practice as it reveals itself in the world, and the response the world makes to our actions. And Judi said about how this kind of attention couldn't encompass everything, how we needed to recognize that conscious mind could not see the whole. And Steve talked about his work with aesthetics, and how all life in a sense was art. None of this was new, and I was a little concerned about how everyone was writing what we were saying down, because, I now suppose on reflection, I knew that was not the manner of learning of the day.

Then Madeline said, But what makes it *research*? All this stuff about reflective practice, but how is that different from what we do anyway, what makes it research?

Her question immediately brought the conversation alive. I tried to explain how our idea of research was of a practice that entered more and more parts of our life, but Eden took over, and with his big grin and slightly lisping black voice told her how since he had been doing this work there was this growing question in his head, all the time, asking him what he was doing, a voice asking him, all the time asking him, to pay attention. This is my researcher questioning, he said, and it asks me not only to pay attention, but how to pay attention better, and then later how to write it down. Eden often has a powerful presence in a group, a presence which I think in part derives from his appearance—a black man with a beard and dreadlocks down his back—but also from the soft authority with which he manages to make very personal observations, to reveal his own questioning.

So again, I tried to summarize, making some general sense of Eden's comments, suggesting that Madeline's single question had been opened out into three. But my intervention was swept along by Steve saying that for him the question was often whether there was a difference between art and life, and by a wider tumbling of questions and responses about how we place ourselves as central to inquiry. Helen tried for a while to come into this, and was continually crossed over, and when at last there was space for her, wondered out loud how we might be talking about these questions if we were not making this primary reference to research. People have been paying attention to their practice for thousands of years, she said, and it is only because we are sitting here in the context of a research seminar we ask the question in the way you have done, Madeline. But to what else might we make the reference? she asked.

And Eleanor jumped in, telling us that the primary reference for the quality of her own inquiry was her spiritual practice, wondering out loud if it was god to whom we might refer. Then she sat up straight, turned to Helen on her left, and said very loudly and deliberately, It's God, you silly woman.... And we collapsed in laughter.

In this exchange something new had arisen, a new quality of answering some longstanding questions. Questions and answers which we had not known we were going to ask, or going to find new ways of responding to. Some quality had emerged in the group, you might call it a quality of inquiry, in which we were together posing and answering questions. No longer waiting for Judi, Steve and me as faculty to offer the wisdom as much as weaving our comments in with the emergent question-posing and answer-offering of the group as a whole. And surely, one or two people were quite silent, but there did seem to be a quality of mutual engagement that involved most of the group.

So again, this is about participation. It is about creating a space for a space to emerge within. It is about having the courage to allow the emergence. And it does take courage, for my own anxiety earlier that day, before the conversation emerged, testifies to this. The anxiety is about whether the magic will work today, this time. Have we done enough, and not too much, to create the possibilities of an opening space.

It is interesting what happened next. The conversation developed and continued for over an hour. There was not enough space for all contributions. At one point I asked how we would know when we had done enough of this to move on to the next activities we had planned. Several people agreed that this was the right question to be asking, but please could they make *their* points before we moved on! We moved out of the flow of the exploration into a confused space of reforming, recreating, and on into a space where we as faculty were quite directive. We said, this is what we want you to do, and led the group through a sequence of small group conversations, movement, drawing, and more conversations which took us to lunchtime.

I think, in fact I think I know, that what we were doing was pouring our authority as teachers into the participative space we had created together. We were using authority in the service of the exploration we had all consented to and had spent an hour jointly shaping. My image is that the authority joined up with the participation and created a new

form which could not have arisen if we had just gone on with the open group conversation. We created a tension, a line through the group space, an invitation to explore now not just through conversation, but through slightly difficult activities—moving bodies in space, making sounds, drawing on large pieces of paper.

From these explorations I have learned above all that participation is a practice, a way of being and doing in the world which is both cultivated and wild. I have learned that attending to participation in writing and carving shows me what I can learn about participation in my profession of teaching—and the other way round. And there is so much for us all to learn.

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