

# Giving birth to a hospice

## The path is the goal

### Overview

In this article we explore what we variously call 'relationally engaged organizing' or 'organizing from the heart'. Broadly speaking, our interest is in practices that have, what Buddhism would call, 'path quality'. Our explorations employ (a) relational constructionism - a postmodern meta-theory in the human sciences (b) Shambhala Buddhism, and (c) reflections on experiences in the course of creating a buddhism-inspired Hospice for end-of-life care. We draw from and make connections between these areas plus - to a lesser extent - the literatures on end-of-life care and hospice work. We do so in order to thicken a view of organizing in which *soft self-other differentiation* stands central. We do so by centering four orientations:

1. organizing from openness
2. organizing from confidence
3. organizing from the heart
4. organizing that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end.

Our hope is to contribute to a practical philosophy of relationally engaged organising.

### Some beginnings

**Ernst** For me it all started about eight years ago at the deathbed of my youngest brother. He had phoned me unexpectedly, a few weeks before: he said "guess what, I'm phoning from the hospital! No, nothing *seriously* wrong, just here for observation, be out soon". Somehow things turned out differently. While in hospital his kidneys suddenly gave out, he sustained massive cerebral damage, and the ensuing coma turned out to be irrevocable... It took him three very painful weeks of panic to die. We sat at his sickbed and learned to see the world from his perspective. Iron bed frames, hoses, wires, pumps, syringes, fluorescent lights, paper clad and hooded nurses shuffling anonymously through the room, tinkering with gauges and controls, leaving again without a word. My brother seemed to be very frightened, every time he emerged from his coma: big beads of sweat on his forehead, kicking his legs, tossing and turning in the bed, mumbling incoherently. He refused to have any kind of communication with hospital staff, who seemed to frighten him. And of course, we had nothing to offer to him in the way of consolation or guidance. He was a self proclaimed 'atheist', not wanting to have anything to do with any kind of 'religious bullshit', which for him was a *very*

broad category indeed. I sat there, felt so deeply for him, held his hand and had nothing to offer but a wet towel to stem his panic. Deep, claustrophobic suffering: for him, and to a lesser extent for me, this was an experience of hell. My brother did not need to wait for death to get there: all it took was the IC unit of an ordinary, well run hospital in one of the most wealthy and ‘civilized’ countries in the world. When we finally closed his coffin, just prior to his burial, I vowed that I did not want to die like he did, and that I would work to contribute to better end of life care for all.

**Dian Marie** Phew. Thank you Ernst. So, if may I ask, is this is when you started thinking about establishing a hospice?

**Ernst** Well, actually, Dian Marie, I don’t think at that time I had ever heard of the existence of such a thing as a hospice. I had never considered dying in the first place. But after the death of my brother I started reading about it, and I intensified my buddhist studies, because I found out that buddhist practice and theory have a lot to say about working with death as a daily practice.

**Dian Marie** So where did the hospice come in?

**Ernst** Well, at the time I was the director of one of the Shambhala Meditation Centers in the Netherlands. Through my work there I came into contact with a very diverse network of, mostly, professionals and businesspeople. In talking to them about death and dying I discovered that we shared a great unease about the state of care for the dying. It felt as if the prevailing technological approach missed the point entirely. At the same time I started working as a volunteer in a hospice. I found that the care provided there, though immeasurably better than the care my brother had received in hospital, still lacked ‘heart’. Is this really the best professional help we can offer people during the last phase of their life? While discussing my experiences with people from the buddhist network, one of them, a businessman and a ‘go-getter’ said: “let’s stop talking about it, and start *doing* something about it! I’ll help you start a hospice, that will give care ‘from the heart’”.

**Dian Marie** All right, Ernst, thanks - that's given me some of the background that I didn't have before. And at what point did you and I begin our conversations on the organising processes and how they were going?

**Ernst** Well, I came to see you because I felt desperately in need of good advice. Trying to establish the first buddhist-inspired hospice in the Netherlands had gotten me into no end of trouble. First of all I began to realize that my goal could not be achieved by traditional organizing practices. In addition, I became increasingly involved in what I thought were fruitless ideological discussions about how to safeguard the buddhist identity of the future hospice. I felt these discussions were taking ages and just getting us stuck. Then, one day I

unexpectedly ran into a young consultant who was in a Buddhist training program I was staffing. As she seemed to be a personable young woman I wound up next to her at lunchtime. I talked to her about my work on the hospice. She seemed quickly to recognize the organizing problems I described and applied a conceptual framework to tackle them. A little later she brought me into contact with her Phd supervisor - you.

**Dian Marie.** And I'm very glad she did. As I explained to you when we first met, I had been working in a university business school for twenty-five years or so. My scientific work was focussed on distributed leadership and non-hierarchical, self-organizing ways of working. At first my struggle was with theorizing how my research objects (Other) construct local 'relational realities' in what they say and do. At the same time, following the practices I had learned in post-positivist (or what some call 'modernist') science, I left my own activities as a scientist out of my story. However, after some years I began to include my own 'construction work' in my theorizing and research practices. To cut a long story short, I slowly began to articulate a 'relational perspective' that assumes fundamental relatedness rather than separate existences. In this view, Self-Other and relations are considered to be co-constructed in ongoing processes. Further, this is assumed to be the case regardless of whether we label these processes as 'scientific research' or, for example, as leadership or organizing.

**Ernst.** Yes, I remember immediately being intrigued by the possible connections between your scientific work and Buddhism! For the Buddha seems to be telling us that dividing the phenomenal world in terms of Self and Other is something we do - and is the source of suffering. So then tell me more about how relational constructionism stories these processes.

**Dian Marie.** Well, the meta-theory centers conceptual language as the most common form of relating. But, of course, relating goes on not just in talk and listening but also in many other, often simultaneous occasions of 'coming together' involving for example, non verbal gestures and voice tone, artifacts (e.g., clothing, computers and so on) and what we think of as aspects of the phenomenal world. In this view, its not that self and other *are* self existing but rather that ongoing relational processes *make* them so. What I find exciting is that this opens-up the possibility that processes could *construct* much softer self/other differentiation; the intriguing question is how they may they do so.

**Ernst.** This is really great. To me it sounds very similar to what the Buddha apparently claimed 2500 years ago - that separating and fixing totally obscures the actual interconnectedness of phenomena.

**Dian Marie.** Yes, so we can already see some interesting and potentially important connections between buddhism and relational constructionism. Post-positivist science requires the scientist to act in knowing and structuring ways to

separate and distance him Self (as far as is possible) from Other. These ways of relating construct hard lines of differentiation between Self as subject and Other as object. Self as subject relates to Other in terms of their potential instrumental value - what Other can do for Self. Many social science theories do much the same, for example, by separating non-leaders and leader, and by viewing leader-follower relations as largely one-way practices in which the leader acts to know and control other. My question is how can the human sciences and related approaches to leadership and organizing embrace ways of relating that are *relationally engaged* in the sense of being open and responsive to other, open to becoming and to becoming other(wise). Put slightly differently, how may relating go on in ways that co-construct “soft” self-other differentiation?

**Ernst.** What you say makes me think of the Buddha's realization that there is no sharp division between Self and Other and that only by relating from the heart could one ... end the ‘war’ within self and with other. He spoke of the importance of non-violence, he spoke of loving kindness in all dealings with other sentient beings. It seems to me that he discovered a way to be gentle to all living creatures - by first learning how to be gentle to all phenomena he observed within himself.

**Dian Marie.** Yes indeed. I guess I had some inkling of this and so about ten years ago I asked a colleague about meditation. She directed me to Karne Choling Meditation Centre - just one weekend made me sure that I was on the right track - or perhaps I should say “path”.

**Ernst.** Yes, Shambhala Buddhism has much to offer in the area of what you call relational construction processes - dealing with the ways we 'fix' and separate self and other in subject-object relations - and view these constructions as 'how the world really is'. More particularly, it seems to me to offer both concepts (the view) and practices for helping us humans to relate without fixing self and other in subject-object relation. Maybe relational constructionism and Shambhala Buddhism could suggest some practical ways of re-constructing leadership and organising - ways that could help me bring this hospice to fruition. As I understand our discussion so far, both seem to invite us into the view that 'the process is also the product' or, as Chogyam Trungpa wrote, "the path is the goal" (Chogyam Trungpa, 2000).

**Dian Marie.** Right! Well I had a look at some Buddhist writings about living and dying and end-of-life care together with writings from hospice about their own practices. I expected that I would find a lot about organizing hospice in ways that have a path quality. However, instead of talk about hospice-in-the-making writers speak about already existing hospice. In addition, talk of relations focussed almost entirely on relations between hospice staff and the dying person and did not include a wider discussion of 'the how' (the path) of creating and organizing.

**Ernst.** That's very odd, isn't it - particularly when the Buddhist view, like the relational, implies that 'the how' issues do not wait until we have a physical building and persons at the end of their life to care for. The ways we and others relate with one another in the process of creating our hospice is an always ongoing issue. Giving life to the hospice must surely be an always ongoing process of learning to "talk softly and walk mindfully" (Chogyam Trungpa, 1991, p 212). And this must be something to do with compassionate action - about which I remember Pema Chodrun saying "there's nothing more advanced than relating with others". So, if the writings on end-of-life care don't help us much then why don't we turn to Shambhala Buddhism and see if it can help us to develop a view of 'the how' of organizing this hospice.

## **Shambhala Buddhism, living and dying.**

**Dian Marie.** Ok. As I understand it Ernst, the teachings of the Buddha include some fundamental ideas about suffering, karma and ego-lessness that get refined in different ways in each of The Three Yanas or "vehicles". The core concepts of "the view" (the philosophical, conceptual part of buddhism) include "the four reminders" – which point to impermanence, the importance of the awareness of death, of living completely and fully in the present, and of learning to let go – particularly when the body dies. So we could think together about how these 'reminders' might get translated into organizing practices. Another key concept is emptiness - which I take to mean that our ego-oriented constructions of apparent reality have no independent nature. And then there is buddha nature - a reference to the view that all sentient beings have "basic goodness" which includes wisdom, compassion and power. Finally, there is the line of talk about "skillful means". So, for example, Reggie Ray speaks of Buddhism as "essentially *a method* to release the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha-nature within" (Ray, 2000 p. 311 emphasis added). And Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (or CT as I like to call him) talks about joining "the arrow of intellect" with the "bow of skillful means" as key to building an "enlightened society" (Chogyam Trungpa, 1984). So we seem to have a lot to draw from when it comes to the everyday 'kitchen sink' practices of relationally engaged organizing or organizing from the heart.

**Ernst** This is interesting. Over the last year or so I have been trying to adapt and apply Shambhala teachings to end of life care. I want a hospice that will welcome everyone, irrespective of background or creed. So I cannot simply state the aims and ways of the hospice in terms of the buddhist teachings. So I 'translated' the 'three turnings of the wheel' of dharma into (something like) principles for end-of-life care. I feel these are buddhist to the core but, at the same time, they are open to people from different cultural or religious backgrounds. I came up with seven. (1) First, we start by radically turning *towards* the suffering of death and the dying. This takes great courage because we usually live in a fixed pattern of denying the reality of (our own) death. (2) We work from a firm determination to alleviate this suffering: this is our commitment (3) We look at 'fixation' as the

source of mental suffering (4) We apply practices of ‘letting go’ as the means to alleviate this suffering (5) We work from the premise, that *everybody* has the means to make progress on the path of letting go at any given time (6) We *always* start our work with the dying from their own perspective on themselves and their lives, and (7) we provide ‘tailor made’ support for every dying individual.

**Dian Marie** So, you seem to be suggesting that these seven points constitute practical ways in which we might be able to “release the wisdom and compassion of (...) Buddha nature” in the context of end-of-life care. They seem to really resonate with the Mahayana and its emphasis on putting Other before one’s self. As I understand it, the Mahayana path of practice includes a commitment to becoming more open and responsive to other people and to the possibilities of otherness - without expecting anything in return. This is certainly very, very different from the subject-object construction I outlined earlier.

**Ernst.** Yes, exactly! Mahayana practitioners realize there is no necessary hard differentiation of self and other and work to benefit others as the tool for furthering this realization. Furthermore, they realize that all phenomena are interconnected and know that there can be no such thing as a 'graspable' truth.

**Dian Marie.** This really resonates with the relational constructionist interest in relationally engaged practices, one of which seems to involve relating in ways that are *not knowing*<sup>1</sup>. Broadly speaking, this means knowing that one doesn’t and cannot know what is good or bad outside of any particular present moment - outside of what CT called 'nowness'. Put the other way around, relating in ways that are 'not knowing' means being fully in-the-moment and open to what the situation might call for. It includes being open to Buddha nature - ones ‘own’ and that of others - and so relating from and with com-*passion*.

**Ernst.** So, it seems that we can translate the teachings of the Buddha into end-of-life care when it concerns the relations between the carer and the dying person and family. But what about those wider organizing issues we just spoke about? What about the possible practical implications for example, for relations between myself (as the principle organizer), potential volunteers and the management board? What about relating with existing hospice, other professional healthcare organizations, governmental bodies that have quality reviews, funding organizations, organizations for patients rights etc. etc. My experiences so far seem to show that the *path quality* of these relations is critical. But until now I feel that I have been just ‘muddling through’. I really hope that our conversations can shed some light to this.

**Dian Marie.** Well, I think all the themes we have touched on can be developed in terms of their implications for relationally engaged organizing. Following on from from what we have already said, the latter would have to embrace practical acceptance of impermanence, nowness, compassion, openness, appreciation and

skillful means. Without too much further thought this seems to suggest that we need to explore the following. First, we are going to need ways of working that give space for being-in-the-moment and being open to what the situation might call for – what we might call authenticity and skillful means. Part of what this means could be summarized as working with space or openness. Second, engaged organizing implies working from one's heart - from what one might call feeling and com-passion. Third, letting go seems important for example, through ways of working that do not presume fore-knowledge of what is and what is best for others. Emphasis then shifts from (the subject-object practices of) knowing and judging to appreciating whatever one has to work with.

**Ernst** Ok, so we seem to have identified some relevant themes and connections. Shall we now look for possible links with your area of Organization Studies and, more particularly, try to thicken these themes through a more in-depth look at relational constructionism?

## **Constructions of organization**

**Dian Marie.** Yes, lets. Perhaps it would be helpful if I begin by saying that the most common view in post-positivist organization studies reflects what CT called '*this and that thinking*' or what I earlier called hard self-other differentiation. Simply summarized, this positions the knower as an 'outside' watcher who follows a (perhaps scientific) methodology to produce 'aboutness knowledge' - including knowledge about organizations, leaders, their characteristics and so on. This sort of knowledge can provide the knowing Subject with the rational basis for acting to form, shape, structure or in some way achieve 'power over Other.

**Ernst.** So when it comes to issues of leadership and organization, 'this and that thinking' is reflected in attention, for example, to specifying goals, values and visions (such as a Buddhist inspired hospice), to fixing them in mission statements, business plans, and formalized structures and then communicating these 'fixings' to others.

**Dian Marie.** Yes, goals and the like are expected to function as inputs that rationally resource and constrain relatively stable structures and procedures such as a management board, division of labour, job definitions and so on. These structures and procedures - in turn - are expected to shape (more or less rational) organizational processes that produce 'organizational outputs'. So, in this view, what Buddhism would refer to as "the fruition" is distinguished from and realized at the 'end of' some (finished) process. Of course there are some "systems models" that make it all a bit more complicated but elements of 'this and that' thinking remain such that relating is theorized as the individual act of an individual entity (person, group, organization...).

**Ernst.** This all sounds very familiar. One of the first things I did was to formulate the business plan for my hospice. In my experience it is virtually impossible to get people to contribute money or energy to any venture without one. On the other hand this seems a good example of an activity which contributes to 'this and that' constructions and so, *separates the path and the goal!*

**Dian Marie.** Well maybe - of course it depends on the plan and on how you and others relate with it. But lets work 'this and that' thinking through some more before getting ourselves stuck in a dilemma. I think some of the key relevancies here are that the emphasis on organization as a noun centers a view of relating as the means by which inputs and outcomes are linked; as I said before, this reduces relations to instrumentalities. Another key relevance is this centering of control, trying to reduce uncertainties and achieve some degree of closure. So, in 'this and that' thinking, we try to *close* down possibilities by constructing as-objective-as-it-can-be fore-knowledge of what needs to be done. This can also be seen as constructing and valorizing knowledge that is single voiced, discriminating and generalizable - knowledge which is, for these reasons, *fast knowledge*. Organizing can then be fast - no need to stop - no need to be present, in the nowness of in this particular moment.

**Ernst.** Wow. If I think this through further, subject-object relations could be stabilized in organizational practices such as, for example, in (largely) one-way interviews and appraisals, in bureaucratic structures and procedures, in top-down leadership, in daily competitions for who knows best, in blaming self and/or other (such as particular individuals or departments) and in individualizing responsibility. But in my experience, these are all very commonplace, everyday organizing practices! Indeed, what's even more: they look remarkably like the way the hospice network tried to set up its first activities and coordinating mechanisms. We registered a formal Foundation under Dutch law, picked a three person Board with total say over content and finances, established subordinate working groups, and.....started bickering and blaming!

**Dian Marie.** Oh dear. Yes - 'this and that' practices separate and fix subject-object relations characterized by an emphasis on fast, 'aboutness knowledge' and 'power over'. The root metaphor is control. And I should add that my experience is much like yours - these are commonplace organizing practices. So, for your hospice to be 'buddhist inspired' we have to explore how organizing could go on in a more relationally engaged, open-hearted ways.

**Ernst.** As I understand it, the way of the Buddha means gradually learning to accept that there is no firm ground for *any* feeling of security or certainty, even about the way of the Buddha. Indeed, the only certainty we can work with is that there is an ever changing reality of such complexity that we can never hope to state any final truth about (any moment of) it. In working with volunteers for the hospice I have found that many find 'groundlessness' to be a frightening prospect.

Indeed, it seems they came to the Buddha to be 'liberated' from this fear! But, I think we are learning: gradually we begin to trust to 'working from the heart'. In our working with dying people this means that first of all we are inquisitive after *their* ways of looking at their lives, and about what they need from us, more than what we think we can offer *them*. This involves very intense listening and constant attention, also outside verbal contexts. And in our working on establishing the hospice we have grown more open minded about practices in other (non-buddhist) hospices and possible overlaps with our ideas and practices. As our sense of mission grows, so does our flexibility and openness.

**Dian Marie.** OK Ernst, that all sounds great. But then I wonder if it might be learning-full to explore a bit more how you yourself worked with 'groundlessness' - not in dealing with dying - but when it came to organizing the hospice.

**Ernst.** Well, in the beginning I followed the ways I was familiar with. I wrote a business-plan, tried to find people that would want to endorse that, chose the appropriate legal entity to try and realize the plan, found a board with people that I thought had clout in the sense of access to money, people and power, tried to find volunteers and so on. But, as I said earlier, I grew more and more uneasy. I began to feel that this way of working would lead to exactly the kind of hospice I did *not* want! I felt that it would lead to yet another 'institution' where people would be treated as objects - of course objects to be treated properly - but objects never the less. Ironically a lot of the people around me apparently felt just the opposite: they called for more planning, more control, more accountability and for more 'strong' (meaning authoritarian) leadership and pre-structured decision making. I felt that they were very uneasy about the 'networking way' of organizing I was trying to introduce, with all it's uncertainties, unexpected shifts of attention and, in short, unpredictabilities. So we had major conflicts in the Board. Eventually, there was a major 'split' and we had to agree to go our separate ways. I had to reflect on what I had learned and on how to continue with the hospice; it was around this time that Bettine brought us into conversation.

**Dian Marie.** Yes, I remember it well. I remember it as a very painful time for you. So do you think you are learning other ways to organizing things?

**Ernst** I think so. But I am still very much mulling it over. My confidence in the need for the hospice has grown - as has my discipline in trying to bring it about without hope of instant success. And I must say, I have slowed down. I now feel that I can afford to give space to an ever growing amount of uncertainty because the strength of the vision and the discipline that will help to ground this vision has grown. But I'm forever looking for ways 'how'. My practice, together with our conversations, are helping me to reflect on what I can learn from the process so far and how to go on from here.

**Dian Marie.** Ok. Why don't we get back to the 'relational constructionist' perspective and Shambhala Buddhism and see what possibilities they offer for how to go on. Relational constructionism offers a meta-perspective or 'view' that invites us to explore the processes of making self/other and relations and to explore possible alternatives to hard, subject-object differentiation. Our explorations of "soft" self/other differentiation, can bring us to back to 'talking softly and walking mindfully' and to compassionate ways of acting.

**Ernst:** Yes, lets.

## **Engaged organizing**

**Dian Marie.** Ok, lets see. Picking up on our earlier points, we are looking for alternatives (a) to fixing and separating (b) to fast knowledge and power over, and (c) to instrumental, dis-engaged ways of relating. Relational constructionism provides possible alternatives such as *slow, engaged organizing* as it might 'go on' (be ongoing) in *multiple dialogues* and *minimal structures* characterized by *openness and com-passion*.

**Ernst.** Could we try and structure our discussion in terms of, say three headings - something like:

- organizing from openness
- organizing from confidence
- organizing from the heart.

Would you feel comfortable with that?

**Dian Marie.** Lets give it a try. And lets bring in relevant discussions from Shambhala Buddhism as we go along. Then perhaps we could bring them together to talk of 'skillful means' or - borrowing the Buddhist slogan - organizing that is "good in the beginning, good in the middle and good at the end".

**Ernst.** Great. Would you start by telling me something about the relational constructionist view of 'organizing from openness' or in dialogue and how it connects with our interest in alternatives to subject-object constructions?

## **Organizing from openness: dialogue**

**Dian Marie.** OK, let me start by returning to our earlier discussion of knowledge and the way it is understood in the S-O view and related practices. I spoke of "aboutness knowledge" which is 'fast' in that it can be codified - written about - built into machines - and built into job definitions and organizational systems and procedures. Such knowledge is (presented as being) about the world 'as it really or probably is' and so - largely free from local-cultural and local-historical obscurations. Amongst other things this means that, for example, scientists, chairs of boards, or care workers - when acting as a knowing subject - need not 'go

outside' the cocoon of their expertise to connect with any *particular* other - because, in their local rationality, *they already know* what they need to know. In this context, the knowing subject can act quickly to implement their knowledge to (rationally) influence other and *talk (by the subject)* is emphasized - rather than listening or dialoguing.

**Ernst.** I have worked in several institutions for healthcare and your account fits the image I have of them. This helps me to understand the 'dissociated' feelings I got there after a certain amount of time, together with feelings of being closed in, alienation, unease and even fear. I strongly felt that I did not want to be a patient there, and I found out that a lot of the professionals working there had exactly the same feelings. 'I wouldn't want *my* parents to be treated like this' - a dedicated nurse with over ten years of experience in her profession told me - about the way she felt she had to treat her patients.

**Dian Marie.** Yes, in contrast, the relational constructionist view centers *ongoing relational processes*. In this view, the present both re-produces some previous patternings (for example, meeting conventions) and acts in relation to possible and probable futures (for example, that decisions will be followed up). So past and possible futures both are implicated in the ever ongoing present. Thus there is never a final statement, or a final plan, or a final authority and the instrumentalized view of process gives way to relations - as they are made - 'in the now'. Rather than the one-way, subject-to-object process of communication, dialogue becomes a vitally important way of relating in *nowness*.

**Ernst.** Ok, this is making ever more sense to me. In my discussions of policy making for the hospice with management board and volunteers I repeatedly emphasized that there is only one 'ground rule' for these discussions which is that we work, and never stop working, with differences of view and of opinion, and consider only one thing to be 'not done' - stopping the dialogue!

**Dian Marie.** Well thats great - I can see you were trying to 'soften' the control approach. But I should say that I am using the term "dialogue" in a very special way. When it comes to practice, "dialogue" refers to a very special kind of talk and listening. Not all talk is dialogue - and indeed - not all dialogue is talk. We could say that dialoguing is a way of enjoying slow, open and curious, authentic relations. It is characterized by a very special sort of listening, questioning, and contributing, by a willingness to suspend one's own assumptions and certainties. It is characterized by reflexive attention to the ongoing process and one's own part in it, and by a growing willingness to 'let go' of one's fixations. Rather than constructing separate, fixed or closed realities e.g., of self (other) and one's own (others) position on some issue, dialogical practices open up to relationality and to possibilities. This opens-up space for self and other to co-emerge. Dialogue is sometimes spoken of as the practice of a "collective discipline" - which is learning how to learn<sup>2</sup>.

**Ernst.** Begging your pardon, here, Dian Marie, but we seem to be bumping into another paradox. I found that a lot of the decision makers I talked to about the plans for the hospice assessed these plans, and indeed my behavior, on the basis of exactly the opposite set of values. They wanted to hear strong and final statements, assurances about objectives to be met and about swift and decisive action. How to deal with that?

**Dian Marie.** Hmm. Well, I could be swift and knowing in my answer but only to contradict myself! You don't expect instant enlightenment so why expect 'instant engaged organization'. Whatever we do, dialogue seems critical for practical attempts to depart from dis-engaged, dis-heartening, dis-enchanting Subject-Object relations. Some approaches to organizing, leadership and consulting are finally moving in this direction. These aim to be multi-voiced rather than imposing some single local rationality, for example, as it appears to the founder or to The Board. They provide space for ongoing emergence and improvisation, for all participants to slow down and open to the fundamental inter-relatedness of self and other. Practicing the collective discipline of dialogue, participants learn to open-up to possibilities – to other constructions of what is real and good.

**Ernst.** So, do you think this way of dealing with ourselves and the world is gaining ground in big business and government?

**Dian Marie** I feel that an ever growing number of people are starting to look with interest at dialogical ways of working. They see that dialoguing can provide a way out of stuckness, out of yet 'more of the same'. Dialoguing can unfix a seemingly solid, stable and singular 'I' who thinks and builds their individual knowledge about other. In addition, dialoguing can help a shift from judgement and critique to appreciation, from what we can't do to what we can, from blaming individuals and procedures to some sort of relational responsibility. So dialoguing is a potentially transformative practice in which self/other and relations can be open rather than stuck, open rather than dis-engaged and open rather than knowing.

**Ernst.** The way you talk about it sounds as though dialogues can go on between singing voices, musical instruments, brush and paper...

**Dian Marie** Yes, contributors to relational constructionist writings and related forms of practice have made wonderfully rich connections with jazz improvisation for example<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, this connection provides a nice link to our other two inter-related themes of 'minimal' or 'light' structures (organizing from confidence) and - something like - empathy (organizing from the heart).

**Ernst.** OK, lets move on, lets jazz things up a little!

## Organizing from confidence: light structures

**Dian Marie.** Ernst, earlier you gave me a paper that you wrote over a year ago for a meeting with the Board and some key volunteers. In it you wrote, and I quote: “Any fixation is a source of suffering. This includes the fixation on plans, projects, budget control, hierarchy or roles within the hospice project. We are *always* looking for the *middle ground* between total openness (chaos) and total involvement (single mindedness)”. You went on to say: “We try to shake loose *any* identification *but* with the suffering of the dying and our wish to alleviate that. Any means to achieve these goals are just that: mere means”. I mention this because these remarks seem to connect with openness and with what some relational theorists discuss in terms of 'light' or "minimal structures" and improvisation. Light structures can be contrasted, for example, with organizational designs, rule books, job specifications, inflexible bureaucratic rules and procedures and single voiced leadership. Unlike these ‘already knowing’ forms and practices, light structures do relatively little to prescribe or restrict the ‘what, when and how’ of any performance - including organizing. Instead they support and afford emergence and improvisation - we could say they are ways of 'being in the now'.

**Ernst.** Yes, I could give some examples in my experiences of organizing the hospice. When I started to see that bureaucratic organizing would produce just the kind of hospice I did not want, I started to look for other ways to facilitate relations between people. ‘Shared inspiration’ was the engine for this way of organizing. Unfortunately a lot of the people around me had increasing difficulty in dealing with the groundlessness they felt this brought about. They asked for more certainty on the ‘what, how and when’ than I was willing or able to offer. I could not find the right response so quite a few people left; apparently 'light structures' were not for them.

**Dian Marie.** Maybe. Let me say a little bit about light structures which links it with dialogue. It seems that dialoguing is a practice that takes time to learn - yes- we shouldn't be surprised - it has to be practiced! Participants in dialogue work are invited to agree to certain ‘rules of engagement’ that help them to learn - whilst practicing - the “collective discipline”. These usually include rules such as e.g., don't interrupt, do not attempt to persuade others, use respectful language, ask questions only for clarification, listen to your listening and so on<sup>4</sup>. The idea is to block or ‘interrupt’ already solidified patterns and so to open up to new possibilities and softer (non S-O) ways of relating. The idea is to provide enough but not too much structure - to provide a ‘container’ that invites slow, open, coherent, in-the-present-moment performances gradually to emerge.

**Ernst.** I wished I'd known this before! It makes me realize that training people in openness is about the only thing you can do.

**Dian Marie.** Or you could think in terms of learning together the "collective discipline". Plus - continuing to 'riff' off you - one of the things light structuring enables is improvisation. Indeed, increasing numbers of organizational researcher-consultants link organizing with improvisation for example, as practiced in jazz or improv theatre. In improvising, participants could be said to discover the future that their actions create - as it unfolds. They can do so, for example, through multiple equal voices (minimizing or doing away with hierarchy), through what could be called distributed decision making or distributed leadership, by being relationally responsive and ready to connect with what is 'not seen or heard ahead of time' and so on. I'm sure you are already making connections with what we just said about dialogue. Improvising in minimal structures means being open to whatever is presented - relating to whatever it is as 'workable' - open to emerging possibilities. You could call this an *appreciative orientation* - there is no 'good or bad', no mistake, no 'bum' note - everything is workable. Relating in these ways involves being ready to dare, to leap into the unknown, perhaps - like Picasso - 'refusing to appeal to the familiar' by repeating some already established pattern or form. I love the way my colleague Frank Barrett, himself a very talented jazz pianist, speaks of improvisation - as "cultivating surrender" (Barrett, 2005).

**Ernst.** This reminds me very strongly of my Shambhala training in warriorship. By 'warrior' we mean somebody who will not run away from his/her fear. By being gentle to *anything* that exists, including your own fear, you open up a tremendous amount of compassion, the bravery to be with everything and everybody as it presents itself, and the will to see the world flower. As you know, in this training we are taught that this takes the unselfconscious dedication and readiness of the tiger, the lion's ability to act on the spur of the moment, the garuda's ever wakeful overview and the inscrutability of the dragon. These are referred to as 'The Four Dignities' - now there's the description of the perfect jazz quartet for you!

**Dian Marie.** Brilliant - and profound! Indeed, it seems to be a matter of practices that get the chance to display themselves brilliantly - by as light a structure as possible - in a particular moment. But this need not mean always light - because that would become heavy! Err, sorry. I should also add that structures can also be thought of as 'light' in the sense of being multiple, temporary and variable rather than singular and stable. This can be reflected, for example, in the practice of creating temporary groups around particular projects - groups that, like a mandala - at some point dissolve. Structures can also be thought of as 'light' when they are 'empty' of some specified content or 'what'. So, for example, dialogical practices and other practices such as appreciative inquiry aim to support participants to orient towards opening-up possibilities and what they can do together - rather than closing down on problems and solutions<sup>5</sup>. Approaches such as these could provide really useful forms for everyday organizing where "the path is the goal". Light structures might be a way to be relationally responsive to those who want

structures, plans, decisive action and so on - create some structures but let them be temporary and open...

**Ernst** This makes me think of our first 'essays' on establishing the hospice. With the board and a group of about 6-8 volunteers we had fierce discussions on how 'to guarantee' its buddhist 'footing'. Should we demand staff and volunteers to be practicing buddhists (to be 'measured' at their having taken the buddhist refuge vow) and have obligatory daily buddhist ceremonies and meditation sessions? Should we admit only people who are prepared to do daily meditation and bow to the Buddha? I'm glad to be able to say that we chose another approach. In our approach the alleviating of the suffering of the dying was and is our central concern. The most important 'tool' we have for this is 'letting go', and our starting point is *always* the situation the dying are in, their stage on the path, irrespective of any creed or belief system they might hold. This enables us to establish an individual path for facilitating letting go for every person in our care, bringing in specialists from all creeds and walks of life. I am not sure I could claim that we dialogued in *your* sense of the word. But we do seem to have succeeded in staying open to whatever the situation might call for by minimizing the pre-structuring of possibilities.

## **Organizing from nowness: listening and feeling.**

**Dian Marie.** I must confess I feel unsure what heading would be most useful for this 3rd part of our discussion. I feel we need to develop the themes of *nowness* - being in the present rather than already knowing and fixed - and *listening* - linking it with openness or what Buddhist writings refer to as two-fold ego-lessness and compassion. Of course these themes are implicit in our earlier explorations of dialogue, improvisation and light structures. They are also aspects of "*compassionate action*" described by Pema Chodrun as not shutting down on your self or on others, being open and non-judgemental, letting go of fixed views, being fully present and 'on the spot', and practicing 'deep listening'.

**Ernst.** It feels to me, Dian Marie, that we are getting to the very heart of the matter. In all my dealings for the hospice I have strongly felt that there is one, and basically *only* one, ground rule, that links both care for the dying, and the organizing process needed to shelter that care: listening. Whatever you do, whatever the inevitable noise you yourself and the other's around you produce: *you never stop paying attention*. And if you find yourself having stopped paying attention, as will inevitably happen, you just start paying attention again, as if this were the first day of your life! This seems to me to be the ground rule for dealing with myself and others, and the basis for compassion.

**Dian Marie.** It tricky though isn't it - because 'listening' is usually understood in the con-text of 'this and that' ways of relating. In the latter, knowing and

influencing subjects are *largely closed to other* – other possible selves, their body, other people and non sentient 'things'. In subject-object ways of relating the subject *already knows* e.g., what s/he wants to know and what s/he wants to do with that knowledge. Talk/*logos* is emphasized, relative to listening/*legein*, and listening is self-centered and grasping, dis-heartedened, tied to interests in 'aboutness knowledge'.

**Ernst.** Yes, strong stuff - yet this seems a very good and very sad description of the reality of everyday health care as I have experienced it, both as a receiver and as a carer. This approach has certainly brought progress but is not fit for creating heart-felt care, for organizing from the heart. So what about listening in this changed context of soft self/other differentiation - what could this mean in practice?

**Dian Marie.** Well, when we let go of these hard separations, for example, between the senses, the mind, the body, the heart, 'inside' and 'outside' mySelf, then listening shifts into a very different context. Listening becomes embodied participation in relational processes characterized by dialogue and supported by light structures. What Corradi Fiumara (1990) called "the other side of language" - the listening side or *legein* - gains prominence. As she said, listening in the sense of *legein* "allow(s) sounds, overtones, multiple voices... to be heard" - allowing - not grasping. She draws very much on Heidegger who linked *legein* to "hearkening and heeding", to soft self-other differentiation and openness. He connected listening with being, in the sense of becoming - understood as a particular local manifestation of a singular, unifying whole. This brings us back to dialogue - and opening up to the logos. Listening - in the sense of gathering and allowing to lie - giving space to what is, rather than moulding or structuring other, allows *both* multiplicity *and* wholeness.

**Ernst.** So what happens to the interest in 'aboutness knowledge' that you spoke of earlier?

**Dian Marie.** Well you could say that our interest has shifted to knowing from within or *participatory knowing*. But of course this now means from within in our bodies. It means sensing and feeling or 'being with' the phenomenal world of people, landscapes and so on. It means not object-ifying Other. It means heart-felt relating. So you could say that participatory knowing has an *aesthetic* quality and is *eco-logical* rather than ego-logical<sup>6</sup>.

**Ernst.** But now we get back to Buddhism - although I am not saying we ever left it! 'Being present' involves all this. But being present is not achieved by a knowing mind, by a discriminating mind, by a mind apart - busy judging whether or not it likes particular sensations - or agrees with particular views. Rather being present is participating in 'nowness' through dissolving boundaries and opening-up to 'heart mind' or what Buddhism calls compassion.

**Dian Marie.** Yes, this kind of listening could be called appreciative or compassionate listening. I think that this way of relating may well be what Pema Chodrun was referring to as "compassionate action". Is this a good time to get back to your hospice?

## **Organizing that is good at the beginning, good in the middle, good at the end**

**Ernst.** Right. Well my experiences with the hospice seem to suggest another possible paradox in possible organizing practices. I'm thinking of the words of the Buddha, who said that you don't analyze the trajectory of the arrow that has severely wounded your comrade. Rather you first remove the arrow and stem the bleeding. This seems to be a way of working that appeals to modern day sponsors and health professionals as well: quick and decisive action. On the other hand this way of working is contrary to the way we want to meet the dying - where dialoguing, empathy and openness are the main factors. Where is the middle ground?

**Dian Marie.** Well this provides a perfect segue to exploring the possible relevance of skillful means. I recall that Buddhist writings talk of skillful means or *upaya* in relation to the way that the historical Buddha introduced his teachings - according to what he felt those particular people - at that time - could handle. So, for example, he did not leap into talk of emptiness without first introducing the four noble truths. In relational constructionism we make a similar argument about acting in ways that are "relationally responsive". And while we are on the subject of arrows - remember CT's reference to joining "the arrow of intellect" with the "bow of skillful means"?!

**Ernst.** I know he was always looking for ways to bring the dharma to his students in a way that made sense in *their* lives and cultures. On the other hand he was never afraid to shock his audience either. I take this to mean that you always try to find contact on the heart-level but should never be afraid of the boundaries and conflicts you will find there.

**Dian Marie.** I'm sure you are right. As we implied earlier, organizing in these ways is not something that any of us can just do 'as and when' we will. Recognition of this surely directs our attention to practice and discipline. This includes learning - through practice - the "collective discipline" of dialoguing, empathy and being present. We need to learn how to work in these soft, slow ways even when local-cultural practices are dominated by the ways of 'this and that'. Our talk about relational processes implies that we all have to learn - as we 'go along' - 'in the now', you could say, rather than 'in the know'.

**Ernst.** Mmm, that's nice

**Dian Marie.** Maybe now is a good time to tell you about my Christmas reading. No, don't worry - I'm not going off on a tangent here. It really seems to resonate with our interest in 'the path qualities' of organizing and with your experiences in trying to bring the hospice to fruition. I came across the book through a participant in one of my master classes who came up to me after our session holding a copy of "Presence"<sup>7</sup>. He thought it connected with what I had been talking about and, to me, the title suggested a connection with Buddhism - so I went home and ordered a copy. On reading it I learned of Joe Jaworski's book "Synchronicity" - which I also sent for and read - over the Christmas break. There he wrote about the "journey" provoked by his wife asking for a divorce. Well, you could read it as yet another heroic tale. But what he talks about resonates with the themes and practices of many spiritual traditions, resonates with Shambhala Buddhism, and with what I have been calling relational constructionism. If I used Pema Chodrun's language I could say that it was a story of how things 'fell apart' and how he then learned a new way of being in the world - self reflection, self discovery, and "surrender" (and I thought of Frank Barrett's talk of jazz improvisation) to a new kind of commitment and to a larger purpose in life.

**Ernst.** Sounds very interesting. But what's the connection with my hospice project?

**Dian Marie.** Well, as I implied, he writes about his gradual shift from separateness to relatedness. Part of what this involved was a growing desire and commitment to serve something beyond himself. For him this was to create a leadership institute that was oriented towards "servant leadership" - serving with compassion and heart. After a number of years and all kinds of experiences he described himself as making the leap of confidence, so to speak. He gave up his job and gave himself up to creating the Institute. As I read I was thinking of similarities with your story of how you gave up your job and set about creating your hospice. But the part that I feel is most relevant and helpful at the moment is the part when he writes about the "lessons" he learned in "encountering the traps". After 'the leap' came the void or, in other words, "a domain without maps". He wrote about falling into "traps" which were his old "illusions" - his "old ways of being" - and so losing the openness and flow.

The first of these was "*the trap of responsibility*" which was to see himself as indispensable, responsible for everyone and everything and so making the focus on him rather than what he called the larger calling. He got out of this one by seeing it as a habit of thought which, once recognized, lost its power. His second trap was "*the trap of dependency*" by which he meant to refer to the time when he felt dependent on a few key staff, key funders and so on. He felt that this meant that he was not as straightforward as he should have been and did not speak from his centre. In addition, he became too dependent on his original plan, feeling that he had to stick to it. He said he reverted to "focusing rigidly on the business

plan...instead of focusing on the result, the vision we had intended” (p125). He stopped being flexible, stopped listening, became more fearful. Again, seeing this as an old habit, an old illusion ‘popped’ it.

The third trap he called the “*trap of overactivity*”. This came from having people in the organization who were not “aligned with the dream” - “resulting in deep incoherence in the organization” (p.127)<sup>8</sup>. He spoke of getting bogged down in detail, became overwhelmed by the seeming size of the task, and felt pushed along at too fast a pace. He attracted some key people who had their own agendas. He wrote “ In these situations, its not ‘they’ who are responsible. Its us. It has to do with our own history” (p.129). Getting out of this trap requires individual and collective reflection: “unless we have the individual and collective discipline to stay anchored, we will eventually lose the flow” (p.129). He went on to emphasize “the discipline of dialogue” as important for all participants. As he described it, this meant taking the time for regular ‘get togethers’ - in the ‘beginning, middle and end’ of the project so to speak - for continual reflection and re-nurturing.

Of course, as he said, these were *his* traps reflecting his neuroses. But ‘the big picture’ is about how easily we can all fall into ‘fixing and separating’ and so ‘fall off the path’. What do you think Ernst? Isn’t this what you just spoke of in terms of connecting on the heart-level and never being afraid of the boundaries and conflicts you will find there?

**Ernst** Wow, Dian Marie, this really touches my heart! It’s like seeing my own path reflected in Jaworksi’s experience. What a great opportunity to learn. And let me tell you, the fact that somebody went a very similar path before me I find consoling. Maybe in a later conversation we could go over these three traps, apply them to the hospice case history, and see whether the application of our four orientations would be helpful in opening up new possibilities.

**Dian Marie.** Yes, of course. And I think its also important to extend this talk of engaged organizing to other contexts such as care homes and the Shambhala community. It seems that increasing numbers of managers, consultants and trainers are making connections between 'spiritual' and professional issues. Some are doing so by centering interrelatedness and a different kind of knowing, letting go the desire to control (e.g., Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers, 2004). Maybe "engaged organising" can provide the difference that really makes a difference - for all of us who are dying. One thing is certain, as CT said, we have much "rich manure" to help us.

**Ernst.** We certainly do. Should we finish up for now?

**Dian Marie** Yes, but what about saying something about what you have learned from this ‘manure’ and what now is happening with the hospice.

**Ernst.** Good idea. Well, basically, the conflict within the Board turned out to be a blessing in disguise. It strengthened my sense of mission. It is just there, guiding me on along the path, pitfalls and all. And interestingly, I learned that communicating openly ‘from the heart’ of this mission simply attracts people who want to come and help. So I have shifted from ‘power’ and ‘planning’ to heart to heart connection. I have learned I can rely on those with whom I have this connection’ and it has led to a quality of work that I could not have imagined beforehand. Also, I have found that I can just trust to ‘chance’, or maybe I should say synchronicity. It seems that if (and only if) you work from trust in your mission, or maybe I should call it ‘confidence’ *and* you work from an open heart, a wealth of opportunities arises every moment.

**Dian Marie** And what’s happening with the hospice?

**Ernst** Well now I try and engage in more open communication. The website and the monthly newsletters we send out have proven to be very effective and powerful tools for attracting people and generating ideas. Trusting to other people’s sense of sharing the mission has significantly increased the number of people involved in the preparations for our hospice. I have begun to experiment more with an open way of working. This means, basically, that I am looking for possibilities and potential wherever it presents itself instead of relying on fixed, predetermined planning and control. In these ways I have ‘stumbled’ upon all kinds of people that have contributed their knowledge and energy towards the creating of the hospice. My encounter with you, and the great amount of effort you have put in, serves as a good example for this. I could never have planned for this support beforehand, nor for the free and dedicated support we have received from others, such as nurses, doctors, architects and even dying people.

**Dian Marie** And so how are these people working and how are you working with them?

**Ernst** At the moment we work in a very light structure of ‘working groups’ that are basically self organizing. My role is the one of ‘keeper of the flame (of inspiration)’ and of linking pin between these groups. One group has written a protocol for buddhist end of life care, of which I am very proud: I know my brother would have agreed with its tone and content. Another workgroup includes you- and has contributed to making this article. There is a workgroup who has organized a string of study sessions, preparing participants for helping dying people - of *all* creeds - including a sessions oriented towards helping people with a *buddhist* creed. Translating our protocol and our ‘principles’ of engaged organizing into plans for a physical hospice is the task of another group. And last, there is a group looking for ways to fund the establishing of the actual hospice.

This is just the beginning.....

self, other & relations	Rel.constructionism	Buddhism	The hospice
self-centered individualism & mono-logical practices	Hard self/other diff., waste of resources, limited problem solving, psychological and ecological suffering	Discursive mind/ Twofold ego/suffering	Planning and control, sharp divisions, powertrips, conflicts, suffering
relational self & dialogical practices	Softening self/other diff	Twofold egolessness	'working from the heart'
	Including all voices and resources	The ceaseless display of interdependent phenomena/ luminous emptiness	A safe yet challenging container for both dying and their caregivers

<http://www.hospicedeliefde.nl>

<sup>1</sup> e.g., Anderson

<sup>2</sup> see e.g., Bohm

<sup>3</sup> Barrett

<sup>4</sup> e.g., The public conversations project

<sup>5</sup> see e.g., Bunker Alban Large group Interventions

<sup>6</sup> an implicit reference to Gregory Bateson

<sup>7</sup> Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Jo Jaworski and Betty Sue Flowers

<sup>8</sup> here he was connecting to Bohm's work on dialogue