ACTION RESEARCH AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

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> For me spiritual life is not an interest, it's a way of life, of being in the
> world, the foundation of everything. bell hooks, (hooks, 1991:218)

One of the interesting debates within the family of methods which we call action research—co-operative inquiry, participatory action research, action science, action inquiry, appreciative inquiry—has concerned what we mean by validity. Positivist science is (relatively) clear that validity is about epistemology, about truth in some sense, a correspondence between theory and empirical evidence. However, in action research, as we have explored these questions, we have realized that validity, or a better term may be quality, is a rather different, and more multidimensional, notion.

There is clearly an epistemological dimension to quality in action research. Action research is an approach to the generation of knowing which aims to bring ideas and knowledge and action together, to produce practical knowing. There is a huge debate, to which I have contributed, about the nature of such practical knowing, and the epistemological changes that the action research perspective brings to the academy (Heron & Reason, 1997).

Action research has over the years also addressed political questions. The argument from the PAR community is that the processes of knowledge creation have been monopolized by those who have power, and thus they create knowledge in the service of their own interests. What is the point of findings that are 'true' if they have been produced in circumstances that disempower people, that distort social relations, and add to the monopoly power of dominant groups? So validity or quality in action research is also about political relations, it is fundamentally about democratizing ways of creating practical knowing (Chambers, 1997; Fals Borda, 1995; Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001; Selener, 1997). And action research has also asked pragmatic questions concerning whether the outcomes of action research projects are 'useful' whether they work in practice (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). And of course, part of the postmodernist contribution has been to emphasize the links between power and knowledge (Foucault, 1975).

Today I want to explore another dimension of quality in action research: action research aims, I think, to develop practical knowing in the service of worthwhile human purposes. In the Introduction to the Handbook (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a) we placed a set of quotes which showed that while action research practitioners suggest slightly different emphases in their work—'quest for life,' 'make the world better,' 'loving,' 'freer'—there is broad agreement that the purpose of human inquiry is the flourishing of life, the life of human persons, of human communities, and increasingly of the more-than-human world of which we are a part. However, Hilary Bradbury and I were struck we are struck that while all contributors are concerned to address questions they believe to be a significant worth, few pay *explicit* attention to inquiring into what is worthy of attention, how we chose what is worthwhile. We wondered if action researchers espouse high values without having relevant disciplines to inquire into this process of valuing?

So today I want to play with the idea that we can see action research as spiritual practice, for as Matthew Fox tells us, the questions we address in our practice tell us *what matters* (Fox, 1991a). Now, when I speak of spiritual practice, I want to be

taken as speaking of an everyday spirituality. For just as it is widely argued that action research is a way of life—for example in Judi Marshall's recent paper *Living Life as Inquiry* (Marshall, 1999)—so to for the mystic and prophet spiritual practice is not esoteric and otherworldly, but is similarly part of everyday life. Meister Eckhart said that 'God is at home, it is we who have gone out for a walk'—spiritual practice is about returning home, coming back to now; Jesus said the Kingdom/Queendom of Heaven is among you; or as the Buddhists say, Nirvana is here, we are all Buddhas, we have to learn to recognize this truth! As John Heron put it 'simple openness to everyday participative experience, feeling that subject and object are in an inseparable seamless field of imaging and resonance—a field with infinite horizons—is itself a spiritual experience' (Personal communication, 1997).

I asked Wolf Storm (Storm, 1972, 1994) to tell me what he, as a Medicine Wheel teacher, meant by prayer. I understood from his reply was to pray was to approach life as sacred, to call to living things, to feel one's relation to them, from the four great directions, as spirit, body, emotions, and mind. When the Lokota people end their prayers, they say, 'All our relations': spirituality is about all our relations, as Thomas Aquinas, said, spirit is the capacity to relate to the totality of things.

If we see action research as spiritual practice, we may thereby discover ways in which we can inquire together into worthwhile purposes. We may also come to understand action research in a deeper and more profound manner.

> Spirituality is a life-filled path, a spirit-filled way of living… A path is not goal oriented. A path is *the way itself*, and every moment on it is a holy moment; a sacred seeing goes on there (Fox, 1991a:11-12, original emphasis)

I have argued before that one of the great tasks of action research is to heal the splits that characterize western experience [Reason, 1994 #30;(Reason & Bradbury, 2001a)]. One of the great splits, which can be seen as taking place just 400 years ago with the burning of Giordano Bruno (de Quincey, 1999b), has been between inquiry and religion: science got to study 'things material' and religion 'things spiritual', splitting up the world into different packages which is the root, I would argue, of our current predicament. Maybe this consideration of action research as spiritual practice will contribute to healing of that rift and allow spirit into our science and inquiry into our spiritual practice!

The Four Paths of Creation Spirituality

In this paper I draw heavily on the teachings of Matthew Fox on creation spirituality—for it was listening to him in Bath earlier this year that the original ideas for this talk came to me. Most of us brought up within a Christian tradition (and for those of us who would not see ourselves as Christian, let us not forget how much Christian teaching has influenced our world, the practice of capitalism and thus of the context of our lives, as Weber and Tawney pointed out long ago) were brought up broadly within the fall/redemption tradition, which starts with original sin and identifies a threefold path to salvation—purgation, illumination and union. We have

to radically clean up our sin, see the light, and then we will have union with a transcendent divinity. Fox says

> It is a dualistic model and a patriarchal one; it begins its theology with sin and original sin, and it generally ends with redemption. Fall/redemption spirituality does not teach believers about the New Creation or creativity, about justice making and social transformation, or about Eros, play, pleasure, and the God of Delight. It fails to teach love of the earth or care for the cosmos, and it is so frightened of passion that it fails to listen to the impassioned please of the *anawim*, the little ones, of human history (Fox, 1983b:11)

The creation spirituality traditions start with original blessing of life, rather than the original sin of fall/redemption (and Fox argues that creation spirituality is a much older tradition, reaching back through the history of the Judaism and Christianity to the wisdom books of the Old Testament , and reaching through Christian and Jewish mystics, the ecstatic Sufis of Islam, romantic poets, to contemporary deep ecologists…). And in contrast to the three paths of fall/redemption, Matthew Fox identifies four paths of creation spirituality

> The Four Paths of creation spirituality tell us what matters. We are told in Path One that awe and delight matter; in Path Two that darkness, suffering and letting go matter; in Path Three that creativity and imagination matter; and in Path Four that justice and celebration, which add up to compassion, matter. (Fox, 1991a:12)

So what then of sin, indeed of original sin?

> The creation-centred tradition, while it does not begin with original sin but with original blessing, does indeed have an understanding of original sin or the sin behind sin. From Meister Eckhart to Mary Daly, the sin behind all sin is seen as dualism. Separation. Subject/object relationships. Fractures and fissure in our relationships. Take any sin: war, burglary, rape, thievery. Every such action is treating another as an object outside oneself. This is dualism. This is the sin behind sin. (1991:49)

Fox points out that this understanding of sin is found in Eastern spiritualities as well, in the idea of separateness. I don't want to take the comparison too far, but there are clearly parallels here with the positivist worldview and the methodologies of scientism. The Western enterprise since Descartes has been based on dualism. Indeed, it is interesting to note Brian Goodwin describes Dawkins' theory of the Selfish Gene (Goodwin, 1994) as paralleling the Fall/Redemption myth. So we can see that from this perspective we urgently need a form of inquiry which doesn't rely on the separateness and divisiveness of dualism, on the separation of subject and object in the western scientific view.

The Four Paths

The *Via Positiva* reminds us that we begin in original blessing rather than original sin, in the 'awe, wonder and mystery of nature and of all beings, each of whom is a "word of God"' (1991:18) The Via Positiva tells us to 'fall in love at least three times a day' (1991:19)—in love with the cosmos, in love with a wildflower, in love with a

symphony, in love with another person. The Via Positiva tells us that awe, wonder, and falling in love matter. Blessing is about abundance, about joy, about passion; about being part of the earth, part of the cosmos; about beauty and harmony and balance. Meretta Hart, who has just completed our MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice chose as the core aspect of her life inquiry how to 'be a blessing' in the world.

The *Via Negativa* reminds us that darkness and nothingness, silence and emptying, letting go and letting be, pain and suffering, also constitute a real part of our spiritual journey. The Via Negativa instructs us 'Thou shalt dare the dark' (1991:19)

> In the pathway that is the Via Negativa, we enter the shadow, the hidden or covered-up parts of ourselves and our society. In doing so, we confront the cover-up that often accompanies evil in self and society. 'It is part of an unjust society to cover up the pain of its victims' notes theologian Dorothy Solee. This commandment requires that spiritual voyagers not only let go of cover-up and denial, but that they actually enter into the darkness that pain is all about. Since both despair and apathy arise from the cover-up of anger, this journey of letting go is also one of going deeper that the despair, apathy, bitterness, and cynicism that can create such resentment in our souls and society. (Fox, 1991b:20)

The Via Negativa is what mystics describe as the 'dark night of the soul'. The creation spirituality path reclaims mysticism, telling us we are actually *all* mystics, able to 'undergo deep darkness'

> It is when the heart is broken that compassion can begin to flow through it.
> (Fox, 1991a:20)

Paths One and Two lead to Path Three, the *Via Creativa*, which is about our generativity, our imagination, our ability to co-create:

> We trust our images enough to birth them and ride them into existence.
>
> The basic spiritual discipline in the creation tradition is decidedly not asceticism, but is the development of the aesthetic. Beauty, and our role in co-creating it, lie at the heart of the spiritual journey. In Path Three we learn what Eckhart meant when he said 'we are heirs of the fearful creative power of God.' Creativity is not about painting a picture or producing an object; it is about wrestling with the demons and angels in the depths of our psyches and daring to name them, to put them where they can breath and have space and we can look at them. This process of listening to our images and birthing them allows us to embrace our enemies'—that is, the shadow side of ourselves—as well as to embrace our biggest visions and dreams (Fox, 1991a:18-21)

But creativity is not enough, for we are also called to the relief of suffering to combating injustice, to the struggle for balance in society and history. We are called to work together in community with others who are also struggling for justice. This is the *Via Transformativa.*

> The creation spirituality journey culminates in compassion—the combination of justice making and celebration. Justice and joy equally make up the experience that compassion is about. The capacity to experience our interconnectedness concerns both the joy and the sorrow that we undergo with others... Compassion is about the actions that flow from us as a result of our interdependence (1991:22)

Fox uses the term 'prophecy' here: we are all prophets (just as we are all mystics), and the prophet is one who interferes:

> To be compassionate is also to be prophetic... The prophet interferes with the injustice, the unnecessary pain, that rains on the earth and its creatures when humans neglect justice and compassion. That prophetic call to interfere with injustice resides in all of us. (1991:23)

These four paths of creation spirituality can be seen as a journey from the joy of original blessing, through the darkness of pain and suffering into creativity and on to working for justice in the world. In this sense, each path negates, grows out of, and builds on the previous. The four paths can also be seen as a spiral or sacred hoop in that

> ... the Via Positiva and the Via Creativa are related in a special way because they are both about awe and wonder, delight and beauty... and the Via Negativa and the Via Transformativa are also related in a special way because we cannot enter compassion if we have not entered the darkness of suffering and pain... Path Four in many respects is a response to the suffering of the world and of the self that we undergo in Path Two. But by the time we arrive at Path Four we are more fully equipped—thanks to the awakened imagination and creativity of Path Three—to respond to the suffering not just with anger but with creative, effective works that truly heal. (1991:25)

The Four Paths as Action Research

I make the assumption here that most of you are familiar with the orientations of experiential and participative research.   Hilary Bradbury and I wrote

> There is no 'short answer' to the question 'What is action research?' But let us say as a working definition… that action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview... It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a)

Further, drawing on work I have done with Judi Marshall and Bill Torbert, we identify three broad strategies of research/practice:

- First-person action research/practice skills and methods address the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act awarely and choicefully, and to assess effects in the

> outside world while acting. First person research practice brings inquiry into more and more of our moments of action—not as outside researchers but in the whole range of everyday activities.
> * Second-person action research/practice addresses our ability to inquire face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern—for example in the service of improving our personal and professional practice both individually and separately. Second person inquiry starts with interpersonal dialogue and includes the development of communities of inquiry and learning organizations.
> * Third-person research/practice aims to extend these relatively small scale projects so that 'rather than being defined exclusively as 'scientific happenings' they (are) also defined as "political events"'(Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996). Third person strategies aim to create a wider community of inquiry involving persons who, because they cannot be known to each other face-to-face (say, in a large, geographically dispersed corporation), have an impersonal quality. Writing and other reporting of the process and outcomes of inquiries can also be an important form of third person inquiry.(Reason & Bradbury, 2001b; Reason & Torbert, 2001)

Action Research and the Via Positiva

Positivist research starts in skepticism, in doubt. It mistrusts the pragmatics of everyday human knowledge-making and places trust instead in timeless, universal, usually mathematical truths. According to Stephen Toulmin (Toulmin, 1990) this philosophical perspective arose out of the particular political circumstances of the 'Enlightenment' period, in particular the devastation caused by the 30 years war and the religious dogmas which had caused so much misery:

> … the Cartesian program for philosophy swept aside the 'reasonable' uncertainties and hesitations of 16th-century skeptics, in favor of new, mathematical kinds of 'rational' certainty and proof… [F]or the time being, that change of attitude—the devaluation of the oral, the particular, the local, the timely, and the practical—appeared a small price to pay for a formally 'rational' theory grounded on abstract, universal, timeless concepts… Soon enough, the flight from the particular, concrete, transitory, and practical aspects of human experience became a feature of cultural life in general. (Toulmin, 1990:75-76)

In contrast, action research strategies start with acknowledgement and celebration of the human capacity for self-direction and meaning making in everyday life. As Budd Hall points out (Hall, 2001), action research, in the sense of people and communities using their inventiveness to address problems of everyday life, is as old as humanity and probably older. As Orlando Fals Borda writes

> The general concept of authentic participation… is rooted in cultural traditions of the common people and their real history… which are resplendent with feelings and attitudes of an altruistic, cooperative and communal nature and which are genuinely democratic [Fals-Borda, 1991 #23:5]

Similarly in co-operative inquiry we start from the view that:

> a person is a fundamental spiritual entity, a distinct presence in the world, who has the potential to be the cause of his or her own actions. To actualize this capacity and become fully a person is an achievement of education and self-development. It involves learning to integrate individualizing characteristics with a deeper communion with others and the world. (Heron, 1992:Chapter 2; Reason & Heron, 1995:123)

Action research leads us to an exuberant possibility of knowledge making: not to a search for one truth, but for multiple expressions of our understanding, expression and creative action. If human inquiry is not exciting, life enhancing, even pleasurable, then what is it worth?

Action research also leads us, I believe, to a participatory worldview, toward a conception of the cosmos as intelligent, self-ordering and self transcending cosmos, of which one dimension is the life forms and ecology of planet earth.

> … our world does not consist of separate things but of relationships which we co-author. We participate in our world, so that the 'reality' we experience is a co-creation that involves the primal givenness of the cosmos and human feeling and construing. The participative metaphor is particularly apt for action research, because as we participate in creating our world we are already embodied and breathing beings *who are necessarily acting*—and this draws us to consider how to judge the *quality* of our acting. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a)

Just as creation spirituality points to a wider cosmology, so too action research points toward a cosmology in which matter is not 'dead' as in the Cartesian worldview, but inherently sentient: 'no matter without mind, no mind without matter' (attrib Goethe). Thus action research fits within what can be called a 'pan-psychic' or 'panexperiential' philosophy (de Quincey, 1999a, 1999b; Griffin, 1998; see also Table 1 for a summary)

Fox also points out that a theology of blessing is 'about a different kind of power' (1991:53). It is about power with and for people rather than power of control or power over. His view is that the doctrine of original sin (which as above I have linked strongly to a dualist worldview and thus to modernist science) has held such a sway in western cultures because it has supported those who hold power

> … an exaggerated doctrine of original sin, one that is employed as the starting point for spirituality, plays kindly into the hands of the empire-builders, slave masters, and patriarchal society in general. It divides and thereby conquers, pitting one's thoughts against one's feelings, one's body against one's spirit, one's political vocation against one's personal needs, people against earth, animals and nature in general. By doing this it convolutes people, so confuses and pre-occupies them, that deeper questions of community, justice and celebration never come to the fore. Blessing is politically dangerous.... (1991:54)

The Enlightenment tradition makes almost no link between knowledge and power: except for Bacon's assertion that knowledge is power, the political consequences of knowledge making were subsumed under the epistemological. It is significant the

Kuhn's book on the structure of scientific revolutions (Kuhn, 1962), which was so influential in introducing the notion of paradigm to our thinking about science, made no connection between knowledge and power. It has been one of the important contributions of the postmodern movement to make this link, to show us 'the interested nature of knowledge-making' that inquiry is a 'political process rather than merely a neutral, truth seeking operation' (Calás & Smircich, 1999:651-2; see also Foucault, 1975; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001; Lukes, 1974). So to start our inquiry with an assertion of the knowledge-making capacity of ordinary people is to reforge the link between democracy and epistemology (Park, 1999, 2001).

<u>First- Second- and Third-person research/practice and the Via Positiva</u>

In first person research/practice we begin with our celebration of the self directing, self generating, self knowing and self transcending capabilities of the individual person as inquirer; we see inquiry not as a specialized professional realm, but as learning through risk taking in living. In second person research/practice, we conceive of the human community and organization not mechanistically, not in terms of control and command, but as a 'community of inquiry within a community of practice'. And we glimpse the possibility of third person research practice as engaging with yet wider communities of regions, nations, the human community of the planet.

A particular form of action research which is strongly based in the Via Positiva is appreciative inquiry....

> In their original formulation of appreciative inquiry, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) argue that action research, especially in the guise of organizational development, has largely failed as an instrument… social-organizational transformation… because of its romance with critique at the expense of appreciation. To the extent that action research maintains a problem-oriented view of the world it diminishes the capacity of researchers and practitioners to produce innovative theory capable of inspiring the imagination, commitment, and passionate dialogue required for the consensual re-ordering of social conduct. If we devote our attention to what is wrong with organizations and communities, we lose the ability to see and understand what gives life to organizations and to discover ways to sustain and enhance that life-giving potential. (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001)

In the terms I am using here, we make a mistake if our inquiry starts with the Via Negativa—and the appreciative inquiry folk outline among the consequences of doing so the limiting of conversation, the maintenance of hierarchy, the silencing of minorities and the general enfeeblement of community and organizational processes

> More than a method or technique, the appreciative mode of inquiry… engenders a reverence for life that draws the researcher to inquire beyond superficial appearances to deeper levels of the life-generating essentials and potentials of social existence. That is, the action-researcher is drawn to affirm, and thereby illuminate, the factors and forces involved in organizing that serve to nourish the human spirit (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987:131)

> Appreciative inquiry distinguishes itself… by its deliberately affirmative
> assumptions about people, organizations, and relationships. It focuses on
> asking the unconditional positive question to ignite transformative
> dialogue and action within human systems… [A]ppreciative inquiry is…
> an intentional posture of continuous discovery, search, and inquiry into
> conceptions of life, joy, beauty, excellence, innovation, and freedom.
> (Ludema et al., 2001)

> Selecting a positive topic to explore is an essential starting point.
> Appreciative inquiry is based on the premise that organizations move in
> the direction of what they study. For example, when groups study human
> problems and conflicts, they often find that both the number and severity
> of these problems grow. In the same manner, when groups study high
> human ideals and achievements, such as peak experiences, best practices,
> and noble accomplishments, these phenomena, too, tend to flourish. In this
> sense, topic choice is a fateful act. (Ludema et al., 2001)

Appreciative inquiry teaches much about the power of the unconditional positive
question, about searching for what gives life and creativity to situations rather than for
problems to overcome. However, it is difficult not to conclude that in its emphasis on
the positive appreciative inquiry is in danger of ignoring the shadow.

> When the Via Negativa is ignored, the prophetic voice is invariably
> silenced. Life becomes superficial, easily manipulated, and ultimately…
> boring… For while the Via Positiva teaches us the cosmic *breadth* of
> living, of our blessed bodiliness, the Via Negativa opens us to our divine
> *depths*. (1991:130)

While the Fox's warning may be a little extreme given the huge positive impact
appreciative inquiry can have, nevertheless it speaks for me to the unease I feel about
its relentless positiveness. The question we must ask is whether, in resisting the
'critical question', the problem-orientation of much action research, it avoids the
depths of the human soul to which the Via Negative points us.

> ... if we fail to let pain be pain... then pain will haunt us in nightmarish
> ways (1991:142)

To this requires courage, a willingness to embrace pain to enter it, befriend it. So we
can turn to the explore the Via Negativa as a dimension of action research.

Action Research and the Via Negativa

The Via Negativa asks us to dare the dark, to acknowledge, enter into and stay with
oppression, pain, silence. So does much action research. When Hilary Traylen did her
co-operative inquiry with health visitors, they found that what they most needed to
look at were the hidden agendas:

> How much do we discuss with our clients, particularly highly sensitive
> issues such as child abuse, incest, drug and alcohol abuse and poor
> relationships?… we all recognized that some of the visits were superficial,
> not tackling the fundamental concerns we held about some families.
> (Traylen, 1988:)

For Hilary and her co-researchers this was a frightening, as well as an exciting exploration.

The women's movement, the second wave of feminism, as been an originating force in the development of action research (Maguire, 2001); much early feminism was based in the methodology of consciousness raising, which we can see as a form of political co-operative inquiry. Consciousness raising invited women to celebrate their strengths: it also supported them in an exploration of their silencing, the grief and rage consequent of living in a patriarchal society.

The celebrated book *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) identifies how many women have experienced silence as a fundamental quality of many women's knowing: 'the absence of voice in these women is so salient' that silence is 'an important anchoring point in our epistemological scheme'(Belenky et al., 1986:24). I am often impressed with how women graduate students, on reading this book, speak of the strength it gives them in recognising that their silencing is shared by many others. As Ann Martin has it

> For me, the connection between feminism and action research begins with the concept of voice as I found it in the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, and Tarule (1986) and the essays of Andre Lorde… Many of us (women) have lived the transition from silence to voice and experienced the power gained in that transition…it's only a small step from the experience of finding one's own voice to realizing that this finding of voice, this learning that one does know, applies to everyone. (quoted in Maguire, 2001)

Maguire writes, 'Feminist grounded action research works to uncover and disrupt silencing mechanisms, subtle and overt, in knowledge creation and organizational change efforts' (2001). And the best features of the emerging men's movement similarly is concerned both the with gifts of being a man and the pain, both caused and experienced, with which masculinity has become associated (Keen, 1992).

In our early practice of co-operative inquiry, John Heron and I realized that the process of inquiry itself is often a distressing one. We realized that when co-researchers engage in fundamental re-visioning of their life practices this *necessarily* stirs up emotional disturbances; and that these would often restimulate archaic patterns of fear, rage, and grief originating often in infancy. And we realized also that the very process of inquiry, of taking back the capacity of create one's own knowledge, would in itself stir up similar emotions, given the repressive and damaging educational experiences that we all endure in this culture. When we worked with the holistic medicine inquiry group back in the early 1980s our experience reinforced this insight, as GPs discovered, for example, their anxious and angry ambivalence toward the profession, to its scientific base and to the educational practices which had initiated them into their profession. (Heron & Reason, 1985; Reason, 1988). And currently Kate McArdle, a graduate student at Bath studying the experience of young women managers, is finding she has to work with her own disturbance as she realizes the distorted patterns of sexuality which occur in organizations.

It is also evident that human association itself carries its shadow: the excitement and energy and creativity of a democratic inquiry group can degenerate into competitive cliques and scapegoating of individuals, into 'love-puddles' in which no critical thought is allowed, into communities that engage in messianic dreaming with no reality-based action (Bion, 1959; Randall & Southgate, 1980). Just because we aim to work collaboratively doesn't shield us from this shadow; just because we are working with the silenced voices of women, persons of colour, nurses etc., doesn't guarantee sweetness and light. We need to be prepared to enter the dark side of human association and work with what is there.

And of course this is also a way to creativity: the edge of chaos is a creative place, if also a dangerous place, for groups to work, as John Heron and I intuited a while ago and Brian Goodwin and I have explored using complexity theory more recently (Reason & Goodwin, 1999; Reason & Heron, 1986)

The Via Negativa has interesting lessons also in view of the research community's current fascination with language. 'The linguistic and cognitive turn has swept the social sciences and humanities since the 1960's and brought to mainstream scholarship the Kantian differentiation between the world itself… and the phenomena, or our interpreted experience of the world... In scholarly circles it is difficult to suggest that the world exists outside our construction of it' (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a). As Van Maanan put it:

> Language is auditioning for an a priori role in the social and material
> world. Moreover, it is a role that carries constitutional force, bringing
> facts into consciousness and therefore being. No longer then is something
> like an organization or, for that matter, an atom or quark thought to come
> first while our understandings, models or representations of an
> organization, atom or quark come second. Rather, our representations
> may well come first, allowing us to see selectively what we have
> described (Van Maanen, 1995:134)

But Fox has a warning about this fixation on language and indeed on other forms of representation, and indeed invites us to heed the fundamental silence which is prior to all expression

> In addition to meditating *on* our very real relationship to darkness and to
> its ever-present companion, mystery, we also need to let go of all
> meditations, all images, all likenesses, all projections, all naming, all
> contact with isness. The need for silence that Zen speaks of, that wisdom
> literature celebrates, that Eckhart praises, and that Merton calls for is not
> just oral silence. Silence means the letting go of all images—whether oral
> ones or auditory ones or visual ones or inner ones or cognitive ones or
> imaginative ones. Whether of time or of space, of inner or of outer. It is a
> radical letting go of language. A letting language go. A concentration on
> what is non-language, non-music, non-self, non-God. It is being. A being
> still. (Fox, 1991a:137-7)

First- Second- and Third-person research/practice and the Via negativa

Thus in first person research practice, the Via Negativa asks us to have the courage to own, enter, engage with our personal shadow, our own capacity for distortion, for

bullying and oppression, for neglect—in the end our own capacity for evil. Bill Torbert wrote a while ago that a person has to undergo an unimaginable process of self transformation before being truly capable of inquiring action. And in his explorations of developmental action inquiry he suggests that at least some of those at later stages of ego development have undergone some kind of ego-disintegration through major crisis of alcoholism, divorce and other crises before emerging with a transformed sense of self (Fisher, Rooke, & Torbert, 2000:177).

In second person research practice the Via Negativa asks us to be willing to enter and dwell with the pain and suffering that we as co-researchers share as a consequence of our common predicament, whatever that may be. And also to work with the pain that we are all too capable of causing each other in the very process of collaborating in an inquiry process.

At a wider, third person level, the Via Negativa asks that we attend to the pain and suffering our cultures have created—often on an unforgivable scale. Those working within the traditions of participatory action research often write of the culture of silence that has developed among oppressed people, and how 'education as a practice of freedom' (Freire, 1970) is about entering and living with and through that silence and finding some means of expression. Brinton Lykes (Lykes & Association of Maya Ixil Women - New Dawn, 2001) illustrates how the arts and photography can serve as resources in participatory action research with women in Guatemala seeking to improve the quality of community life in response to the effects of war and extreme poverty.

> Much has been written about how contemporary warfare destroys the fabric of social life, affecting families, communities, institutions and social life in general. Others have addressed the symbolic aspects of terror and trauma and its effects within and across generations. Those destructive forces and their wake mark individuals in differing ways, distorting perception, suspending many in unresolved grief, and terrorizing and traumatizing others. Children and their parents are forced to "choose" fight or flight… joining military or guerrilla organizations or fleeing their homes, even their countries. Institutionalized racism and economic inequality destroy the material and spiritual fabric of everyday life among people who have inhabited a land for centuries….
>
> The engendered nature of war's violence has only recently been highlighted… Interviews with some women and with key informants told of repeated rapes of girls and women, the brutalization of fetuses torn from pregnant women's stomachs, the torture and killing of girls and women, and of children in front of their mothers, mothers in front of their children. Many women were impregnated, giving birth to children frequently rejected by their communities and, sometimes, by the mothers themselves…
>
> Despite this brutality, women were more likely than men to survive and face the burdens of the psychosocial and material consequences of this violence.
>
> In Chajul, women have been using creative resources… to create a public testimony, a PhotoVoice, that witnesses to the atrocities committed against

[their people] and contributes to their development of individual and collective responses to health and educational needs of women and children in their communities… (Lykes & Association of Maya Ixil Women - New Dawn, 2001)

Lykes and her collaborators develop a process in which women photographers recorded their lives and those of women and their families. They then told the stories of these photographs in small groups and together selected those that had most salience

Through recording multiple stories of daily living, that is, of war, its effects, and ongoing poverty, they developed sensitivities to the various forms of violence experienced in the wider municipality as well as analyses of the complex challenges facing the region as it develops recovery strategies in the wake of war's trauma….

Among the photographs selected for analysis are many depicting the war and its effects. One picture and the stories told by the woman being photographed as well as others who analyzed it exemplify the direct effects of the war on the women and children of Chajul.

The story that accompanies this… photograph is based on an interview that one of the women in PhotoVoice conducted with a grandmother who had returned to her village after having been forced to move into the town of Chajul during the early 1980s. Her husband and son had been killed in the war and she and her daughter and grandchild sought refuge in the town. Lacking food and income, her daughter left the town one day in search of plants from their home village that would provide soap for cleaning and leaves and roots for cooking. She went with her mother's blessings and under the protection of a military patrol that was scouting in the area. The patrol, ambushed by guerillas who killed some of the soldiers, accused the young mother of having set up the ambush and arrested her. The following day, despite the grandmother's pleas on behalf of her still-nursing grandchild, the young woman was brought to the town square. Church bells were rung and once all the townspeople had gathered in the town square, the daughter was summarily hanged from the balcony of the town hall. The brutal murder, a "lesson" to the townspeople about "collaboration with the guerilla," served also to instill fear and silence.

The picture taking and interview, PhotoVoice, enabled this grandmother to share her losses with a member of her community who accompanied her process of mourning that had been suspended, a grief that had been frozen… Others from the PhotoVoice group had witnessed the hanging and in their analysis group they shared conflicting stories of what they "re-membered" of this day. Fear had terrorized the community and a silence enshrouded the event. The storytelling and analysis process offered an opportunity to re-construct the events, to created a shared story. Several members of the group volunteered to interview others in the community to establish the precise date in which this event had occurred and to situate it within the town's public history, thereby ensuring that the next generation would know what had happened from those who had survived who now dared to speak publicly about their suffering, their deep loss, and their anger. This process, these pictures and stories, and many like them, create

a context for grieving but also for building towards a different future.
(Lykes & Association of Maya Ixil Women - New Dawn, 2001)

Action Research and the Via Creativa

All research is a creative act, as one can see from reading the stories of the great discoveries of the sciences from the ancient Greeks through the Enlightenment to the current extraordinary new understandings of our cosmos; or realizing how our ancestors around the globe found ways to work with plants to create the varieties of crops we now rely on.

Action research draws on a wide variety of ways of knowing which include what John Heron calls presentational knowing—the first creative act which clothes our relatively inchoate (silent) experiential knowing in forms of imagery. In the co-operative inquiry cycle, co-researchers bring their stories and other presentational accounts of their experiences to the inquiry group. Participatory action research projects often involve indigenous story and vernacular art both to give expression to the inquiry task and to engage a wide community in the inquiry process, as we have seen with Lykes' work above.

Some projects draw on particular art forms as part of the inquiry. Jim Mienczakowski and Stephen Morgan (2001) describe the use of ethnodrama as a form of inquiry. With his colleagues Mienczakowski started with work with changing attitudes towards schizophrenia, into reflection upon experiences of drug and alcohol abuse and detoxification and to explore recovery from sexual assault. They collaborate with those involved to develop a picture of their experiences using ethnographic methods, and to present this in the form of a play

> The critical edge… is that informants have control over how their health consumption will be publicly represented. Our application of action research to theatrical presentations may thus be viewed as a mode for questioning, [and] reframing… a key ambition of the project was to depict informants not simply as human beings [rather than characterisations of pathogens] but to give them voice in the explanation of their lived realities…
>
> Where possible, an ethnodrama script will incorporate as much verbatim narrative as possible. Characters may speak the words and thoughts of several informants and fictionalised passages may also be included. However, no fictional characters, dialogue or scenarios are permitted unless they can be validated by informants and researchers as reasonable, likely, typical and representative of the range of behaviours and outcomes experienced in the setting. That is to say we do not create fictional accounts to serve a form of poesis or to satisfy aesthetic or dramatic need. The consumption of health is fraught with drama as it is! In all events, this is not theatre for artistic pretention, aesthetic appeasement or entertainment… We simply adapt a small repertoire of character devices integral to all narrative and performance work with the clear intention to involve audiences in the issues presented through performance for debate at the close of the performance….

> It is at the performance stage that audiences are invited to discuss the
> implication of the performances with cast, health academics and educators
> and community health representatives at the close of performances.
> (Mienczakowski & Morgan, 2001)

One fundamental teaching of the Via Creativa is that the creative action that arises as an outcome, a consummation of inquiry practice (Heron, 1996). We have so much understood research as 'contributions to the body of knowledge', in terms of outcomes in books, papers and other propositional forms, that it is easy to forget that the point of action research is to creatively change the world in the service of flourishing of human persons, communities, and their ecological contexts (Grey, 2000:48). A second teaching of the Via Creativa, along with the Via Positiva, concerns abundance. We might say that the basic discipline of action research is not the rigour of skepticism but rather the celebration of possibility and abundance.

First- Second- and Third-person research/practice and the Via Creativa

The Via Creativa and first person research practice involves experimenting with new forms of expression and action in the world. One PhD dissertation I have seen includes a piece of embroidery at the beginning of each chapter. Torbert suggests taking a 'vacation' in the middle of each working day, a period when old behaviours are suspended (Via Negativa) so the new possibilities may emerge—spontaneous, maybe countercultural action, or the disturbing inquiry of the Magician/Witch/Clown which roots into and overturns our basic assumptions (Fisher et al., 2000; Marshall, 1999, 2001). Second person research practice in the mode of the Via Creativa is likely to draw explicitly on forms of art as inquiry—using visual arts, movement, psychodrama—to re-vision the world of the co-researchers. In more of a third person inquiry mode is the kind of 're-enchanted' art discussed by Suzie Gablik (1991), art not in the modernist tradition as separated from the everyday, but art in context which invites us to look again, to stop taking for granted

> This book is a sustained meditation on how we might restore to our culture
> its sense of aliveness, possibility and magic… (1991:1)

She raises some fundamental questions about the role of artists and the practice of art, her own answers to which raise issues about the *use* of art in our world:

> If modern aesthetics was inherently isolationist, aimed at disengagement
> and purity, my own sense is that what we will be seeing over the next few
> decades is art that is essentially social and purposeful, art that rejects the
> myths of neutrality and autonomy. (1991:4)

Thus her vision or art is one which contributes to the 'collective task of "reenchanting" our whole culture' which is 'one of the crucial tasks of our time' (1991:11).

Action Research and the Via Transformativa

> The creation-centred spiritual tradition considers *compassion* rather than
> *contemplation* as the fulfillment of the spiritual journey that takes one

> back to one's origins in renewed ways. It considers justice to be
> absolutely integral to the spiritual journey. (1991:247, original emphasis)

In almost exactly the same way, the action research tradition place practical knowing in action in the service of human and ecological flourishing, rather than reflective knowledge, as the consummation of inquiry practice. Compassionate action is both the purpose and the test of knowing. I have several times in making this point drawn on the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray (1957), who argued that 'I do' rather than 'I think' is the appropriate starting point for epistemology (p. 84).

> … most of our knowledge, and all our primary knowledge, arises as an
> aspect of activities that have practical, not theoretical objectives; and it
> is this knowledge, itself an aspect of action, to which all reflective
> theory must refer (p. 12).

However, as Macmurray also pointed out, the concept of 'action' includes the development of theory which may illuminate our action, guide it and provide it with meaning:

> In acting the body indeed is in action, but also the mind. Action is not
> blind... Action, then, is a full concrete activity of the self in which all
> our capacities are employed (p. 86).

Fox makes a very similar point

> Augustine makes a dangerous dualistic distinction between action and
> contemplation. For him, 'wisdom belongs to contemplation, knowledge to
> action.' Ghandi, who insists that God comes in action, shares the creation-
> centred belief that wisdom is part of creating. If contemplation be pitted
> against action... then contemplation cannot represent the fullest spiritual
> energy of the human person (Fox, 1991a:251)

He goes on to say that

> We humans, for whom the planet has indeed become a global village, are
> required to create a new civilization that is worthy of our dignity as royal
> persons and our responsibility as divine co-creators. If we do not create a
> global civilization where peace and justice reign and where the spirit of
> delight and celebration can be made to happen, then we have non one to
> blame but ourselves. For we do choose the religious and social structures
> we prefer, and we choose the gods and idols we worship (Fox, 1991a:251)

So both for both creation spirituality and action research the consummation of our endeavours in practical, and the purpose is to contribute to the well being and flourishing of humans and all living beings. Fox describes this notion of flourishing in terms of compassion and justice.

But flourishing requires transformation in another way, transformation of the mindsets we hold, the ways in which we frame our world, indeed in the very process of framing itself. Part of the legacy of the modern period has been to emphasize the conceptual over the experiential, the mind over the body; part of the legacy of

positivism has been to see truth as singular, to see power as zero-sum, to lock us into frames of knowing so tightly that it is difficult to escape:

> Our language and practices anchor us in modernity, and offer no easy route to "sensibly" move away. The "final vocabulary" (Rorty, 1989) of business is so strongly established in our culture - and day-by-day establishing itself in all the cultures of the world - that to move outside is to risk straying into senselessness. To 'understand' the whirling complexity of our places in the world is to simplify, ignore, concretise and impose the framing that contains us: this is what we - modern humans - work at every day of our lives, with varying degrees of success, to hold our shared reality together. And yet somehow we have to learn to do something differently. The tightening in my gut at moments which seem like closure, and the alternatives spoken to me by my feminist perspectives alert me about this… but they don't easily deliver me the words, the actions, the interventions to help me in the moment when I think I see closure, reductionism taking place (Coleman, personal communication 2000).

As Laing pointed out in the 1960s and 1970s, drawing on Bateson's work on learning and double bind theory (Bateson, 1972; Laing, 1967, 1971), to step outside the frames or society is to be labelled as mad or bad or both. But we need to challenge the injustice of our times, the damage we are causing to the planets fundamental balance, and I believe to the epistemological errors that all this is rooted in.

> We are here to transform the social order, not merely to endure it in a passive or cynical way (Fox, 1991a:298)

Fox says this calls us to prophecy quoting Rabbi Heschel's description of prophecy as interference, interference with the ways things are, with what is intolerable, in order to open up spaces for new creation. In parallel with this, Stephen Kemmis (2001) draws on Habermas' critical theory to describe a primary quality of action research as opening up new spaces in which inquiry and dialogue can happen.

First- Second- and Third-person research/practice and the Via Transformativa

First person research practice therefore becomes an inner inquiry into the gifts we bring to life and the purposes to while we are each called; and it becomes an inquiry into the authenticity, courage and effectiveness of our actions. This it to

> to bring scholarship to life… to bring inquiry into more and more of our moments of action—not just as scientists if that happens to be our profession, but as organizational and family members, and in our spiritual, artistic, craft, exercise, conversational, sexual, and other activities. (Reason & Torbert, 2001)

Second person research/practice involves the development of communities of inquiry/practice which can help us deepen our understanding, provide support and challenge for our actions as "friends willing to act as enemies" (Torbert, 1976) and also as "friends willing to act as friends" (Marshall & Reason, 1993): action inquiry can be a difficult and lonely path, and we need all the support we can get. Third

person research/practice challenges us then to create wider communities of inquiry in the service of social transformation.

Some concluding reflections

So to see action research not just as a way of changing organizations and communities, not just as a form of knowledge creation, but as a spiritual path, points us toward what Thomas Berry describes as the Great Work for humanity. Berry argues that each age presents humanity with a particular Work which 'gives shape and meaning to life by relating the human venture to the larger destinies of the universe' (1999:1). Berry says that

> The Great Work before us, the task of moving modern industrial civilization from its present devastating influence on the Earth to a more benign mode of present, is not a role we have chosen. It is a role given to us, beyond any consultation with ourselves. We did not choose. We were chosen by some power beyond ourselves for this historical task...We are, as it were, thrown into existence with a challenge and a role that is beyond any personal choice. The nobility of our lives, however, depends upon the manner in which we come to understand and fulfill our assigned role. (Berry, 1999:7)

And of course, the Great Work is the work of all of all people

> No one is exempt, Each of us has our individual life pattern and responsibilities, Yet beyond these concerns each person in and through their personal work assists in the Great Work. Personal work needs to be aligned with the Great Work... While this alignment is... difficult in these times, it must remain an ideal to be sought. (Berry, 1999:10-11)

In this paper I have raised another dimension of quality, which clearly overlaps with the above, of action research as spiritual practice, which can be addressed through the four paths of creation spirituality. As Fox writes in *The Re-invention of Work* , there are two questions you can ask of your work: what joy does it bring to others? And what injustice and suffering does it address (Fox, 1994)

And as Meister Eckhart wrote

> The outward work
> will never be puny
> if the inner work
> is great.
> And the outward work
> can never be great or even good
> if the inward one is puny and of little worth.
> (Fox, 1983a:99)

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