

HARMONY OF PLACE: AN ECOLOGICAL COMMUNITY IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

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AS A BERTHA FELLOW, FOUNDING DIRECTOR OF THE SUSTAINABILITY INSTITUTE for sixteen years and co-founder of the Lynedoch EcoVillage, Stellenbosch, South Africa, this chapter is a personal reflection on a two-decade journey rooted in place, transformative learning and radical change during the early years of a democratic South Africa. It is just over 21 years since my family and I were drawn to a small valley called Lynedoch, nestled at the entrance to the Cape Winelands, Stellenbosch. The Eerste River runs through this valley and, in the distance, the Hottentots Holland Mountain range creates a vast portal to the African continent stretching northwards.

Both these natural features are named by our Dutch colonisers. The names provide reminders of complex and painful histories that include British settlement, land appropriation, killing of the Khoi Khoi and San first peoples, and slavery. Colonisation has included change of languages, cultures and ways of being. The notorious system of *apartheid*, the iniquitous institutionalisation of racial divide privileging those born with white skin, had fertile ground on which to build its ultimate in human modernist divides.

Lynedoch, so-called by Scottish missionaries who arrived in the early 1900s to tame the wildness of the supposedly 'primitive', is now a messy mixture of high quality wine farms, massive wine-storing buildings, storage units, a few dilapidated structures, and five-star tourist destinations. It is a place where the word 'harmony' may not easily sit, at least not at first sight. David Cadman writes,

Harmony is an expression of wholeness, a way of looking at ourselves and the world of which we are part. It's about connections and relationships. The emotional, intellectual and physical are all connected. We are connected to our environments, both built and natural; and all the parts of our communities and their environments are connected, too. Harmony asks questions about relationship, justice, fairness and respect in economic, social and political relationships. As an integrative discipline it can be expressed in ideas and practice.¹



Lynedoch Village. Photo by Sustainability Institute



Woodlands sunrise. Photo by Sustainability Institute

The connections and relationships to which David Cadman refers have a tendency to sound neat, apparently with little room for the discord so firmly entrenched in the structural inequities rife in this area. It is true too though that some landowners in this valley are involved in radical worker-equity schemes, biodynamic farming, playing classical music to grape vines and competing for a selective tourist market. From histories of deep exploitation of land and farmworkers alike, this is change indeed; a place with stories of deep divide and disconnect, along with the dynamic tensions of creating new beginnings.

I had imagined in 1997 what seemed a fairly straightforward project of arriving to set up an African leadership institute on the Spier Wine Farm in the Lynedoch Valley. While the Spier Leadership Institute was formalised as a non-profit trust in 1999, the question that arose rapidly was 'leadership for what?'. Here began the real complexities of context. Questions of social justice, ecological integrity, poverty and landless peoples rapidly raised their heads and our focus for the institute fairly obviously became 'leading for sustainable futures'. In 2002, we chose to align the Institute fully as a 'living and learning centre for studies and experience in ecology, community and spirit' and changed the name to the Sustainability Institute.² The focus on building leadership capabilities became implicit in all ensuing activities from that day to this. During the infancy of South Africa's new democracy, there seemed little more important and, in the glow of a Mandela-led government, I felt progressive, radical, and aching to contribute to the building of a different nation.

With the strange agency that place seems to have, it became abundantly and immediately clear that before any 'thought-leadership institute' could emerge, the most pressing calling in this particular context was, in fact, a school to serve the needs of extremely poor farmworker children. In addition to being an area where foetal alcohol syndrome is at one of the highest levels in the world due to the past 'tot' system of paying farmworkers a portion of their wages in alcohol, the previous government had never made education for black children compulsory. Not only had many children dropped out of school, but those who did attend were subjected to appalling conditions, corporal punishment and little in the way of learning. The existing ramshackle prefabricated school was on land owned by a white farmer and had been for 30 years. He was ready to bulldoze the building to reclaim this land.

In a way, this place in a post-apartheid South Africa seemed to resemble a war zone. Not the global apocalyptic images with which we are familiar from CNN, but rather an insidious erosion of childhood. Poverty, families for generations without land tenure and exploited as farmworkers, alcohol abuse rife, and sexual

exploitation and violence as common occurrences. The next generation was so clearly bearing the costs.

We rapidly discovered through social and community conversations that a new, ecologically-designed school for farmworkers' children would not solve all the other issues that simultaneously arose through our focus on children. Poverty, malnourishment, lack of housing, poor community structures, and little in the way of state support were all connected to their everyday lives and, on reflection, I only now see the harmony arising from paying attention to the rhythms and shifting patterns in the daily detail of building the fabric of social and ecological justice. Suddenly, the dream of a leadership institute was firmly embedded in our local context, dealing with local issues; as grounded leadership needs to be.

In the year 2000, we opened a Montessori nursery for 75 enthusiastic pre-schoolers and, in 2002, we completed the ecological renovation of one of the dilapidated buildings, to be used as a primary school for 500 farmworkers' children. Building homes together with people who were being evicted from farms was the next challenge. The small Lynedoch EcoVillage, home to 32 families, was born as the first mixed-income ecological development in the country. Threaded into the countless tiny decisions affecting what was to become everyday life, were questions of appropriate design, building materials, renewable energy, re-use of water in a water-scarce country, sanitation, road surfaces, and pedestrianisation where possible. In integrating social and ecological justice, it became evident that very simple choices such as solar water geysers and careful insulation would make both qualitative differences to daily living as well as financial sense. Poorer people were able to afford their homes because of the home loans that we could make available when banks would not loan to the poor, a tiered levy system and ecological building technologies which simply save money each month.

'How would nature do it?' was the question we attempted to answer in creating the infrastructure for fairer living. Now, the Lynedoch EcoVillage incorporates 100% water recycling through a horizontal wetland; solar water geysers; adobe, sandbag or recycled brick homes; large indigenous woodlands in green spaces; and food gardens. All of these may not have cost less in design nor building, but they do cost less in maintenance, upkeep and monthly payments.

Social dynamics have always been exactly that: dynamic. They remain so. Historical inequity, blind privilege and entrenched racism have demanded commitment, humour and constant conversation. There is no handbook for living in an emerging community, where the tensions between people who live, work and bring up children together play themselves out in sometimes rather unpredictable ways. Participating together in daily lives, traversing a multiplicity

of roles, requires levels of skill that we do not always have. Trust built over time, organically and against significant odds, seems to be forming ways of engaging that are sometimes softer and more gentle; not always, but sometimes. We cannot ignore the fact that the Lynedoch EcoVillage also reflects the wider system of which we are part in a country with serious challenges in unemployment, equity, violent crime and state capture. What does seem to constantly connect us in the entire valley is putting children, safety and nature first.

My experience with Fritjof Capra and Satish Kumar at Schumacher College, in 1993, and the Gorée Institute, Senegal, was profound in terms of transformative and transgressive learning. It added a beautiful mix of science and spirituality to my background in the Montessori approach and I became convinced then that the work that may have the greatest opportunity to de-colonise learning in a post-apartheid South Africa would be the space for learning that touches the yearning in peoples' hearts and souls. A yearning that is for connectedness, through studies and experience in ecology, community and spirit. It was our version of Satish Kumar's beautiful trinity of 'soil, soul and society'.³

Seven years later, I co-created our transformative approach to learning at the Sustainability Institute.⁴ I have taught in our master's level programme accredited by Stellenbosch University and held at the Sustainability Institute since its inception in 2003.⁵ One of beauties is the intricate connectedness between what we learn from our practice and the classroom: organic farming, land reform, alternative education for children, appropriate building technologies, renewable energy, water recycling, and on-site waste disposal. Connecting the children and students to ways of living that create direct experience for an intricate weaving between head, heart and hands or theory, practice and critical reflection rooted in nature, has become a golden thread of difference in multiple realities that ground the institute as unique.

This means beginning each day with a morning circle outside under giant Ficus trees with the mountains in the distance. A sense of wholeness emerges through gentle body work, meeting as a learning community, dividing into work groups to assist with gardening, waste collection, cleaning the Institute, cooking for the Lynedoch Children's House, and generally caring for and nurturing ourselves, each other and the place that holds this small, vibrant band of explorers. The children, from the time they can toddle up until adolescence, are frequent visitors to the woodlands and food gardens; simply as a beautiful place to play, or as avid diggers, weeders, planters and harvesters. The Montessori Lynedoch Children's House holds nature as the first teacher and all learning is rooted in reverence for the natural world.



Meditation walk youth. Photo by Sustainability Institute



Morning stretches. Photo by Sustainability Institute



Weaver nest. Photo by Sustainability Institute



Food garden. Photo by Sustainability Institute



Growing garden. Photo by Sustainability Institute



Learning in the garden. Photo by Sustainability Institute



Children in food garden. Photo by Sustainability Institute



Art in nature made by students. Photo by Sustainability Institute



Students making art. Photo by Sustainability Institute



Getting ready to plant. Photo by Sustainability Institute



Children dancing. Photo by Sustainability Institute

Starting with a focus on transformative learning for children has thus led, in the small seven-hectare property, to the development of a pre- and primary school serving 600 children and adolescents; to Stellenbosch University undergraduate and master's level programmes in Sustainable Development, held at the Sustainability Institute for 75 students annually; and, to 32 newly-built homes. Lynedoch EcoVillage is thus a live case study for students in their daily experience, participative learning and research.

The local issues such as poverty, food insecurity, violent crime, land reform, racial divides and massive inequity that are dictated by this place, time and historical context involve messiness and the gritty building of community. It is intriguing now to note that the experience and practice of our early work has become bound into the modules in the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The taught postgraduate modules include, Sustainable Development; Complexity Theory; Leading Transitions and Environmental Ethics; Sustainable Cities; Ecological Design, Food Security and Globalised Agriculture; Food System Transitions; and, Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. In co-creating the structure for this set of learning pathways, it was our own hands-on experience that led to the conceptual development of the ideas to be researched and courses to be taught. This year is the seventeenth year of the postgraduate diploma and, so far, we have approximately 600 graduates.

In founding what became the Sustainability Institute in the Lynedoch EcoVillage, we have become activist-academics in ways that have created connections between seemingly entrenched fragments and divides'. Over the two



Graduation celebration in labyrinth. Photo by Sustainability Institute

decades, a harmony of place seems to be emerging. This is not a sanitised claim to some form of development nirvana. It is, instead, a recognition of the poetics of place as teacher and of seemingly infinite connections and rhythm within transformation, individually and in learning communities. While the questions David Cadman asks in his definition of harmony hold a sense of depth and elegance, these are perhaps added to by the grittiness and pain within the practice of transformative community-building. Focusing on learning connected to living issues has made the possibility of an institute for the studies and experience of ecology, community and spirit something that is sensed, felt, seen, touched, heard and smelt; and, not always easily described.

Acknowledgment: all photographs are credited to the Sustainability Institute

NOTES

¹ David Cadman, 'What is "Harmony"', (23 May 2017), <https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/harmony-institute/> [Accessed 9 May 2019].

² Sustainability Institute, <https://www.sustainabilityinstitute.net> (Accessed 27 September 2019).

³ Satish Kumar, *Soil, Soul, Society: A New Trinity for Our Time* (Lewes: Leaping Hare Press, 2013).

⁴ 'The Sustainability Institute' at <https://www.sustainabilityinstitute.net/> (n.d.) [Accessed 9 May 2019].

⁵ 'Master's Program in Sustainable Development' at <https://www.sustainabilityinstitute.net/learn/us-pgd-mphil> (n.d.) [Accessed May 2019].