

## POLITICAL, EPISTEMOLOGICAL, ECOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF PARTICIPATION

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### ABSTRACT

After briefly introducing the paradigm of experiential, participative action research, four dimensions of participation—the political, epistemological, ecological and spiritual—are explored. The political dimension concerns peoples' right to have a say in decisions which affect them, and is linked with participatory economics and the development of learning communities; the epistemological dimension concerns that nature of human knowing in a subjective-objective world; the ecological dimension counters the threats to the natural ecology which result from the positivist mindset; and the spiritual dimension suggests that one of the primary purposes of human inquiry is to heal the splits which characterise modern Western consciousness.

### PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

I invented my own form of participative research—not knowing anything about other forms of participative inquiry at that stage—in the late 1970s as part of my PhD dissertation in the USA. I wanted to explore two-person relationships, and, after struggling with a variety of methods, realized that I could not adequately research them from the outside, but that I needed to turn the researcher-subject relationship on its head and, rather than research *on* people, research *with* people. With this in mind, I invited the couples to become researchers of their own relationship. I designed and facilitated an inquiry workshop with my "subjects"—including myself and my co-facilitator—as co-researchers (Reason 1976).

When I returned to the UK I met others—particularly John Rowan and John Heron—who were engaged in re-visioning research. John Rowan was developing what was to become the dialectical paradigm for research (later published in

Reason and Rowan 1981) and John Heron was developing the early models of co-operative inquiry (Heron 1971). Together with others in London we formed the New Paradigm Research Group to develop and practice these methods together. And as we looked at what was happening in the human sciences we realized there was a world-wide movement toward forms of participative research, certainly in anthropology and development studies, in sociology, in women's studies, even in psychology (although opinions here differed: when we published *Human Inquiry: a sourcebook of new paradigm research* (Reason and Rowan 1981) Hans Eysenck wrote (1983) a wonderfully damning review while Carl Rogers referred to it as a "goldmine of methods" (1985); such were the tensions in our field).

Since publishing *Human Inquiry* I have worked both to develop co-operative inquiry as a particular inquiry method, and to place it in relation to other collaborative approaches<sup>1</sup>. I no longer use the term "new paradigm research", a term with which I have been identified, finding it now too vague and rather embarrassing; nor am I very keen on the term "action research"—a catch-all term which while helpful if used with caution, is too all-inclusive, since it can be used to cover everything from emancipatory inquiry through to positivist field research. I prefer to think of a "family" of related methods which are experiential, participative and action-oriented, each having its particular place within a wider picture.

Over the years I have established and facilitated co-operative inquiries with doctors and complementary practitioners, contributing to the development of an holistic approach to health care (Heron and Reason 1985; Reason 1986; Reason and Heron 1986; Reason 1991; Reason et al 1992). I jointly established the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath, where we work with a very diverse group of people in mid-career who are inquiring into the practices using a variety of collaborative inquiry approaches of which co-operative inquiry is one (Reason and Heron 1995; Heron 1996a). As we wrote in our recent report to the University:

The Centre's focus on "action research in professional practice" takes our work into a wide range of areas and disciplines. As the title suggests, we work with professionals—managers, social workers, educators, health professionals, police men and women—who are using action research to address practical questions in the improvement and development of their practice in collaboration with others. In addition, a developing major strand in our work attends to the *management of diversity*, using action research approaches to explore:

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<sup>1</sup> While I have framed this as a personal introduction, telling the story from my perspective, I want to emphasize that I have been blessed with many wonderful colleagues throughout. I would particularly like to acknowledge my very long and productive collaboration with John Heron with whom I have worked in many ways since we met in the late 1970s; and with Judi Marshall who has been central to the development of our collaborative work with graduate students at Bath since the early 1980s. Graduate students at Bath have continually stimulated my thinking as have associates worldwide including Bill Torbert, Yvonna Lincoln, Orlando Fals-Borda, Marja-Liisa Swantz and many others.

- the needs and aspirations of women and persons of colour in organizations and society;
- muted and suppressed voices such as prisoners, mental patients;
- the contribution of nursing and complementary medical disciplines (e.g. acupuncture, medical herbalism) to mainstream healthcare;
- the development of participative problem solving in communities.

The outcome of such inquiries is both practical and intellectual, with the intellectual growing out of the engagement in real life issues and opportunities. Our aim is to work toward greater effective participation, so that all involved in situations can contribute their ideas and effective action; it is thus grounded in values of democracy, equal opportunities, and education as personal development. We wish to bring these important issues, which are often marginalized, more into mainstream management attention.

I think at first I saw co-operative inquiry as simply a way to get data which was both more "accurate" because it was based directly on experience, and also more ethical since it engaged *with* people rather than did research *on* people. At this level participation is merely a methodological issue. Then, influenced by my reading of PAR and feminist literature, and my involvement in peer learning communities, I realized that participation also involved peoples' right and ability to have a say in decisions which affect them, and thus as well as being a methodological nicety is a *political imperative*. And as I worked with the approach, and in particular tried to articulate what I meant by *validity* in co-operative inquiry, I began to realize that it had implications for a completely different view of knowledge, and was based in a radically participative worldview, and in this sense is an *epistemological imperative*. As I became more aware of the damage that is done to the planet's ecosystems, primarily, I believe, as a result of the positivist worldview of the Western mind, and as I realized that human persons are a part of (rather than apart from) the planet's life processes, I realized that participation is an *ecological imperative*. This led me to argue that one of the primary purposes of human inquiry is to heal the splits which characterise modern Western consciousness, and thus that participation can also be seen as a *spiritual imperative*. In this paper, I shall explore these questions in a little more depth.

### **THE POLITICS OF PARTICIPATION**

Participation is a political imperative: it affirms the fundamental human right of persons to contribute to decisions which affect them. Human persons are centres of consciousness within the cosmos, agents with emerging capacities for self-awareness and self-direction. Human persons are also communal beings, born deeply immersed in community and evolving within community: as Bookchin points out (1991), we are not human without community. Participation is thus fundamental to human flourishing, and is political because, particularly in these times, it requires the exercise of intentional human agency, political action in public and private spheres, to encourage and nurture its development.

As Rajesh Tandon has pointed out (1982), along with others within the Participatory Action Research community (e.g. Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991),

the current arrangements for knowledge creation mean that the established centres of power tend to have a monopoly on the production and use of knowledge. Knowledge is produced and used in the service of dominant groups, rather than being used as a means of education toward community and agency. The primary critique of non-participatory research is that it serves this dominant culture through monopolizing the development and use of knowledge to the disadvantage of the communities in which the research takes place, and is thus exploitative.

This happens at a very fundamental level but often quite unconsciously. In Western allopathic medicine, for example, the dominant paradigm sees the human body as a physical entity operating according to the laws of the natural sciences, completely separate from the influence of the human mind (apart from some rather irritating anomalies such as the placebo affect). This means that the unwell person is defined as an object to be manipulated by treatments controlled by the medical practitioner, and that the person is subtly (and not so subtly) educated to become a patient—in effect an object, as the very words we use, *patient* and *in-valid*, demonstrate. The person as patient is therefore no longer an agent, and any internal capacity they may have for intentionally augmenting and cultivating their self-healing capacity is effectively ruled out by the dominant paradigm. Persons are not allowed to participate in the development of their own wellbeing (although fortunately there are significant moves within health care to reverse this).

As Lukes (1974) has pointed out, power has at least three dimensions. One-dimensional power involves the capacity to directly influence events; in the medical example this concerns the ability of the person to be directly involved in decisions concerning treatment. Two-dimensional power involves the ability to influence the agenda of possibilities that may be addressed, in particular to prevent certain perspectives being considered; in the medical example this would include whether patients can influence the range of treatment methods deemed to be appropriate (and whether non-orthodox treatments such as acupuncture might be included). One consequence of the development of the medical profession in the nineteenth century was to exclude certain practices from the agenda of treatment. Three-dimensional power involves the ability to control the frameworks through which we make sense of and understand ourselves and our world; this is the most fundamental exercise of power, power used to shape the way we see their world so that we may accept things as taken-for-granted because there appears to be no alternative. In the medical example, three-dimensional power is in operation when persons are influenced to see themselves as objects, powerless to influence their own health (Heron 1996a).

The person attempting to exercise one-dimensional power against an authority is likely to be seen as difficult, awkward or rebellious. One attempting to exercise two-dimensional power is likely to be seen in addition as silly, deluded and misinformed. The person attempting to exercise three-dimensional power—to question the frameworks of understanding—may, as Laing pointed out (1967) be seen as either insane or wicked.

I would argue that a fundamental human capacity is this ability to inquire into and make sense of our world. This is a capacity which in part naturally develops with maturity, and also needs wise, loving and liberating education to nurture its evolution (Freire 1970; Heron 1992). It can through neglect and oppression be held back and stunted so that it remains tacit and underdeveloped in many persons and communities. Its further reaches are relatively uncommon and are attained only through disciplined processes of self-development since they are not actively supported in Western societies (Torbert 1991) although are increasingly required in a post-modern world (Kegan 1994). At these later stages the person is no longer defined by the frameworks of understanding through which they construe their world (Bateson 1972), but realizes that all paradigms and frameworks are relative, including our own. With this realization, the person is open to the possibility of 'reframing' his or her viewpoint and purposes in a situation, consciously seeking and choosing new frames. And the person sees that other persons' perspectives are as significant and as valuable as ones own, leading inevitably to deeply democratic attitude and to participative behaviour toward others (Fisher and Torbert 1995). The person may also develop a desire to exercise leadership in the service of participative forms of human association.

As John Heron and I have argued, communities and organizations need to enhance human association by an appropriate balance of the principles of hierarchy, collaboration, and autonomy: deciding for others, with others, and for oneself (Heron 1989, 1993). Authentic hierarchy provides appropriate direction by those with greater vision, skill and experience—and is always concerned with transforming relationships so that those in relatively subordinate positions move toward greater skills in collaborative and autonomous action (Torbert 1991). Collaboration roots the individual within a community of peers, offering basic support and the creative and corrective feedback of other views and possibilities (Randall and Southgate 1980). Autonomy expresses the self-creating and self-transfiguring potential of the person (Heron 1992). The shadow face of authority is authoritarianism; that of collaboration peer pressure and conformity; that of autonomy narcissism, wilfulness and isolation. The challenge is to design institutions which manifest valid forms of these principles; and to find ways in which they can be maintained in self-correcting and creative tension (Heron 1989; 1993).

### **Participative Political Economy in the later Twentieth Century**

Are trends discernible toward more participative political forms in the late twentieth century? The news here is both good and bad. Particularly troubling on the "bad" side is the increasing power of international economic forces which appear answerable to no-one: the transnational corporation and the "global casino" of financial transactions, both of which appear to have power over individual lives and over nations. *Corporations rule the world*, as David Korten puts it neatly (1995). However, at both macro and micro level positive moves are also taking place toward establishing participative political and economic structure.

I am writing at a time when we in the United Kingdom are moving toward devolution of political power to Scotland, Wales and maybe the regions of England; and also just touching on a wider debate more representative electoral

systems. We have been through the heady, hopeful post-election days, having routed a government which was centrist, libertarian, ineffective and corrupt, and are wondering if New Labour will be any different—and the signs are both good and bad. There is much to be done to restore and develop a participative political economy. Will Hutton, in his book *The State We're In* (1995), provides a brilliant analysis of the perverse consequences of the neo-classical economics of the market place. The emphasis on competition over collaboration destroys peoples' sense of belonging and their ability to participate in any way in the political economy of their country. Hutton argues that the emphasis on personal choice and freedom we have seen in the UK in recent decades has encouraged the privileged to believe in the superiority of private provision and self-regulation, and left them with no appreciation of the common weal or responsibility for the whole. The UK is left with a "thirty, thirty, forty society" with 30% of the population actually disadvantaged, 30% marginalized and insecure, and 40% privileged, the insiders with access to market power and the position it gives. This situation, this "new and ugly shape of British society", is unjust and dangerous, Hutton argues, and in addition economically inefficient. The story concerns the UK political economy, but probably applies to other countries which have embraced the neo-liberal myth.

Hutton is one of those who argue that we should move away from an economy based effectively on anonymous and absentee ownership toward a stakeholder economy in which those whose lives are affected have the right to contribute to decisions which concern them. Maybe more radical than Hutton are the "new" economists—Max-Neef (1992), Daly (Daly and Cobb 1990), Robertson (1990), Ekins (Ekins and Max-Neef, 1992) and others—who are loosely associated through the New Economics Foundation and TOES—the other economic summit which meets in parallel with each Group of Seven economic summit to put forward an alternative message concerning economic possibilities. This is not the place for a thorough review of new economics, but rather simply to emphasize that it is critical of the way policies based on orthodox economic theories create dependency (for example on jobs provided by large organizations) and powerlessness, and emphasizes the possibility of an economics based on empowering people and communities. James Robertson defines four principles of new economics:

- It must systematically enable people to take greater control over their lives
- It must systematically conserve the earth's resources
- It must include qualitative values and ethical choice in economic life
- It must recognize that our first concern is no longer with the wealth of nations but with a single one-world economy, which must be reconceptualized, redesigned and restructured... into a pluralistic, decentralizing multi-level system. (Robertson 1991)

Thus new economics is concerned with the "real" economy, recognizing that there is a range of work which must be done for communal wellbeing which is simply not counted in the formal economy—homework, care of children and elderly, community involvement. Much of this work is, of course traditionally women's work (Waring 1988).

I was struck, at the World Congress on Participatory Action Research in Cartagena (July 1997), by the close relationship between participative action research and the new economics. In a sense, PAR is one way of putting new economics into practice in a way that is engaging, educational, and based on community needs. This link was made clearly in conversation with Marja-Liisa Swantz, who, as a result of her work in Tanzania, is now writing a book called *The Place of People's Knowledge in Understanding the Economics of the Poor*, about economics from the perspective of village life, and in particular from the perspective of women and women's needs and concerns. She writes in an early draft:

By using participatory approaches in studying local level small societies a 'close-up' picture of the local reality is gained. There is nothing new in the concept of participation for anthropologists, but talk of participatory economics may not be very familiar. A participatory approach opens a door to learning about people's own ways of looking at their lives, about their knowledge base and their practical learning processes. It enables statisticians and demographers to gain understanding of what is measurable. It puts flesh on the bones and furnishes empty structures. By studying women's everyday economics in a mutual learning process we begin to see where the universally applied calculations and assumptions fail.... (Swantz, in preparation)

### **Developing Communities of Inquiry**

If the new economics offers a relatively large scale vision of a participatory political economy, the various forms of local participatory action provide smaller scale examples—PAR projects, co-operative inquiries, learning communities, liberating structures—all provide examples of how participative action can be developed and the role of leadership and facilitation in this. In an earlier paper (Reason 1995) I suggested some ways to design educative processes that will encourage and facilitate co-operation, based on my experience of working with learning contracts in self-development groups and collaborative research communities. I don't think developing collaborative learning communities is as straightforward as one might wish, given that so many people have been educated into a culture of dependency and silence, or have been trained to exercise power over others in the pursuit of their immediate goals. A collaborative educational process needs to open a space in which participants are both invited to engage in work which is important and meaningful for them, and also insist that they reflect on the manner in which they perform that task so that together they learn how to move toward a more genuine collaboration.

A "contract" or "constitution" for such a learning community holds open a paradoxical space. On the one hand it states clearly: these are our objectives, these are our rights and responsibilities, this is when we will meet, these are the things we will do. These arrangements can be arrived at in collaborative fashion, but they will at this early stage of the group require some quite authoritative facilitation: for example when initiating a co-operative inquiry group I usually propose a clear structure of cycles of action and reflection to provide a framework

within which the group development can take place. But as well as setting out the immediate framework for working together clearly, the contract points to the possibility of a future state of affairs to which the group is intended to evolve—I often use the term "learning community", but the actual words need to be carefully chosen to appeal intuitively to the culture of the group concerned. This future state of affairs can and should be only loosely defined at this early stage, thus opening imaginative possibilities. The contract thereby sets out a framework of relationships which gives sufficient clarity for group members to join together and begin to work; it also offers an image of what the community is intended to evolve towards; and proposes as an expectation that one task of the community will be learning together how to accomplish this. This suggests three principles for building constitutions of intentional co-operative learning communities.

A first principle is that the constitution provides a clear framework for all participants to join and begin to work. The constitution is not adequate if it does not meet the participants where they are, if it mystifies or obfuscates, encourages dependency or deprivation. This probably means that it needs to articulate the goal and also map out in some detail the early steps toward the achievement of that goal; yet at the same time the fuller achievement of the goal requires and demands further development toward participation.

A second principle is that the constitution articulates a future form of desirable relationship to which group members can aspire, but which is loosely framed and necessarily always open to definition and re-definition. In this way the constitution contradicts its own clarity of purpose by offering a goal which can never be fully reached. We may frame this ideal as a "peer learning community", as a "community of inquiry", as a "learning organization". Torbert uses the term *foundational community* to refer to "the fire in which fundamentally new economic, political, aesthetic, and spiritual possibilities are actualized" (1987:216) to meet the "alchemical challenge of timely collective action" (Fisher and Torbert 1995:198). The essential point is that the vision offers an ideal to which all can subscribe but which cannot be encompassed with a clear statement, and which includes the possibility of both stability and change. Thus a gap is opened up between the clarity of the present and the as-yet undefined possibilities of the future, a gap which stimulates the imaginative capacities of the participants: "What is a learning community?"; "Are we one?"; "Yes we are, because....."; "No we are not, because...."

A third principle is that the constitution provides a learning and inquiring process for moving within this paradoxical gap. The constitution, while in part non-negotiable, paradoxically includes essential processes for its own revision and development, through experiential group processes and co-operative forms of inquiry (Reason 1988, 1994; Torbert 1991). The constitution poses the question, "If we were a learning community, how would we be behaving together?" The group is thus "tricked" into engaging in cycles of reflection-action-reflection to explore the nature of its own process as it moves toward the ever elusive ideal.

The constitution thus both obeys the traditional injunction to "start from where the client is" yet paradoxically also starts from where the client is not. It defines the



boundaries and opens a space in which creativity is demanded. In my earlier paper I likened this to Winnicott's (1971) notion of transitional phenomena and Goodwin's (1994) account of play in the development of living organisms (see also Reason and Goodwin, 1997).

These kinds of educational communities demand the exercise of liberating leadership and facilitation. They require an exquisite balance of authentic authority, participation and autonomy (Heron 1989) in the exercise of liberating leadership (Fisher and Torbert 1995). Briefly, it demands that the facilitator live on the edge of many contradictions. They must be willing and able to take their authority to propose and initiate collective action. They must have the ability to hold and articulate a vision of a future state and invite others to reach toward it with them. They must continually create democratic structures and relationships, and behave in ways that invite reciprocity and dialogue. They must accept that their actions as leaders are in the service of others, that they take authority in order to honour and enhance the self-directing capacities of others. They must know that as they do this they will be most severely challenged, that they will at times be required to let go of their own vision to allow space for the multiple visions that may develop within the community. This calls for exquisite capacities for attention in action, for the discipline and rigor involved to maintain high standards in this kind of work is formidable. As Torbert put it long ago (1976:167), most of us must go through a scale of self-development we can scarcely imagine before being capable of relationally valid action. Possibly the most important key to understanding appropriate leadership and facilitation in the service of participation is that the facilitator's power is to be essentially vulnerable (Torbert 1991).

### **THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF PARTICIPATION**

Participation is an epistemological imperative. As Gregory Bateson's argued, the most important thing is for us to learn to think in new ways (1972). For it seems to me that the Western worldview is based on a fundamental epistemological error that humans are separate from each other and from the natural world. The consequences of this are, in Skolimowksi's words, "ecological devastation, human and social fragmentation, spiritual impoverishment" (1994:136). While from one perspective the orthodox scientific worldview was a liberating step away from the bonds of superstition and scholasticism, from another perspective the choices made at the time of the enlightenment narrowed our view of the world toward a materialist and mechanical perspective which, while powerful for a while, contains major errors, in particular for understanding the living world. The scientific perspective has taught us the value of critical public testing of what is taken as knowledge, but it has also placed the researcher firmly outside and separate from the subject of their research, reaching for an objective knowledge and for one separate truth.

I think it is important to place any critique of Western epistemology in an historical context, particularly in the context of an evolving human consciousness. I made my own attempt to do this in *Participation in Human Inquiry*.

If we look at the evidence, mainly from anthropology and the study of myth and the history of consciousness, a fairly consistent story can be told which suggests that human consciousness has evolved (and is evolving) through three broad phases. In the first phase human consciousness is undifferentiated from the natural world and people live in deep unconscious communion with their surroundings. In the second phase human beings progressively differentiate themselves from their environment, developing a separate sense of self and of community; in an extreme of this phase (which characterises much of Western consciousness at the present time) participation is denied and people live in an alienated consciousness. In the third phase the sense of participation is regained but in a new way so that human beings participate intentionally and awarely in the creation of their world. This last phase is on the whole more potential than realized. (Reason 1994:17)

Richard Tarnas explores these themes in the *Passion of the Western Mind*, which is in part a history of Western philosophy, but more importantly an account of the way in which the “evolution of the Western mind has been driven by a heroic impulse to forge an autonomous rational human self by separating itself from the primordial unity with nature” (1991:441). This is an essentially masculine quest resulting in the suppression of the feminine and thus the suppression of the experience of participation in all its forms. However, as a consequence of this heroic quest “the deepest passion of the Western mind has been to reunite with the ground of its being” (443), and Tarnas argues that we may be coming to the resolution of an immensely long dialectical movement toward a reintegration of the masculine and feminine in a new participative consciousness.

The notion that the Western worldview is in transition has been part of intellectual currency for quite a while. We are in a “postmodern” moment, when the modernist view, based on ideas of a separate self and on progress toward some perfect future state, is seen as having come to the end of its useful life. The postmodern tendencies are twofold. On the one hand the deconstructive trend lays bare our illusions of any kind of certainty—incredulity toward meta-narratives, as Lyotard (1979:xxiv) puts it, and in particular the grand story of modernist achievement. As a result of the deconstructive movement we are forced to let go of (some of) our hubris. But the deconstructive movement is in some senses a *continuation* of modernity, because it is still centred on the human construction, arguing that there is *nothing but* social construction of the real. Spretnak argues that many aspects of contemporary life can hardly be seen as “postmodern”, as claimed by deconstructionists, but as “intensified and expanded dynamics of modernity”

Giddens is correct, I believe, in identifying many disembodied aspects of contemporary life not as “postmodern”, as is often claimed by deconstructionists, but as intensified and expanded dynamics of modernity....

Our age is *hypermodern*.. because the *conditions* of modernity are now driven by the dynamics of the technosphere and the globalized economy. “Cyberspace” is hardly *postmodern*. What could be more disembodied, disembedded and decontextualized? Surely the computer age is *mostmodern*, to use a term suggested by David Ray Griffin. (Spretnak 1997:22; emphasis in original)

In contrast to this is constructive or ecological postmodernism identified by Spretnak and Griffin, among others. This perspective, while acknowledging that all human perspectives are relative, seeks to ground them in the wider presence of planet and cosmos of which humans are a part. From an ecological perspective it is important to start from our embodied presence in the world as physical beings rather than as disembodied and deconstructed minds:

Ultimately, to acknowledge the life of the body, and to affirm our solidarity with this physical form, is to acknowledge our existence as one of the earth's animals, and so to remember and rejuvenate the organic basis of our thoughts and our intelligence. (Abram 1996: 47)

It seems to me that a defining characteristic of this perspective is that it is *participatory*. As Skolimowski puts it, "We always partake of what we describe" (1992:20), so our "reality" is a product of the dance between our individual and collective mind and "what is there", the amorphous primordial givenness of the universe. The participative perspective sees a world not of separate things, as a positivist view would have, nor as a socially reinforced construction of the human mind as held by the various relativist perspectives, but rather of relationships which we co-author. The world we experience as 'reality' is subjective-objective, a co-creation that involves the primal givenness of the cosmos and human experience, imagination and intuition, thinking and construing, and intentional action in the world (Heron 1992). In participative knowing knower and known are distinct but not separate, part of a unitary field of being which is made up of relatively independent entities, which unfolds through the process of coming to know and the action that derives from that knowing (Heron and Reason 1997). In this view, "truth" is not a matter of static fact, but a quality of relationship (Abram 1996:264).

The participative worldview stands in contrast to both the positivism paradigm with its mechanical metaphors which underlies the modern worldview, and also the various forms of relativism which characterize the postmodern metaphor. A basic problem of the positivist, objective mind is that it cannot acknowledge the paradigm it has created and which frames its vision. It fails to distinguish between the mysterious presence of the given cosmos and the worldview it has generated which gives shape to that given. It cannot see that the ground, on which it stands to frame its world, is its own creation. In consequence, its outlook tends to be immodest, intolerant and imperialist. The basic problem with the constructivist mind, in its postmodern, poststructural extreme, is that it dismisses any ground as valid simply because there is another ground beyond it. It confuses relative truth with nihilistic scepticism: it thinks that because no ground is final, no ground has any claim to truth. In consequence, it exacerbates the modern experience of rootlessness and meaninglessness.

Within the participative worldview "Worlds and people are what we meet, but the meeting is shaped by our own terms of reference" (Heron 1996a:11); and we meet worlds and people through a variety of ways of knowing. *Experiential knowing* is that direct encounter, face-to-face meeting, feeling and imaging the presence of

other: some energy, entity, person, place, process or thing. Experiential knowing is knowing through participative, empathic resonance with a being, so that as knower I feel both attuned with it and distinct from it. It is also the creative shaping of a world through imaging it, perceptually and in other ways. Experiential knowing thus articulates reality through inner resonance with what there is, and is the essential grounding of other forms of knowing.

Experiential knowing is tacit and inchoate and in a sense inexpressible.

*Presentational knowing* emerges from and is grounded on experiential knowing; it clothes our experiential knowing of the world in the metaphors of aesthetic creation. Presentational knowing, drawing on expressive forms of imagery and using the symbols of graphic, plastic, musical, vocal and verbal art-forms, gives first articulate form to our experience. These forms symbolize both our felt attunement with the world and the primary meaning which it holds for us.

*Propositional knowing*, knowing in conceptual terms, emerges from presentational knowing. It is knowledge by description expressed in statements and theories that come with the mastery of concepts and classes that language bestows. Propositions themselves are carried by presentational forms—the sounds or visual shapes of the spoken or written word—and are ultimately grounded in our experiential articulation of a world.

*Practical knowing* is knowing how to do something, demonstrated in a skill or competence. It presupposes a conceptual grasp of principles and standards of practice, presentational elegance, and experiential grounding in the situation within which the action occurs. It fulfils the three prior forms of knowing, brings them to fruition in purposive deeds, and consummates them with its autonomous celebration of excellent accomplishment.

Heron has argued for the primacy of practical knowing (1996a & b), for while you can divorce thought from action, you cannot divorce action in the world from thought, and in an important sense the purpose of knowing is to transform the world in the service of human flourishing. Practical knowing thus both consummates other forms of knowing, and is grounded in them, and thus in a sense provides a link between the epistemological and political themes of this paper.

Within a participative worldview inquiry is not the province of specialist researchers, but rather becomes a way of life which integrates action with reflection, practice with learning. A variety of forms of action research have been articulated, most of which describe systematic movements between action and reflection, or varieties of research cycling between experiential, presentational, propositional and practical knowing. Thus a participative epistemology articulates a way of knowing and acting which is both grounded in our experiential presence in the world and honours the human capacity of sense-making and intentional action.

## **THE ECOLOGY OF PARTICIPATION**

Participation is an ecological imperative. It affirms that human persons are a part of the cosmos, we evolved with it and are part of its creative force. We don't stand separate from each other, but are deeply bound in consociation (Bookchin 1991); we don't stand separate from the nature world; we don't stand separate from spirit. This is not to say that we don't bring particular gifts: as Thomas Berry puts it, "the human activates the most profound dimension of the universe, its capacity to reflect on and celebrate itself in conscious self-awareness" (1988:132)

The participatory worldview allows us as human persons to know that we are part of the whole, rather than separated as mind over and against matter, or placed here in the relatively separate creation of a transcendent god. It allows us to join with fellow humans in collaborative forms of inquiry. It places us back in relation with the living world—and we note that to be *in relation* means that we live with the rest of creation as *relatives*, with all the rights and obligations that implies... (Heron and Reason 1997)

Gregory Bateson's work in developing the notion of an *ecology of mind* takes us toward an understanding of "the pattern which connects". He argues that mind is best thought about not as the property of individual human persons, residing somewhere within our skulls, but is immanent in the whole natural world. Mind, for Bateson, resides in those systemic circuits of information, the feedback loops which provide processes of balance and control, which are part of all natural ecosystems. An oak wood, for example, consists of perhaps a thousand species, all of which live together in a combination of competition and mutual dependency. The ecological balance of the oak wood lies not in a controlling blueprint, but in the interactive balances and dependencies of the whole system that prevent any one species dominating the rest (1972:406) Capra's (1996) recent synthesis of systemic thinking from Bateson, Maturana and others describes what he calls the *web of life* in very similar terms, as does the Gaia hypothesis (Lovelock 1979), which suggests that the planet Earth and all her creatures can be seen as one living organism creating maintaining conditions suitable for life through homeostatic feedback systems.

When human persons exalt conscious purpose over this wider notion of mind by pursuing short term goals at the expense of the wider system they deny their participation in the whole. We do this whenever we burn fossil fuels or create agriculture based on monocultures. The kind of straight line thinking which derives from the pursuit of short term conscious purpose can only encompass a limited arc of the ecological circuits of the natural world, and thus destroys the balance and harmony of the whole.

Human persons have probably always acted, to a greater or lesser extent, in the pursuit of short term conscious purpose with little regard for their participation within the wider whole. It is apparent that early humans contributed to the extinction of many ancient mammals and birds (Leakey and Lewin 1995) Agriculture itself has changed the landscape irrevocably. But in these times of extraordinary powerful technology our ability to override and damage processes of the natural world—the wider circuits of mind—has grown to dangerous proportions. We have

fished out much of the sea, polluted much of the groundwater, disturbed the balance of the atmosphere, and in the thirty some years since humans began to travel in space we have managed to litter the orbit of the planet with vast quantities of junk.

If you put God outside and set him vis-à-vis his creation and if you have the idea that you are created in his image, you will logically and naturally see yourself as outside and against the things around you. And as you arrogate all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore as not entitled to moral or ethical consideration. The environment will be yours to exploit...

If this is your estimate of your relation to nature and you have an advanced technology, your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell. You will die either of the toxic by-products of your own hate, or, simply, of over population and over-grazing. (Bateson 1972:462).

Participation is an ecological imperative because if we fail to make the developmental transition to an aware participative relationship with the planet we will in all probability create an environment unfit for human habitation.

### **THE SPIRIT OF PARTICIPATION**

Participation is a spiritual imperative. To deny participation not only offends against human justice, not only leads to errors in epistemology, not only strains the limits of the natural world, but is also troublesome for human souls. For it seems to me, given the condition of our times, that a primary purpose of human inquiry is not so much to search for truth but to *heal*, and above all to heal the alienation, the split that characterises modern experience. For as R. D. Laing put it rather dramatically

... the ordinary person is a shrivelled, desiccated fragment of what a person can be....

What we call normal is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action on experience... It is radically estranged from the structure of being (Laing 1967:25-7).

As I wrote before:

To heal means to make whole: we can only understand our world as a whole if we are part of it; as soon as we attempt to stand outside, we divide and separate. In contrast, making whole necessarily implies participation: one characteristic of a participative worldview is that the individual person is restored to the circle of community and the human community to the context of the wider natural world. To make whole also means to make holy: another characteristic of a participatory worldview is that meaning and mystery are restored to human experience, so that the world is once again experienced as a sacred place (Reason 1993: 10)

We need to beware of inflating the notion of the spiritual to some remote end state that can be attained only after immense effort. For while the discipline of spiritual practice is important, as John Heron points out (personal communication 1997), “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”. Meister Eckhart described the spiritual path as “beautiful and pleasant and joyful and familiar”, and as Matthew Fox asks

Why does he claim that his way is “familiar? Is there a haunting sense in which the creation-centred way conjures up childhood and other periods of truth in our lives? Is it because what is beautiful and pleasant and joyful is necessarily familiar...? Is Eckhart’s way a familiar way because it is non-elitist?... Eckhart learned to trust his life and own life experiences... to be spiritual is to be awake and alive—the holiness of life itself absolutely fascinated Eckhart (Fox,1983:3-4)

Nor does attention to the spiritual mean that we lose concern for the political, for our outer work—actions in the world—are grounded in our inner work. As Heron points out (1996b) , just as practical knowing derives its validity from its grounding experiential knowing, practical knowing consummates our experiential knowing in worthwhile action. Eckhart tells us we cannot use the inner work as an excuse for abandoning the outer:

We ought to get over amusing ourselves with raptures  
for the sake of a greater love  
which is to administer to what people most need  
whether spiritually  
or socially  
or physically. (in Fox 1983:92)

But he also points out that

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. (in Fox 1983:99)

So one purpose of human inquiry is to locate the practical response to human problems in its necessary wider, spiritual context. If humanity can be seen as “nature rendered self-conscious” as Bookchin suggests (1991:313), and humans are a part of a cosmos capable to self awareness and self-reflection (Swimme 1984), then human inquiry is a way through which human presence can be celebrated; as Skolimowski puts it, we need to take the courage to imagine and reach for our fullest capabilities. Thus the practical inquiry of human persons is a spiritual expression, a celebration of the flowering of humanity and of the co-

creating cosmos, and as part of a sacred science is an expression of the beauty and joy of active existence.



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