

Embracing the Paradox of Transformational Change: exploring the occupation and new-found spirituality of an international development professional

by David Fletcher (2004)

1. Abstract:

This paper describes the author's occupation as an international development professional and how it has changed as the result of a recent transformative learning experience. Drawing on the literature and a number of vignettes from his development experience, the transformation described is more than a shift from an outward oriented societal change model to an inward focused personal change model. Nor is the transformation simply a switch in philosophical orientation from a critical, constructivist / interpretivist paradigm to a perspective that accepts absolute truths. The transformation, articulated and illuminated with personal reflections, is one that accommodates, transcends and embraces these apparent paradoxes by valuing spirituality as an important source of meaning for occupation. This identified source for meaning is attracting more and more attention in the literature. Recommendations to embrace spirituality, and to embrace the kinds of paradoxes mentioned, as essential concepts in the occupation of international development professionals are shared.

2. Keywords:

- occupation
- personal transformation
- social transformation
- spirituality
- transformative learning
- meaning

3. Author's Biography:

David Fletcher is an international development consultant with 20 years experience in Africa and Canada. David is presently studying in indigenous knowledge and community resilience in Ghana.

4.0 Introduction

- *Never doubt that a small, committed group of individuals can change the world - indeed it is the only thing that ever has. Margaret Mead*
- *Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral. Paulo Friere*
- *Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind. Albert Einstein*
- *Be the change you want to see in the world. Mahatma Gandhi*

In this paper I will explore the occupation of an international development professional, and the role of transformational learning in that occupation. The paper will draw upon the literature and my recent personal transformational learning journey as an international development professional. I have worked in community development and social change in Canada and on the African continent for 20 years, and in the last couple of years what constitutes my occupation has changed. I now occupy much more of my time on personal transformation rather than direct activist work for social change. I am starting to understand and interact with the world through new eyes. This transformation could be considered narcissistic, but it has deep spiritual roots and has caused me to revisit and reevaluate the priorities of my occupation.

On this learning journey I have asked myself a number of questions. As an international development professional should my work focus on transforming society or on transforming myself? Assuming there is some relevance to transforming myself, how do I go about that - is it a rational or an imaginative process? Finally, is “good” social change work dependent on an understanding of the social construction of knowledge and meaning and the related critical analysis of power in regards to domination and oppression? Or are there universal truths and the influence of internal powers or “higher powers” on people’s lives?

The paper initially draws on literature related to social change and personal change to situate my interdisciplinary occupation in its dynamic context. Two approaches to personal transformative learning are then explored - the intuitive and the rational. Finally, literature concerning the social construction of meaning in occupation will be highlighted, and juxtaposed with spirituality as an alternative source of meaning. I will then share and discuss six vignettes of my learning journey. The discussion and conclusion offer some insights of what constitutes the occupation of an international development professional and how transformative learning can add value to all occupations that work to promote change at the personal and societal level.

5.0 Literature Review: Transformation, Transformative Learning and the Construction of Society

This literature review presents four perspectives. The first perspective concerns the issue of social transformation and personal transformation. Often these two issues are considered quite separate, and even set in opposition to one another, yet literature is blossoming that demonstrates they are actually intricately linked. The second and third perspectives concern transformative learning as a theory of personal transformation: initially as an intuitive / imaginative approach and then as a rational / critical approach. Again, there appears to be evidence for owning the paradox of these two approaches - a both/and approach - rather than using a critical process to choose one process over the other. The fourth perspective touches on the concept of the social construction of society and examines the possibility of marrying it with a more open, spiritual philosophy - in some ways an attempt to appreciate both an eastern and western ontological perspective. This may be necessary if transformation is going to be pursued in our increasingly interdependent world

5.1 Social Transformation and Personal Transformation

The field of international development studies has its roots in sociology, economics and political science. This study is concerned with social transformation - understanding and promoting change in developing countries and with oppressed communities to create a more just, and equitable planet. The predominant paradigm for promoting international development, however, has been material-centred growth. This paradigm captures both the free market capitalist orientation to development promoted by the World Bank and most bilateral donors from the OECD, and the state oriented liberation movements of the 1960s and their descendants. Both are focused on materials and growth (Allen and Thomas, 2002; Black, 2002). Over the years, however, there has been consistent advocacy for an alternative development paradigm which has been named, people-centred transformation. This paradigm advocates for people to be empowered to work together; to transform institutions, technology, values and behavior; to promote justice, sustainability, inclusiveness; and to create a new vision for the future (Korten, 1990). Cross cultural communication and intercultural effectiveness - that focuses on the learning and competence of the individuals involved in the systems - is important within this paradigm. Work on issues of gender and race are also explored and indigenous voices and diverse world views are respected. In the majority of the mainstream development literature transformation of the self is a non-issue, however, and the focus is very much on educating others and transforming social institutions (Murphy, 2001).

Even Paulo Friere, the Brazilian educator, who has been an inspiration to many working towards emancipatory education and social transformation makes personal change a secondary issue. For Friere transformative learning is a process in which people's critical consciousness is awakened and they learn to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of society (Taylor 1998). Friere's approach is used as a means to an end, however. Emancipatory education is seen as a process for social transformation - it is not considered an end in itself. Many emancipatory educators would consider a focus on personal change and transformation as navel gazing.

This bias against personal transformation is surprising. Mahatma Gandhi, one of the most universally respected social change activists, is often quoted for insisting individuals need to “be the change you want to see in the world” (Gandhi, 1990; Ingram, 1990). Slowly this consciousness is seeping into the literature (Bohm, 1995; James, 2004; Murphy, 2001). But this does not mean we turn our backs on efforts for social change.

An insightful literature outside the regular margins of international development discourse that helps with this issue is occupational science. The study of occupation, with its roots linked to the medical model and attention to disability and mental health issues, has had a focus on the person (Yerxa, 1993). Occupational science uses a holistic model, however, and the whole person and the interaction of that person with her or his surrounding environment is critical. Working to foster change in individuals and in the systems and structures of society - whether it is the everyday organization of work, or global systems enabling rights or perpetuating oppressions - are both key elements of occupation (CAOT, 2002). Occupational science therefore adds significantly to an understanding of social and personal transformation.

Occupational scientists articulate a need for effective structural and personal action, (Do Rozario, 1994, 1997) a balancing of doing, being and becoming, (Wilcock, 1998) a sense of communitarianism (Whiteford, 2003) and a demand for occupational justice (Townsend and Whiteford, 2005). These concepts encompass ideas of going beyond power and control and personally embracing values such as wisdom, joy and harmony. Professionals are challenged to accept an entire spectrum of work from the individual through community to the structures at large. A case is made for starting with personal change, however, which can then evolve into social change (Thibeault, 2002; Wilcock, 1998; Townsend and Whiteford, 2005). Authors are clear that advocacy for change in everyday practices to alter systems of domination is structural, yet it clearly needs to be combined with other work that promotes healing, values the spiritual, develops personal meaning and purpose, and recognizes the importance of transcending self to connect with others (Do Rozario, 1997; Townsend, 1997b).

Others in different disciplines also contribute to this understanding of the paradox between social change and personal change (Apt, 1998; Cranton, 2002; Taylor, 1998, Tisdell and Tolliver, 2003). Carl Jung’s distinction between introversion or extraversion as two ways to relate to the world captures this same dilemma. There is a belief that a focus on personal transformation and then integrating into society with the dominant ideology unquestioned deserves criticism. Similarly, pursuing a personal journey of transformation yet remaining blind to privilege and power in a society that is structurally and systemically unjust is also problematic. Recognizing we are living in a time of crisis, dealing with that and also changing our personal consciousness to include “deeper meaning, higher purpose and a sense of the sacred” (O’Sullivan, 2005: p.6) is also important. What is essential is that personal and social transformation go hand in hand (O’Sullivan, 2005; Taylor, 1998; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). As Taylor states: “transformational learning occurs when one grasps with growing insight the way biography [persona] intersects with the social structure, and the privilege and oppression of persons based on power” (Taylor, 1998: p. 18).

This new - atleast to international development studies - openness and valuing of processes of personal transformation as being intricately linked to social transformation is significant. Efforts for social change can not be separated from efforts for personal change. This finding demands

that the literature on personal transformational learning be examined in more detail. This is done in the next section.

5.2 The Intuitive / Imaginative Transformational Learning Approach

There is a growing body of literature related to the intuitive / imaginative concept of transformational learning (Algado, Gregori and Egan, 1997; Boyd and Meyers, 1988; Dirkx, 1997, Do Rozario, 1994; Grabove, 1997; O’Sullivan, 2005; Preece, 2003; Scott, 1997; Thibeault, 2002; Tisdell and Tolliver, 2003). Boyd and Meyers (1988) define this approach to transformative learning as “helping individuals work towards acknowledging and understanding the dynamics between their inner and outer worlds. For the learner this means the expansion of consciousness and the working towards a meaningful integrated life as evidenced in authentic relationships with self and others” (p. 261). This approach draws on the work of C.G. Jung, and brings forward concepts of the collective unconscious, discernment and grief work. It involves a shift in consciousness, values rituals, myths and dreams to give meaning, and includes the intuitive and the emotional as part of the journey of becoming (Dirkx, 1997; Do Rozario, 1994; O’Sullivan, 2005; Scott, 1997; Wilcock, 1998). The significance of this in an international development context is striking. Rituals, myths and meaning are associated with culture, so valuing these in cross cultural contexts will be particularly relevant for learning. The commonality in these experiences across cultures is also illuminating. Dirkx, for example, argues that we can see the soul through common experiences such as the mystery of birth, death and love and that it is these common transformative experiences that are evidence for the importance of “mythos” the imaginative, emotional and intuitive (Dirkx, 1997: p. 81).

In this intuitive / imaginative approach to transformational learning discernment is considered a key. Discernment is about distinguishing what is true and has value for you and much of the literature discusses the stages of receptivity, recognition and grieving as part of this process (Boyd and Meyers, 1988; Grabove, 1997; Scott, 1997).

A further dimension of this perspective on transformative learning is the sense of the sacred (Algado et al, 1997; Do Rozario, 1997; O’Sullivan, 2005; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). Tisdell and Tolliver, for example, discuss the four faces that need to be reclaimed for our lives to become whole: the political, the personal, the historical, and the sacred. They argue that the spiritual face is essential for transforming identity from an oppressed one to a reclaimed, positive identity.

The spiritual journey is about moving toward knowing and operating from the core self or more authentic identity, recognizing that given that we are shaped by systems of race, class, gender; our genetics; our various psychological and biological needs and desires; and others expectations of us, it is impossible to know this authentic self with absolute certainty. This is the paradox ... and spirituality is about living in the belly of the paradox (Tisdell and Tolliver, 2003: 375).

Other researchers and practitioners - working at a community level - have also written about the value of an intuitive, imaginative or spiritual approach to transformational change (Algado, Gregori & Egan, 1997; Preece, 2003; Thibeault, 2002). This intuitive, imaginative approach is not the only perspective on transformative learning. There is also a reflective critical approach to transformational learning which is outlined below.

5.3 The Reflective / Critical Transformative Learning Approach

A more common interpretation of transformative learning is the reflective, rational, critical, analytical approach. This approach to transformative learning is intimately tied to the work of Jack Mezirow. Mezirow, in his work over the last 20 years, has clearly articulated and delineated transformative learning theory and has been instrumental in inspiring much of the practice in this field. Mezirow's definition is:

“[Transformative learning] is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings” Mezirow, 1991: pg 167

Transformative learning has the purpose of constructing, validating and reformulating the meaning of experiences in order for individuals to become socially responsible thinkers. This is done through a rational, analytical cognitive process that is critical of one's underlying assumptions (Boyd and Meyers, 1988; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 1998; Cranton, 2002; Grabove, 1997). The goal is to produce a thinking, autonomous and responsible agent” (Mezirow, 1997: pg 7). This approach to transformative learning includes the element of survive (eg. understand the crisis we are part of and move beyond denial and despair) and critique (eg. resist hierarchial power as expressed through race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation) (O'Sullivan, 2005). Proponents of this perspective on transformative learning insist that individuals must make their own interpretations of society and should not “act on the purposes, beliefs, judgements and feelings of others” (Mezirow, 1997: p. 5). The argument is that the self is primarily determined by a set of codes that are cultural, social, educational, economic, political or psychological and that these create habits of the mind, and ultimately a 'life world'. These codes and meaning perspectives are often acquired uncritically in the course of childhood and become embedded in one's psyche and act as a lens through which we observe ourselves and the world. (Cranton, 2002; Mezirow, 1997; Taylor 1998). This understanding is particularly relevant for those working with people in cross-cultural settings in international development, where people will see the world through distinctly different lenses.

Transformative learning draws on the psychoanalytic framework of Sigmund Freud. Transformative learning is seen as an outer journey of the ego struggling to be free from the habits of the mind, socialization and cultural factors and gaining control of one's life by dealing with unconscious, repressed obstacles (Boyd and Meyers, 1988: p. 263).

The process of transformative learning will make us aware and potentially change our frame of reference and the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs and habits of mind are based. This process has four main components: experience, reflection, discourse, and action (Cranton, 1992; Grabove, 1997; Mezirow 1991, 1997). The initiating experience in transformative learning can be a series of changed meaning schemes or a personal or social crisis - death of a loved one, disaster, divorce, accident, war, job loss or retirement (Taylor, 1998: p.8). Authors are clear the process is challenging and demands courage and authenticity (Cranton,

2002; Grabove, 1997). Discourse is probably the most explored of these components -it is a dialogue specifically oriented to assessing justifications for competing interpretations, by critically examining evidence, arguments, and different points of view
Mezirow sums up this overall approach:

“There is an inherent logic, ideal and purpose in the process of transformative learning. The process involves transforming frames of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one’s reflective insight, and critically assessing it...and actively resisting social and cultural forces that distort and delimit adult learning.” (Mezirow, 1997; p 11)

This rational approach contributes significantly to the understanding of transformative learning.

Even the proponents of this approach recognize that an exclusively reflective approach is not enough, however, and there is more and more literature that advocates for a valuing of both the rational and the intuitive understandings. Grabove in her review of transformative learning quotes another researcher Clark as describing “transformative learning is a personal journey that is restorative: a rational approach through a non rational process (Grabove, 1997: p. 93). Grabove clearly argues that there needs to be an honouring and an interconnection between both the rational and the intuitive approach to transformation. She concludes her work on the many facets of transformational learning and practice:

“At the centre is the person. The transformative learner moves in an out of the cognitive and the intuitive, of the rational and the imaginative, of the subjective and the objective, of the personal and the social. In seeming paradox, the value of the imagination and the power of emotion exist within the rational notion of transformation, and learners rely on analysis to make sense of their feelings, images and intuitive descriptions.” (Grabove, 1997, p. 95)

It is this integration of the two streams of transformational learning literature - a both/and approach rather than an either/or approach - that provides the greatest value when applied to the occupation of international development professionals. One must remain vigilante, however, that Mezirow’s notion of “becoming more autonomous” does not take precedence over the blossoming of one’s higher consciousness that recognizes interdependent relationships and compassion for society as a whole (Do Rozario, 1997; Taylor, 1998).

In Table 1 some of the key elements of transformational learning applicable to international development are presented.

Table 1: Key Elements of Transformative Learning

	Imaginative / Intuitive	Reflective / Critical
Epistemology	Intuitive, creative, emotional	Rational, critical, analytical
Theoretical foundation	In-depth psychology	Critical social theory
Purpose	Expand consciousness	Socially responsible thinkers and doers?
Sense of self	The Self is on an inner journey, and must be receptive, and include recognition and grieving. Discernment, connecting with archetypes and using silence to move towards wholeness of the Self is essential.	The self is socially constructed and contains a repressed unconscious. The self, or ego, must be freed from socialization; and get rational control in order to do what is authentic in the world.
Educate people to:	Explore deeper meaning and purpose, sense of sacred, contemplation and silence - create.	Think critically, assess own and others underlying assumptions and interpretations
Motivation	Insight and intuition; experience demands change	Habits of the mind are limiting - trauma or critical questions inspire change
Actions needed	Imagine alternative ways to think, make meaning of own experience, own one's truth.	Recover voice; overcome limiting socialization

5.4 Social Construction and Interpretation of Society and Spiritual/ Theological / Cosmological Understandings

There is a third theme in the literature relevant to the evolving occupation of international development work. In conceptualizing society there is a rich literature on the social constructivist and interpretivist positions (CAOT, 2002). This has grown and developed prominence recently in opposition to the scientific, empirical, positivist model (CAOT, 2002). Beyond these positions, however, there is an ontological position that accepts universal truths determined by a higher being. This is not a positivist position - as there is no effort to gather evidence to prove these truths, yet it is certainly beyond social constructionism / interpretivist positions. If a group believes that reality is determined by a power outside themselves - their conceptualization can be considered valid as that is their interpretation. However, the paradox is that the group itself will not accept that they “interpreted” the reality, or that it was socially constructed, because they believe implicitly in the power and influence of the higher power who determines reality. There is value in exploring literature related to the social constructivist / critical position, and the spiritual (cosmological and theological) positions in some more detail as they relate to international development. Perhaps most importantly is to own the paradox between the constructivist and the spiritual positions.

Constructivist social theory focuses on domination and institutionalized oppressions and demands attention to differences. Occupation, personal and social lives, are constrained by structures and organizational relations which determine the possibilities for social transformation (Darville, 1995;

Townsend, 1997; Young, 1990). In this understanding, social systems of power confer truth, and therefore one can only perpetuate or challenge that truth. From this perspective political action is the only action that can change the world (hooks and Davis in Brookfield, 2003; Foucault, 1977). This leads to an understanding of social justice as “moving beyond having and doing to include action and the means to exercise capacities” (Young, 1990:16).

Social theorists’ view personal transformation as “either a dialectic in social interaction and action or a by product of the social forces at play” (Scott, 1997: p. 43). According to them we are deluded as citizens and act in naïve or ineffectual ways if we deny the power of the controlling forces in society to dictate our behaviour. Structures and collective culture shape reality and individual identity. People can transform physical and social conditions of their contexts and imbue them with coherence and meaning and to do so we are encouraged to develop a sense of agency (Do Rozario, 1994; Scott, 1997; Thibeault, 2002). Agency is confounded, however, when “complex issues paralyze our knowing what to do” (Scott, 1997: p 43). These complex issues are encountered on such a regular basis that we often turn to irrational resources to deal with the complexity: intuition, metaphysics or spirituality. Many authors show a respect for this spiritual and intuitive knowledge (Do Rozario, 1994; Scott, 1997; Thibeault, 2002). Thus, even when we subscribe to the theory of social construction we are forced to admit other forces are also at play that need to be valued, respected and integrated into our meaning frameworks.

Iris Marion Young is a strong advocate for the critical, constructivist position. She argues that positivist social theory ‘separates facts from values, claims to be value neutral and is liable to reaffirm and reify the given social reality’ (Young, 1990: 5). She would probably make the same argument against interpretivist social science. She goes on to state that, “[norms come from society] norms can come from nowhere else ... ideas of good and just arise from the desiring negation that action brings to what is given” (Young, 1990: 5 and 6). These are important arguments, but they are limiting in some ways and do not appreciate the spiritual / theological / cosmological position.

If one considers that norms or values come from a “higher power” and are inherent in humankind, then values and social facts can be quite separate things, the former with a divine source. Social justice can also be expanded beyond having, doing and exercising capacities to exploring a higher consciousness and communion with the Supreme. The focus on socially constructed domination and oppression and power-over can also be considered quite limited if one accepts other ontological alternatives such as Hindu concepts of karma and reincarnation.

All of this is to say, while holding on to the concepts of social constructionism and interpretivism in international development practice, one must also explore spiritual, theological and cosmological understandings of society. These understandings provide meaning to people’s lives and occupations and inspire much social change.

A driving force behind three of the most profound social transformations in the 20th Century were spiritual beliefs. Mahatma Gandhi's work and the non-violent struggle for independence of India, Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement, and the members of the African National Congress who developed the Freedom Charter and consolidated efforts for the end of Apartheid in South Africa, all had strong beliefs in a set of universal truths that existed beyond what humans constructed socially.

A number of academics also argue that meaning is constructed by both contextual influences and internal change and accept that we need to remember the spiritual essence (the mystery, higher power) and the analysis of the oppressions that are constructed in the world (Egan & DeLaat, 1997; Lee, 1999; Preece, 2003; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003).

Preece, for example, has shown that spirit is an essential ingredient for transformational leadership and that a connection to something greater than self is critical. She is pragmatic, however, and argues that this acceptance of the metaphysical has to be balanced with a resistance to the systems and structures of globalization and their impact in the economic and political realms. Combining these seemingly disparate elements of change - personal spiritual awakening and critical analysis of society - is a paradox that must be accommodated for authentic development work (Preece, 2003).

Acknowledging and appreciating these philosophical issues is important within the practice of international development studies. An interpretivist, a constructivist and a spiritual conceptualization of society are all relevant to international development professionals.

6.0 The Learning Journey of a Professional Development Worker: Reflections and Insights from an Occupational Analysis

In October 2002 I resigned from a Field Director's position with a large international NGO. It was an opportune time to move on - I may have been a little burnt out - and I chose to "take a sabbatical" and so began a profound journey of transformation. Building personal capacities have always been important to me, such as in cross-cultural communication and understanding, yet I recognize how infrequently over the years I have really focused on myself and worked towards holism and personal transformation. Circumstances and synchronistic events led me to focus energy in this area the last couple years, however, and I'm now clear that effective work and occupation as a professional development worker - one who wants to make a contribution to the betterment of the world - can best occur through transformation of the self. My journey of

transformational learning has involved much reflection and reassessment of previous experiences and has included adopting a disciplined meditation practice, and making effort along a particular spiritual path. This section describes a selection of critical incidents that were part of this transformative learning and offers some reflections into the process I underwent and what the experiences ultimately have meant to me. These include some challenging critical reflection on past experiences and some surprising and “enlightening” experiences that can only be described as gifts of insight.

A -1988 Nigeria: National Mass Immunization Days

This was a massive effort across Nigeria to immunize children. In the area of the country I’m working in I am asked to join the coordination effort with special responsibility for transport - a critical component because the cold chain needs to be maintained to ensure the vaccines are kept potent. At dawn I am at the assembly point where there are dozens of vehicles and staff getting mobilized to travel to the field. Ice packs have been made and now portable coolers are being packed so that vaccines can be transported. Everything seems in order until I learn that none of the vehicles have any gas in them. I’m told the owner of the one gas station in town will not fill up any of the vehicles because of “a problem with the administration”. I go to the gas station. The owner is there and tells me that there are some bills unpaid. I explain there are dozens of people ready to travel to the field and that there is a cold chain to maintain. I remind him that he was at a meeting a week ago with the administration where everything was being coordinated. He walks away from me. I follow him and continue to explain that I can ensure that the administrative issue will be cleared up as soon as offices open, but that right now time is critical. He walks away from me again. I try and speak to him again, but he keeps walking away so I ‘shege’ him. Shege is a full hand gesture that is a very big insult in this culture. It is not done to an elder in the community. As soon as I make the motion I regret it. There is no immediate effect on the situation, but I am devastated and feel guilty about my actions. I’d been living and working in the community for a couple years at this point and was considered to be doing well in my immersion into the community and my high profile professional work. I have learned the local language and am considered the “calm, cool Canadian” who never gets angry or upset. I feel I have just washed all the cultural adaptation down the drain. I let anger and ego get the better of me and I’m overcome with guilt. Dejected, I drive the five minutes back to the assembly point. When I step out of the car, all the staff clap and cheer for me! “David”, they say, “now you are one of us. It is good to see you get angry and not control yourself all the time.” I chuckle and we go off together to find the “administrators” who a few hours later are able to solve the gas problem.

Later, as I reflect on the experience, I still feel a bit bad about the shege, but I rebuild my relationship with the owner of the gas station and continue to live and work in the community in a positive and cooperative way. I recognize how complicated inter-cultural understanding can be.

Seventeen years later I reflect on this experience again. My perspective is different, however, and the meaning of the situation is transformed for me. From a values interpretation of the situation I brought anger and guilt forward, and then considered it resolved, when people laughed, because of the comraderie and my attachment and emeshment in the community. Now, however, I

realize I may have misinterpreted their laughter. It may have been based more around lightness (accepting the situations of life), positivity (what needs to happen will happen) and acceptance (of one's place in society as a young person). It is also clear that engaging my ego and my anger did nothing to improve the situation. A critical analysis of the situation would lead to an assessment of power and domination. Perhaps my 'shege' was perpetuating the abusive role of a white colonialist and this caused psychological harm to the people involved, but intuitively this does not ring true for me.

In this situation my transformative learning followed a reflective / critical process initially as I attempted to be socially responsible and to rationally play a role in the world. In doing the work, I thought I was making a contribution to social change. Looking on the situation all these years later, however, I realize that the experience was much more about my own learning and that I can now bring more intuitive insights to the situation and in so doing move towards a different sense of my own truth.

B-1985 - 1990 Nigeria: Reinterpreting belief / world view in light of new insights

Living in Nigeria for a number of years I learned to appreciate the importance of honouring the ancestors - those who have gone before. Before important occasions (eg. village meetings) and celebrations libations are poured for the ancestors. At the time I think I considered this as a cultural phenomenon and a link to the genetic ancestors of the family, community, ethnic group and nation that I was with. Similarly in Canada I learned First Nations prayers to "all my relations" - past, present and future. I respected and valued these beliefs and rituals. Intellectually I supported these understandings in the context of justice, and equality and respect.

I have now come to a deeper understanding that we do not honour ancestors and relations as separate from us, but we honour them as part of the whole - of which we are part as well. We recognize our interdependence and our common ancestry as children of a supreme spirit. I now know this is a truer understanding. This insight is a result of my own reflection, interactions and discussions with other development professionals who do work in cross-cultural contexts, and in-depth discussions with individuals intimate with traditional West African culture and belief systems.

Here my learning was influenced by a rational approach, a thorough exploration of socially interpreted and constructed norms, discourse with others, and it was also aided by intuition and sensing what was right.

C - 1992 Canada: Workshop on Oppression and Privilege

At a workshop on oppression and privilege I was chosen to play a "victim" in a sculpturing exercise, a form of popular theatre. I was kneeling on the floor and the other participants gathered around me and pointed, and assumed positions that showed "power over" me. Some

people even stood on tables so they were clearly looking down on me as an “inferior”. It was a vivid portrayal of power. The facilitator then “activated” the other participants. This meant they moved in closer to me and started shouting and saying derogatory things to me. They closed in and got very tight around me so it was hot and I began to feel I couldn’t get any air. They continued to press around me. I always considered myself a pacifist, yet in this situation I felt fear and the violence of the group towards me and I started to hit people’s toes. I thought my reaction was just in fun, after all this was just a workshop exercise, but I realized in the reflection afterwards that I had reassessed my pacifism. I recognized how those suffering from oppression can strike out and turn to violence when they don’t believe there are other alternatives. This was a powerful learning for me and was influential on a lot of my future social activism - not moving towards violence, but respecting where it comes from - and in working with others on constructive ways to use anger.

Recently, I have reflected on this experience again after learning more about the work of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.. If one is clear with one’s underlying assumptions and beliefs, is committed to them and disciplined and faithful enough to stick with them no matter what, one does not react to situations caused by the oppressors, but sets one’s own agenda and provokes the oppressors to see the truth and the injustice of their ways (Gandhi, 1997). I have also reflected that if

one uses anger to create the social transformation one desires, one will result with a new situation that has anger embedded in it. Probably not what was desired in the first place. Promoting change through love, peace, discipline and truth will ultimately be more successful than through anger.

I recognize in this incident that I was using a critical perspective, such as that advocated by Young in learning about change and that that has been transformed into a more spiritual, value based orientation (Young, 1990). I do not think the critical perspective has been lost, but it has been transcended. I used a reflective approach to learn from my experience (both during the workshop and a number of years later) and learned something about the power of underlying beliefs and assumptions. This matches with some of Mezirow’s ideas around the process of transformational learning (Mezirow, 1997). I also recognized, as Do Rozario suggests, that my spiritual beliefs now have a profound impact on my understanding of the situation (Do Rozario, 1994).

E -1996: The Gambia - Spiritual Pragmatism

Working in The Gambia I met a traditional healer who was the referral point for the only allopathic, psychiatric hospital in the country. Mallam Yusuf¹ was the one who the specialist hospital sent the cases they could not treat and had to resort to tying the patients down to their beds. Mallam Yusuf had much success with these patients and it was a joy to meet him and observe his work. At the time, however, I was guiding a group of development studies students on a field visit and we had had many recent discussions about common mental health issues experienced more and more commonly. I asked Mallam Yusuf, “we are aware of your treatment of serious cases, but are you able to help those who have other kinds of mental health issues. For example, I said, say a father is concerned because he can not get a good job and doesn’t have enough money and can not support his children’s school fees; what would you prescribe for

¹ The name of this individual has been changed as I was unable to recontact him prior to writing this paper.

someone like that, you know someone who is worried about money? Mallam Yusuf looked at me and smiled, “if someone is worried about money”, he said, “give them money”. It was wise and pragmatic advice. Later he described, however, that money is a minor issue there are much more serious mental illnesses and he explained how he treated them. One particular prescription, for people in this predominantly Muslim area is to write prayers from the Koran on a hand-held prayer board, wash the chalk off the board and drink the water. This simple technique, combined with a nutritious diet, the encouragement of involvement of the patients in daily chores around the compound and the peaceful and “sacred environment” where the only prescriptions from Mallam Yusuf, but he had great success.

This incident has had a long-lasting impact on me because this community elder so freely shared his wisdom. His initial insight was based on a logical and rational assessment of the economic situation. I learned through further discussions with him that he had a clear critical analysis of the development realities of The Gambia and did not harbour any romantic notions of how his healing work was dealing with underlying issues of oppression and domination in the country. At the same time the spiritual environment he created, and the healing patients experienced when they spent time with him, demonstrated the power of his belief. Arguments could be made that his treatments simply benefited from a “placebo affect” and the power of belief and prayers of the patients being treated. In reflection on the situation now, however, I recognize that “why” his work is successful - whether it benefits from a spiritual connection to the divine or not - is irrelevant. What is important is the unique integration he demonstrated of spiritual pragmatism.

F-2002 India: Spiritual awakening - what is the purpose of life?

Being told the purpose of life - and having it ring true and resonate with your inner being - is an empowering experience. I was given this gift of knowledge at a meditation retreat in Mount Abu, India. I had looked for purpose in career success, and family, and contributions in humanitarian and social change work. I had even pursued a holistic balance in my life, rationally trying to bring mind, body and spirit into harmony. All of these had benefits, but there was always a sense that there was something more. These things now appear limited compared to what I now know. Our true purpose is to live our lives free from vice and as virtuously as possible. This has been said before, by many throughout the ages. I might have even heard it - but to KNOW it is different. Intuitively I now know it is true, and I focus much of my energy on this pursuit. It takes effort. It feels right.

This was a profound spiritual experience, that has included elements of synchronicity, myth, archetypal journeys and ritual. The impact of this experience can be seen from a rational perspective in terms of the significant shifts I have made in how I spend my time, and my set of daily activities. Perhaps more significant has been the impact the experience and ongoing practice has had on my occupation as a development professional as I now set very different priorities and measure success in new ways. These changes will be different depending on each individual’s chosen path, but integrating a ‘spiritual touchstone’ into my professional work has been transformative.

7.0 Discussion

This paper has looked at the literature and a number of personal vignettes to describe the occupation of an international development professional, and the role transformative learning can play in that occupation. The paper highlights three key points concerning social and personal change, the process of transformational change, and the role of spirituality in international development practice.

1. International development work should include as much focus on personal transformation as it does on social transformation. Socioeconomic transformation has always been considered the purpose of international development practice. This traditionally included transforming material conditions, or on transforming others, and related systems and structures, but rarely had anything to do with transforming oneself (Allan & Thomas, 2002). The focus has always been external rather than internal. The learning shared in this paper, however, is that personal transformative learning needs to be considered an important part of the occupation of international development professionals. This does not mean that social change should be given up for personal change, but that both orientations are essential for being, and becoming a “good” development worker (Do Rozario, 1997; Gandhi, 1957; Murphy, 2001; O’Sullivan, 2005). The reason for this, as many of the vignettes showed, is that personal transformation can help individuals get more in-touch with their own and universal values, can enable them to understand their underlying assumptions, and can help them perform not only in a socially responsible way, but with deeper purpose and meaning. This is exactly what transformative learning is all about (Cranton, 2002; Grabove, 1997; Mezirow, 1997) The two vignettes from Nigeria - one dealing with overcoming anger and ego and appreciating a different set of values involving peace and acceptance - and the second one about appreciating local culture and one’s place in the cosmos give some indication of how the transformative learning journey can enhance international development practice. It is critical to recognize, however, that a shift from social to personal transformation is not being advocated, but an acceptance of the tension between the two and a valuing of how social transformation can only occur through personal transformation and personal transformation is empty if it does not lead to actions supporting the transformation of society towards justice and equality. Transforming the self is not an alternative to, but a pathway towards transforming the world.

2. Both reflective/critical and imaginative/intuitive approaches to transformative learning can yield results, and embracing both approaches will inspire profound change. Accepting that some level of personal transformation is valuable for international development professionals, people are still left with the question of how do they go about this process. The literature is clear that there are two ways of looking at transformational learning: an intuitive / imaginative approach and a reflective / critical approach (Boyd and Meyers, 1988; Grabove, 1997). The vignettes shared demonstrate that both of these approaches supported my transformative learning journey. On one hand, my journey has been a critical one as I’ve become a more socially responsible thinker. The 1988 vignette from Nigeria demonstrated this as I recognized how habits of the mind and socialized ego was at work. In the vignette of the workshop on privilege I also discussed a critical reflection that aided my learning about violence, discipline and setting the agenda.

On the other hand, options to expand consciousness through prayer, meditation, silence and visualization as suggested by O'Sullivan (2005) and Do Rozario (1997) were also part of my journey. Vignettes such as learning the significance of pouring libations in Nigeria showed intuitive knowledge at work, and the Mallam Yusuf story from the Gambia showed people striving to create alternatives from a perspective of faith. The India vignette directly related how a "spiritual awakening" had a profound impact on my transformative learning and generated numerous insights in my ongoing work. No argument is being made for one type of learning process being superior to the other. As a number of the researchers shared it is a both/end approach, a valuing and respect for both the rational and the imaginative that is most productive.

3. Oppression and domination and the constructivist/interpretivist understanding of society must be respected, and the spiritual essence of our life as human beings must also be considered. This is another paradox that it is essential to embrace for those occupied with international development practice. It is critical to respect local culture and belief systems and promote endogenous change. Part of this change must be pragmatic in regards to a shift in power imbalances in interactions between individuals and groups and in the systems of the world which are unjust (Townsend & Whiteford, 2005; Whiteford, 2003; Young, 1990). Philosophically these learnings are encumbent upon an acceptance of interpretivist and critical/ constructivist social science. At the same time there are core values - the essence of our being as humans - that are universal truths. Claiming this paradox - respecting multiple realities and power imbalances, while at the same time pursuing core values we share, and honouring the sacredness of life and the potential immanent and transcendent power of a higher being - is essential. The human part is the doing - the being part is our spiritual essence. The task is therefore to discover the essence and shared values of all. Neither can exist without the other. Just as personal can not exist without the society - or society without the personal. As a result of my own spiritual practice I began to revisit the past and reinterpret events and recognize spirituality energy at play in many situations. This is something I was blind to previously - and it was only after my experience in India that I was able to appreciate these insights. The literature speaks of these things (Algado et al, 1997; Do Rozario, 1994; Grabove, 1997; O'Sullivan, 2005), and the vignette in The Gambia gave me a taste of this kind of experience, but it is essential for international development professionals to consider these issues as most people in other parts of the world have a strong faith and set of spiritual beliefs. I see it as important for international development professionals to ask themselves questions like: who am I? what is my purpose? where do I come from? where am I going? (Robert Wright begins his book on progress with these same questions. Wright, 2004). This is not to get the answers, but to expose oneself in an explicit way to these issues in order to better understand the starting place of those you will be interacting with in many cross cultural settings. It also becomes important to be able to articulate the values you are bringing to your work and to ensure you are living up to those values in all that you do. Part of my personal transformation, now that I have a spiritual practice as part of my regular occupation, is that I feel more anchored and am able to recognize in many interactions that there is another power present - another player to the dance of life - that I would not have recognized in the past even though people told me about it.

Other insights can arise from one's personal transformative learning journey, discussed in light of the literature. What appears to be required is to embrace the paradoxes and consciously reflect and intuit what is significant. I invite others to consider this as part of their occupation.

8.0 Conclusions

Occupation as an international development professional is challenging and rewarding. This is occupation in the true sense of the word, much more than a job, it is a way of life that combines one's paid work, volunteer and social time, recreation and sense of being. It is more than "doing", international development work, but nurtures "being" a human on this planet of diverse cultures, working, sharing and learning cooperatively with others in a respectful way to overcome injustice and oppressions. It also includes "becoming" - the focus on transforming oneself and becoming whole and healthy as an individual as a prerequisite for working with integrity to make the world whole and healthy. This is the major insight shared in this paper - that transformative learning needs to be an integral part of the occupation of all international development professionals. Professionals need to combine an outward oriented societal change model with an inward focused personal change model. Professionals have to spend time on their own transformation - their own process of becoming - and recognize that this can be both a reflective and an imaginative process and they can gain insights at all corners through every interaction. This transformational learning can be challenging. Dirks speaks of the need to "embrace the messiness and disorder" (Dirks, 1997: p. 84) of transformative learning and Scott states emphatically, "this is not easy work...it is hard, painful and it makes one quite vulnerable. Often people go into a kind of hibernation" (Scott, 1997: p.49). It is well worth the effort, however.

Occupation also has to embrace both the critical, constructivist / interpretivist paradigm and a spiritual perspective that is open to accepting absolute truths and valuing spirituality as an important source of meaning for occupation. These insights may seem paradoxical, but they are the challenge - and the joy - of international development work. Other professionals working in complex, intercultural environments that engage both individuals and the communities and social structures which impact people's lives may also find some benefit in embracing these paradoxes and making transformative learning an explicit part of their occupations. As Gandhi encouraged us, "be the change you want to see in the world".

9.0 References

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