

Loving the Unknown

My long-lasting relationship to the Unknown and 'unknowing' began in earnest during my three-year apprenticeship as an actor. It became a central part of our work, and continued to be so throughout my subsequent twenty years as a director and acting teacher with my own company and at academies such as Mountview Theatre School and The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

In that first three-year period I worked in an international experimental theatre company based in Switzerland. The company was greatly influenced by the work of the Polish theatre legend Jerzy Grotowski, and his actors came to instruct us from time to time.

'Experimental' is perhaps too mild a word. Firstly, we took nine months to create each theatre piece (two in three years), performing in Switzerland and on tour in Europe. Secondly we trained crazily, hundreds of hours, and often whole nights pushing our bodies beyond any kind of normal limit until, as Grotowski put it, our bodies 'disappeared', lost all density. This was not in order to make special movements (and had nothing to do with 'movement theatre') but rather to render our bodies completely *available* so that emotional or imaginative impulses were, without any time lapse whatsoever, felt and expressed through every cell of our bodies, at the very core.

An indication of the effect on us of this work was that, on rare evenings off, one of our favourite activities was to go out to the countryside and then run together for hours through woods and fields in the dark, jumping like gazelles over gates and hedges...pure energy!

However, this was all just a preparation for the real creative work, and the deep encounters with the Unknown. For day after day, night after night, we would warm our bodies up, as a musician would tune their instrument, until we were open and ready enough, and then, with perhaps just a word or an object in the space as a starting-point, or sometimes nothing at all, we would enter the extraordinary territory of becoming like channels for worlds, stories, songs, characters to *download* themselves through us, *without any interference or wilfulness on our part*.

This meant learning to reside in a deeper and deeper Emptiness, a deeper and deeper kind of listening – to each other, to our imaginations, to the whispers of worlds we could know nothing of, and then surrender.... Within the process there was also something of a mysterious alchemy by which we gradually learnt how to give shape and form to the impulses, without in any way dictating or driving them. We were truly following. And little by little our director could shape the material that arose and weave it into a story.

The two performances we created had at best immense power. They were played in a setting, not a stage, with the audience always on at least two sides, and a number of people came to see the same piece up to ten times, such was the intensity of their experience.

Thereafter my twenty years of work as a director/teacher were entirely dedicated to helping actors enter that alchemical depth of creativity, one could even say creation itself, and also to exploring and discovering the practices and disciplines that would take us closer and closer to it.

Fast forward thirty years, and some of the richest and most meaningful and productive experiences in a leadership development seminar come at least two days into the programme. After gentle yet

intensive exercises in the physical, emotional and meditative domains, contextualised in a clear and coherent mental framework, something rather special often starts to happen in the group. Firstly, a particular kind of Silence arrives, something rarely known in corporate circles, and participants in the room settle comfortably into it, often commenting on how this would have been impossible the previous day. It is actually visible in the sense that their bodies are far more settled in their chairs. More importantly, their hyper active minds have firstly started to quieten down, and secondly become far less of a dominant function. The need to 'know' and explain has significantly melted and a very different kind of receptivity is opening. A receptivity rooted in Being rather than Doing, and on spacious awareness rather than narrow linear thinking.

This is the gateway to new levels of insight, about themselves, about their team, and/or about a particular scenario they are facing, and more often than not, new ideas will also start to 'download'. Solutions appear that would never have been reached through normal rational processing. And, it feels effortless, even rather energising.

Through this surrender to Being, and to not-knowing, and not needing to know, the doorway to 'the idea came to me' has well and truly opened.

Our corporate cultures live under a tyranny of Doing/fixing/solving and rational thinking that constantly wants to reduce the world to certainties in order to maintain a fantasy of being in control. Until we learn to love the unknown – which first often means simply accepting and feeling our fear of it, of being 'out of control' - we are doomed to go round and round in the same mental and emotional patterns, in less and less fresh air, with less and less access to any kind of higher intelligence or innovation.

Conversely, as we together start to unlock ourselves from this tyranny through careful and precise physical, emotional and meditative practices, worlds and ideas and connections of untold richness await us. As well as new levels of relating to each other....