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Art Perfecting Itself: Living the Arts of the East and the West

The Fierce Green Fire and the Heart of the Cosmos

Radical Creativity ~ The Way Nature Intended

Artists as Activists; Creating Social Change

The Practice of Council and Creativity

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The Fierce Green Fire and the Heart of the Cosmos

CHRIS NICHOLS



... we reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes ... I realised then that there was something new to me in those eyes...I had thought that fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean a hunter's paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.

... and the Tale of Chris Seeley ...

As I was writing this article, my dear friend and close colleague Dr Chris Seeley died, after a year-long illness. In celebration of her work, which touched the lives of so many people, candles blazed for her on that clear December night in Argentina and Brazil, in every corner of Europe, from Syria to Senegal to South Africa, and across the Middle East to New Zealand.

So many lives were touched by her so deeply because the creativity that ran through every aspect of her being set everyone around her ablaze.

* * *

So I am writing on behalf of both of us, about what inspired the work we did together and separately.

Chris Seeley and I co-facilitated the Ashridge MSc in Sustainability and Responsibility, as well as many short courses and workshops at Schumacher College and Hawkwood.

Our work was always to be in service of fierce green fire of life, in every place and context possible.

When I do such work today, I am doing the work of the wolf and the mountain, in service of the cosmos of which all of this is an integral part.

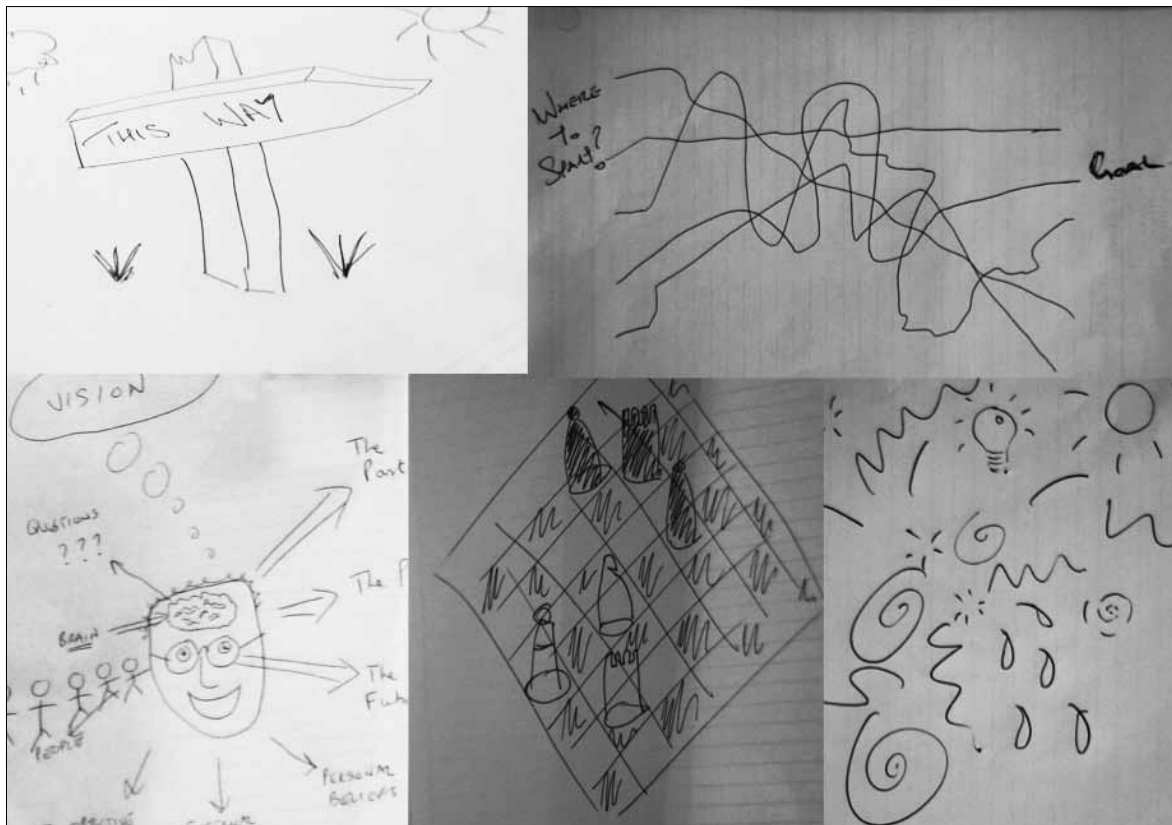
Creativity is at the heart of all such work because creativity is at the heart of the cosmos. The Universe Story is above all a story of creative power – the unending story of energy making and remaking itself.

Creativity is the flame at the heart of the Universe: the spark in the eye of the wolf, the spark that blazes in you and in me.

Two stories to begin:

The Tale of Aldo Leopold ...

I love the story about the awakening consciousness of Aldo Leopold. He was an environmentalist at a time when that meant shooting wolves to preserve deer. He took aim, shot a wolf, and arrived to view his kill in time to see life flickering to an end:



Artful at the Heart of Everything

At the heart of all of my work is the practice of ‘Artful Inquiry’ – which means using many diverse ways of seeing and exploring – clowning, drawing, painting, poems, story, bodywork, music ... Richer ways of experiencing and exploring anything and everything.

David Whyte, a poet, writes:

Anything, or anyone, that does not bring you alive, is too small for you.

And this is the reason I work with ‘creative knowing, creative inquiring’ as much as I can: the fossilised knowing of existing maps and expertise is often too static and too small to let us truly flourish, and is certainly insufficient for us to explore how we need to live at peace with our earth now and in the future.

So whether I am working with an individual, a coach, a facilitator or consultant with a leadership team or with my MSc group as a tutor, the same principle applies: I ask how I can allow creativity to flourish in ways that allow the work to be generously transgressive of all that is too small, and fully in service of all that allows Life to thrive in its many wonderful ways.

This will make more sense if I show some of the work in practice. Here are some examples of how I use creativity both for and by me, and for and with others.

Artful Representation

Very often I start workshops or coaching sessions by asking people to draw. You might think this is a bold starting point (and it does sometimes cause surprised expressions on faces), but people always seem willing to step in and do it. I’ve invited people to draw pictures of everything from ‘strategy’ in the boardroom to ‘how I became who I am’ in coaching sessions.

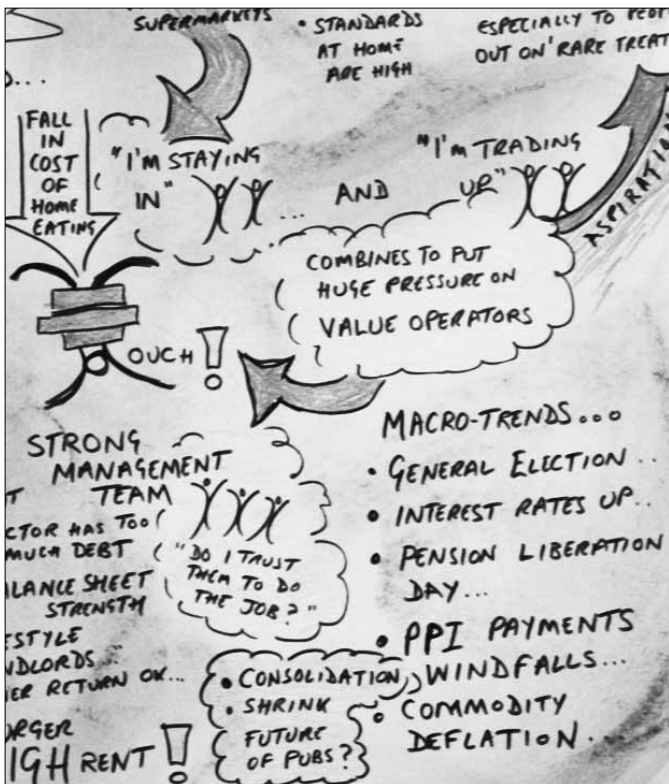
I’ve included some pictures produced by MSc students to show that we are talking here about art made quickly.

What happens as a result is that very rich, very deeply personal conversations come about quickly. The act of drawing seems to reveal connections and patterns that might long go unseen in words. We also pay lots of attention to the nature of the visual metaphors in imagery that come out.

People very quickly gain confidence in sharing these quick but rich drawings and go on to make use of them in their own note-taking and journals. I love it when someone begins to use their art for themselves; it is another part of themselves coming to life.

The pictures often reveal deep unspoken assumptions that, once visualised, no longer have as much power to constrain. Sometimes the images allow us to see the complexity of the system in which they are located, and out of this ‘systemic seeing’ flow new choices for thoughts and actions. It is deeply creative in its powerful simplicity, and every one of us can do it.

I also use graphic representations of another kind in my work. Often I will draw large-scale images – sometimes the size of a whole wall – using soft-pastel and watercolour to record and comment on a session, conversation or issue.



What I notice is that this again stimulates a different conversation about the session. People will respond to the imagery, to the colours - and in doing so will see new meanings in addition to those they found in the words themselves.

Again, anything that deepens and connects is good in my work. I love it when something I draw causes a new conversation and new insight to come about. I think that the more ways in which we see the world, the more insight we have into the complex and interconnected system of Life of which we are part.

Playing with Sound: Grounded Creativity

Artful Representation is about using creative images to stimulate new ways of seeing, out of which flow new words and stories of possibility.

But sometimes the words themselves are part of the problem: sometimes we just don't have the language to say what we need to say – and sometimes the problem is too difficult to be spoken.

This is where playing music works wonders. My colleague Mark Harmer and I created Grounded Creativity to bring musical work within everyone's

reach – even those who claim to have no musical bone in their body!

There is a video to show how simple this work is (LINK to www.groundedcreativity.com/video). We use really simple instruments – the kind you would use with kindergarten kids: drums, shakers, wooden frogs, simple tonal strings or xylophones. Our starting point is simpler still: to notice that we all make sounds and rhythms all the time. Then we invite people to experiment with the sounds they can make: nothing is too simple, and nothing can ever be wrong. Our precept is that music is organised noise, so we are making music from the first moment, listening to each other and collaborating with sound.

Then we ask the group to play out the situation that is of concern: we've done this with organisational conflicts and marketing opportunities, and we've done this in personal coaching and therapy situations. Every time the result is a deep insight. Exploring issues through music, allowing people to feel their body-wisdom in response to creating sound, seems to create the ground for massive shift and discovery.

Another thing we see is that afterwards people experience a deepening of connections within the group. The work of making sound together, the act of creating a musical sound (and it is always delightful!) opens new levels of contact.

Creativity in Complexity and Change

We live in a wonderfully connected world, where all parts of the Living Cosmos influence each other. Everyday ways of seeing and acting are just too small to allow us to appreciate the wonder of our place in the web of Life.

We need our creative energies, and the insights of creative ways of seeing and knowing – not to illustrate and entertain, but to enliven our imaginative responses to our challenges and to create new ways of living more fully in ways that stand easily on the Earth.

Life is a creative process in a creative cosmos. We all need our creative, transgressive spirit to breathe and blaze, in our work and in our play, because in all of this we bring ourselves, and everyone around us, more alive.

Chris Nichols works artfully at Ashridge, Hawkwood, Schumacher College and many other places. He co-directs the Ashridge MSc in Sustainability and Responsibility and has started a number of social entrepreneurship projects including www.groundedcreativity.com. He is co-founder of The Cosmos Project.