

## **"SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY":**

**Sustaining spirit in our lives, our communities, our cultures and our society.**

*Presented by* Tim Muirhead, CSD Network

*I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we're meeting on, acknowledge my gratitude that we share this land today, my sorrow for the costs of that sharing, and my hope that we can move to a place of justice and partnership together.*

### **What Are We 'Sustaining'?**

We in the 'social and cultural' fields have borrowed the term 'sustainability' from the environmental dialogue, just as we borrowed the term (social) 'capital' from the economic dialogue. This borrowing is good. It is dangerous to consider community, social and cultural matters without integrating the environment that supports us, or the economy through which we distribute our resources and effort.

But if we borrow such terms, we need to also ensure that they genuinely speak to our experience of being human, and don't ignore that experience as though it is a side issue. Environmental sustainability focuses, rightly, on sustaining the foundations of life - biodiversity, clean air, clean water, rich soil - that will ensure the environment can support future beings physically and spiritually. But in social and cultural sustainability - just what is it we are trying to sustain? Similarly, if 'Capital' is accumulated wealth - which economics measures in terms of money - how do we describe the 'wealth' that we are trying to accumulate socially?

For me, the answers to these questions emerged some years ago, when I was working in the northern suburbs of Perth, helping plan and develop appropriate human services. We did this well, I think, and services increased, and the role of Local Government evolved towards a more human focus.

This was good, but something was missing. I felt that, for all this exciting and important work, there was still a great silent gap in well being. I was haunted by the possibility that much of our important work might be distracting us from what really matters. It sometimes felt like I was learning better and better ways of shoring up an eroding river bank, while the foliage that had naturally held it was withering away.

And so I searched for an answer to the questions - what are we trying to achieve here; what are we trying to sustain? What is the 'capital' that we are trying to accumulate? My answer, surprisingly enough, was 'spirit'.

10 years later, it's still my answer: in all that we do we should be aiming to 'develop spirit' - in ourselves, and in others - in people we know, and in people we don't know. I think it should be a job for each of us as friends, parents, lovers; each of us as community workers, as managers, and policy makers; each of us as communities, organisations and governments. Spirit: For me that's the currency we need to sustain, the clean air and clear water and rich earth of human health and well-being, the biodiversity of the human soul that we desperately need to sustain - even enrich - in our lives and communities and cultures.

'Developing spirit' should guide our choice of holidays and houses, it should guide our economic and environmental and social policy. And health. And foreign affairs. And immigration. It should guide our political debate, and bureaucratic decision making and community development practice. It should guide how we run meetings and manage staff, how we raise children and love our partners and relate to our friends.

It seems, at first glance, a strange and loose concept, but I have found in the intervening years that by putting this simple concept at the centre of any dialogue about community, cultural and social policy and practice we find a common focus to that dialogue that is too often missing. And that's important, because when there is no clear common foundation or 'currency' to terms like 'community development', 'capacity building', 'sustainability', 'social capital', governments and others (including us community workers!) can twist and warp these great concepts to justify a whole gamut of different agendas and policies and strategies. ('Community Development' and "Social Capital" for example have both been used to justify reduced funding to community organisations)

So, I'd like to propose the currency for social sustainability and social capital - not dollars; spirit.

### Why 'Spirit'?

'Spirit' became important to me when I looked it up in the Dictionary. Its etymology - its original meaning - is 'breath of life'. I was very struck by this. You know what it feels like when your spirit is strong. You can feel your energy and enthusiasm; you can feel true passion and compassion; true joy and true grief; you can care about others and care about yourself. But what struck me when I read this description - 'the breath of life' - was what it looks like when we can't get it. I thought of a person drowning.

A person drowning thinks only of the next moment - just trying to stay alive rather than focusing on the wider picture. A person drowning lashes out - even at people who are trying to help them. A person drowning grabs at anything to try to get that breath back into their lungs. And a person drowning, finally, ceases to care; gives in.

A person who can't "breathe" their spirit can be like that drowning person. When my spirit is choked I can think only of the next moment, not the wider vision. When my spirit is choked I lash out at others around me, even those who want to help me; even those who love me. When my spirit is choked I consume and consume, grabbing at anything to fill up the hole left by my choked spirit. (This consumption is not only environmentally and economically un-sustainable, it stresses and distracts me from my life). And when my spirit is choked I give in, cease to care, get apathetic. Our communities are full of people feeling like this. We often feel like this ourselves.

If we have communities and a society where people are thinking only of the next moment, where we are lashing out at each other, where we are consuming at rates we and the planet can't sustain, and where we simply cannot care about what is happening around us, we will have communities, societies, cultures with no capital, no capacity. They will be un-sustainable and we'll have to increasingly turn to control and distraction - lifestyle TV, 'border security', wars on terror, rampant consumerism to manage them.

So... as a matter of urgency, in Australia, whether our interest is 'productivity', or environmental protection, or social justice, or the well-being of a small child, we need to

answer the question 'how do we develop spirit?' And the answers need to inform all our ideas and actions; all our policy and practice, be they personal, professional, organisational or political.

(When I say 'develop' spirit, I understand that term, also, through the dictionary. - it is the opposite of 'envelop'. When we 'envelop' something we wrap it up; when we 'develop' something, we unwrap it. To develop a community is to un-wrap the potential of that community. To develop spiri' is to un-wrap the spirit in a person or people - not to teach, or change, or build spirit in that person - simply to un-wrap the spirit that is there waiting.)

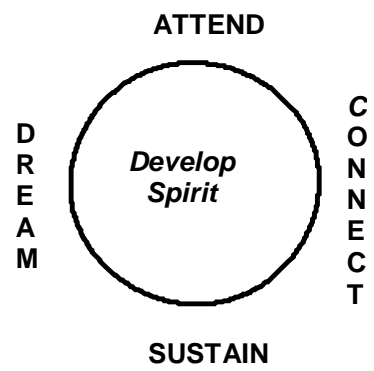
**How?**

So.....what will it take from us, as people and governments; as workers and managers to develop spirit - the stuff of sustainable lives, community, culture and therefore society?

It takes, I think, 4 key elements:

- 1. We need to be able to really attend (or 'pay attention') to our own lives, and we are helped in this when others pay attention to the lives we have lived and wish to live, rather than the life that someone else believes we should live. (Organisationally and politically, this is the work of *empowerment*.)

- 2. We need to be able to connect with others. Human beings simply can't operate in isolation, and the quality of our relationships with others will profoundly affect our spirit; profoundly affect the quality of our lives and our capacity to make a difference in the world around us. (Organisationally and politically, this is the work of *relationship*. It relies on the disciplines of honesty, respect and inquiry as outlined in the attachment)



- 3. We need to be able to live in a human and ecological system that sustains all of us - that ensures there is *equilibrium between the needs of all of us*, including future generations. There's no point being spirited if the world falls apart around us, either now or in the future. (Organisationally and politically, this is the work of *justice* and can involve us in advocacy for ourselves or others.)
- 4. And we need to be able to dream - to dream of how we want our world to be, and act as though we can make it so. To borrow a cliché "our dreams (or visions or ideals) are like the stars; we may never reach them, but like the ancient mariner, we can guide our journey by them." Without dreams our lives can slip into meaninglessness that we must escape from through distractions like drugs, TV, busy-ness, or finding people to hate. (Organisationally and politically, this is the work of *'visioning'*.)

Empowerment, relationships, justice and vision are, to me, foundations of good practice and policy; practice and policy that develops spirit in our lives. So they, and the *attention, connection, sustaining* and *dreams* that they produce, are the foundations of personal, community, cultural and social sustainability.

Without them, spirit hides away; our lives and communities and cultures and society wither and wilt; there is nothing to hold the human erosion that silts the river of our culture.

The practical and political applications of this single focus are pervasive - even universal, and in the remainder of this paper, I want to give a glimpse of those applications.

Some of the community development applications of such a focus are contained in "Weaving Tapestries: A handbook for building communities" produced by LGCSA (WA) and authored by Tim Muirhead. I've *attached* some edited extracts from this book that elaborate on the work of 'attending' and 'connecting'.

### **Social Sustainability In Practice - Developing Spirit In All We Do.**

Every one of the 'tasks' summarised on the previous page can be part of the every day work and policy making of all of us.

But let me offer a few illustrations.

#### **Public involvement practices**

A Council decides to consult on how an area of land adjacent to a town or suburb should be used. You can do that in a way that ignores or even chokes spirit.....You can hold a great big public meeting, and put government and Council representatives behind tables up the front, and give their view of what should happen. And then you can invite comments from the floor, (during which the traditional bun-fight develops, and a few people behave badly, lashing out at the poor buggers up the front), and then you invite written submissions. There is no relationship built. Most people in the room haven't spoken, so no one has paid attention to them. People are responding to the ideas of others, rather than expressing their vision. Because big meetings create an in-human atmosphere, people behave horribly - there is no respect, many are silenced and therefore unable to be really honest, and there is no real inquiry or questions - just a fight over answers.

But you could also approach the same 'consultation' in a way that develops spirit..... You can facilitate genuine respectful dialogue at the local level, visiting local groups, encouraging local meetings, where people sit at tables together and exchange their views about possible uses of the land. In doing this I, as a participant build relationship with other people in my local area. My vision for the land will broaden, because the dialogue will expand my ideas and I will hear the ideas of others. Inevitably, the process will pay attention to who I am and what I believe, because I will actually be able to express myself, and I will find myself involved in dialogue of justice, because I will be listening and talking about the varying needs of different groups. All this, in small and important ways, develops my spirit. It doesn't necessarily make me agree with the outcome, but I will know that it is an outcome that is a natural consequence of living amongst others,

rather than believing that it is just the result of uncaring, inaccessible distant decision makers.

Let's look a little more broadly to think about various disciplines and how they might contribute to sustainability through developing spirit.

#### **Town Planning:**

In a culture that focussed on development of spirit we would not place so much energy on designing car-parking and road systems that encourage us to stay locked in our cars. The aim of shopping centre design would not be to make people buy things they don't need (or "maximise retail return".) We would not focus primarily on lot yield, fencing quality, landscaping covenants.

Rather we would create spaces and places, buildings and services, processes and ideas that develop the spirit of people. We would design shops as public domain; streetscapes that maximise both interaction and privacy, rather than just privacy; community involvement, street level decision making (even if it means conflict!) parks that have both danger and adventure for children.

Let me be clear; this is not a criticism of planners - they are responding at the moment to the demands of our culture. Demands for safety, for silence and escape, for avoidance and conformity. This is what a culture of fading spirit is asking for. I am not suggesting that planners are losing spirit, or maliciously choking it. I'm suggesting our whole culture is losing spirit, and we need to re-develop it.

#### **Education**

In a culture that focussed on development of spirit, education would not be merely about developing a workforce for industry and government. It would not be about making people into something they are not. It would be about developing the spirit of people, allowing them to become their full selves. It would provide opportunities for a great deal of action and experience, allowing them the power of choice. It would allow them to express their wisdom and listen to the wisdom of others. Thus they would start to develop real truth, to begin to focus on their own missions in life, to come to understand their own abilities, to develop real spirit.

We would understand the power of Winston Churchill's remark "I love to learn; I hate being taught."

#### **Corporate Planning**

Corporate Planning would not focus primarily on building a lean, efficient hardworking organisation, but would explore how to develop the collective and individual spirit of people, thereby, as a spin-off, improving productivity. We would build connections with our staff through honesty, respect and inquiry (*see attachment*). And we would develop an environment that enhances their ability to be powerfully themselves, rather than cogs in a misguided machine. It would draw on their small and large dreams and pay attention to their experience and actions and wisdom. And it would ensure that people discussed, with each other, the just 'equilibrium' between varying needs of themselves, their colleagues, and the people they are there to serve.

The best of management theory and literature understands this. But too few of those in positions of authority see the potential of managing for spirit, rather than managing for control.

### **Cultural Development**

Community Cultural Development has huge potential in the development of the human spirit. It can use creative processes to encourage communities to genuinely pay attention to themselves, to others, and to their natural and built environments. It can build experiences and opportunities for people to express their dreams and reveal their own abilities and truths and direction. What potential! And it often genuinely delivers.

But I have seen, too, practice that does not pay attention. Practice that tries to co-opt people into a new concept and practice, rather than giving voice to their lives; that tries to find a single 'theme' for a local area that, by omission, ignores the diverse actions and experience and wisdom of local people; that falls into a trap of trying to categorise something as rich and confusing and sacred as individual and collective cultures into understandable chunks. When it ignores the spirit of people in this way, even the practice of cultural development can do damage.

### **Change processes**

When we want to bring about change it is tempting to do this in a 'top down' way - instructing people to change. This can choke Spirit, fuel resentment and - particularly with attitudinal change - push people's own views underground where they fester and infect communities and organisations. So how can we bring about change in a 'spirited' way?

Say my Council, with 150 staff, want's to develop more culturally diverse approaches. We, as managers could put all 150 people through 'cultural diversity training' develop a manual for every desk, and insist everyone build 'cultural diversity' into their daily work practice. But this will feel imposed and give ammunition, in the staff rooms and corridors, to those who are cynical or opposed to the idea. "Oh - another trendy idea from on high!!". But a spirit-focussed approach would engage those 20% - 30% of people who are genuinely enthusiastic about the idea. We would pay attention to their ideas for developing culturally diverse approaches, assist them in connecting with others around the idea (including allowing them time to meet informally with others). We would encourage them to approach us and advise us on how we can resource them to pursue their own 'dreams' for greater cultural diversity. The idea would spread from within, rather than being imposed from above. People would be engaged with the issue 'in spirit' rather than out of a (possibly resentful) sense of duty or submission.

### **Economic Planning**

It goes without saying that economic planning would become far more focussed on people, as individuals and communities, and the environments that support them, rather than on an increasingly meaningless array of incomprehensible indicators.

### **Government and community funding**

In human services fields, our practice can help develop spirit, or it can help choke it. A few examples:

- When we fund in response to community dreams and directions, rather than imposing good ideas on them, we develop spirit.
- When we insist on a local community worker working to 'the plan' rather than what emerges in the communities she works in, we choke spirit. But when we allow her the flexibility to pay attention to relationships at the local level, and the dreams and needs and aspirations that emerge from these relationships, we develop spirit, both in the workers and in the community.
- When we insist on accountability through pre-determined outcomes we force people to pay attention to the funding contract rather than their own wisdom and actions and experience. But when we use action learning accountability tools that allow projects and ideas to evolve and go wrong and find new ways, we allow people to pay attention to their experience and actions and wisdom, and spirit is developed.

### **Political leadership**

And finally, a word to our politicians. When we human beings can breathe our spirit, we have, within us, extraordinary reserves of compassion, generosity, courage and wisdom. But when our spirit is choked, we can respond with hatred, greed, fear and small-mindedness. If you look for, and appeal to, that which is small and dark in us, you will find it and let it run rampant. If you look for and appeal to that which is great and glorious in us, you will find it and let it run free. Do that for us. Appeal to our compassion and generosity and courage and wisdom. Help us breathe and live that spirit that sustains our lives, our communities, our cultures and our society.

### **Us**

And to all of us here; let's try to do the same. Pay attention to the spirit in ourselves and each other. That's what we can do, in every action, every strategy, every policy, to build lives, communities, cultures and a society that will develop and sustain human and community spirit.

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# ATTACHMENT

## Working with Spirit Attending and Connecting:

Edited Extracts from  
"Weaving Tapestries" A handbook for building communities" produced by LGCSA  
(WA) and authored by Tim Muirhead.

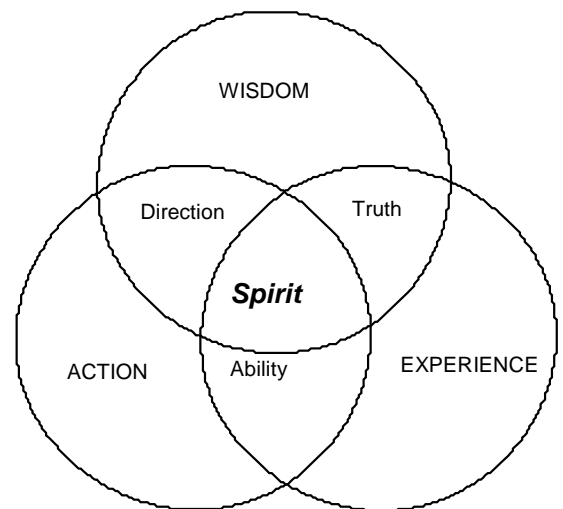
### PAY ATTENTION

The central task in developing Spirit is simply to 'pay attention'<sup>1</sup>. Pay attention to the life of the person you are, or are with. Rather than paying attention, first, to the program or policy, or 'outcome', pay attention to the person. There are three 'sources of Spirit' in our lives that we need to pay attention to:

**Experience** - what we have taken in from the world.  
Everyone has had an extraordinary life and rich experiences.

**Action** - what we give back out to the world.  
We all have, within us, things that we want or love to do, things that we're good at, things that we want to strive for.

**Wisdom** - "the part of us that knows". Some people call this "intuition" - the part of us that knows the right answers, even when we are not yet able to articulate why.



When we pay attention to **both Experience and Wisdom** we are rewarded with our own "**Truth**" - a clarity about those things we believe and that matter to us.

When we pay attention to **both Action and Wisdom** we are rewarded with "**Direction**" - a clarity about where we want to head next in our life or work.

When we pay attention to **both Experience and Action** we are rewarded with "**Ability**" - the capacity to do certain things with ease, therefore allowing us to move on to ever-increasing challenges.

If we have strong truths, strong directions and strong abilities, then our "**Spirit**" will be strong, and we'll contribute much more effectively to our selves, our families, our communities and our society. When we **pay attention** to these things, then we actively develop ('unwrap') Spirit, and thus contribute, enormously, to our communities, our culture, our society.

<sup>1</sup> This is based on advice by my friend David Nourish; a wise man and mentor to many, living in Perth.

And look at the cost of doing the opposite!: when we ignore (or ridicule, or disallow) people's own experience, actions and wisdom (eg, by putting the strategic plan, the committee agenda, the funding guidelines, the majority view, ahead of the person we're next to) then we actively choke Spirit. Truth, direction and ability is diminished in that person. They won't be 'with us in Spirit'. At best, they'll be 'with us' out of duty. Our workplaces or communities will be empty of vision, filled with conflict, polluted by greed, and awash with apathy and exhaustion - they'll be unsustainable.

Look at any workplace if you want to see an illustration: the extent to which staff are required to work outside of their own *truths, directions* and *abilities* (including available time) is the extent to which they will 'burn out' - their spirit will be choked.

So if we're going to build sustainable society and cultures we will need to develop policies and practices - at personal, organisational, community, and government levels - that actually pay attention to who people are. (We don't need to be ruled by who people are, but we do need to pay attention to it.)

**CONNECTION**

**Building Relationship - The disciplines**

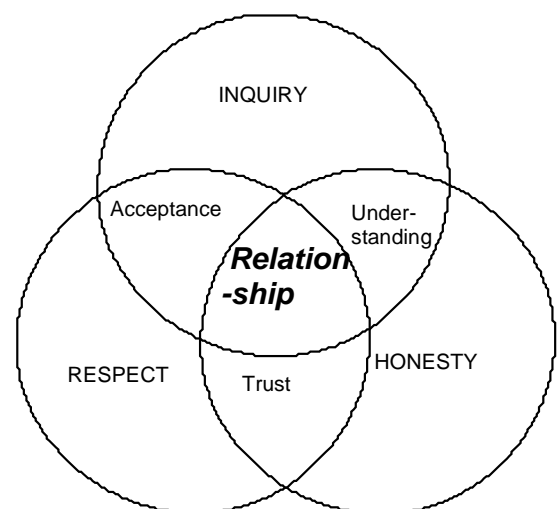
Relationships are the very fabric of community. They are the essential product that community workers have to work with, and any practices or policies that diminish the quality of community relationships are directly choking spirit and therefore diminishing sustainability.

My observation is that the extent to which my interactions will build, rather than diminish, relationship is the extent to which I can practice just 3 disciplines:

- **Inquiry** (asking until I am clear what the other person means or feels),
- **Honesty** (giving necessary information as honestly and openly as I am able to) and
- **Respect** (having regard to the others perspective).

(Note that 'respect' is very different to 'admiration' or 'agreement'. Sometimes I will disagree with someone's actions, and out of honesty need to say so, but I must still respect them as a valuable person. In a country as diverse as Australia, where people are influenced by such a wide range of personal and community cultures, developing our capacity to 'respect' someone who is different to us is simply essential).

These three simple disciplines, if I practice all of them, will result in understanding, acceptance and trust, (see diagram) allowing an effective relationship. Then I will be able to work effectively with this person, even when we disagree.



If I am not honest, I won't build trust, no matter how 'nice' I am because people will always feel themselves to be on uncertain ground. ('maybe he's just trying to please me!') And I won't create understanding, because people won't have the full and honest information that they need to understand me or the situation fully.

If I am not respectful (having regard for their perspective) I will not fully accept who another is, because I will be judging them, rather than listening for their perspective. And I will not invite trust because I will hurt or frustrate another if I don't listen for her perspective.

If I am not inquiring - giving another permission to tell his or her full story or perspective, then I will build neither acceptance of the other, nor understanding. And I also will not accept or understand the full situation that we find ourselves in together.

Without acceptance, understanding and trust, the relationship will actually drain energy from me and the other person, rather than generating energy.

As an organisation (like a local government), if we find ourselves surrounded by a lack of trust, acceptance and understanding, we need to challenge ourselves on whether we are genuinely practicing the three disciplines. And the same challenge applies to all of us as people, or policy makers, or community workers. Because those three disciplines build genuine connection, and genuine connection develops Spirit, and spirit sustains lives and communities and cultures and society.

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