

Pulling Together for Sustainable Development aka “Tall, Dark, Handsome and No.1”

[A synopsis of the presentation given by Oikos’ Nick Mayhew to a group of senior civil servants and corporate executives at a dinner at PricewaterhouseCoopers on 11 February 1999, commissioned by the Whitehall and Industry Group.]

“Tall, Dark, Handsome and No.1” was a mixed-media performance-presentation designed, not so much to ‘wrap up’ the MasterClass series, but to suggest the need for ongoing enquiry and deliberation. It challenged the audience to consider the meaning of ‘sustainable success’ in the context of growing local/national/global aspirations of ‘sustainable development’. The presentation was intended as a provocation, a stimulus, to rethink assumptions, to question received notions of personal and organisational responsibility, and to explore ideas about the *roles* we play in furthering a currently *unsustainable* development paradigm. Ultimately the aim was to generate ongoing reflection about how these roles might and should change.

“Tall, Dark, Handsome and No.1” contained a range of contentious ideas: that executive decision-makers are involved in elaborate forms of ‘role-play’ as they further their personal and institutional agendas; that organisational life thus comprises forms of ongoing ‘improvisation’, much of which becomes tired and predictable without sufficient opportunities to ‘rehearse’ alternative roles; and that too much executive ‘role-playing’ is structured by a ‘master-script’, or ‘grand narrative’, dictating behaviour that conforms to a now defunct development paradigm.

The presentation suggested that this development paradigm is unduly narrow, ‘male’ and elitist. This paradigm is embodied by the metaphorical character ‘Tall, Dark, Handsome and No.1’, who can be identified living out ‘his’ part in all of our lives to varying degrees - especially our working lives. In assorted mixed-media forms, the presentation illustrated how this *enacting* and the form of development, or progress, that results, is - through patterns of exploitation and insensitivity - undermining the very social and ecological foundations of human life.

It started by showing the danger of systemic collapse facing humankind, as a result of the regressive, cyclical interaction currently occurring between ‘threatened biology’, ‘altered biochemistry’, ‘declining natural resources’, ‘social disintegration’, ‘persistent deprivation’ and ‘swelling population’. The presentation went on to illustrate how, in multiple ways, the linear, techno-scientific, economic rationality pervading much executive decision-making, cannot but add to - let alone make sense of - this *unsustainability*. In doing so, it referred - albeit fleetingly - to the impoverished work experiences, neurotic private lives, and ‘tragedy of the commons’ that our present development paradigm continues to reproduce.

“Tall, Dark, Handsome and No.1” went on to suggest that we can only truly entertain the idea of ‘sustainable success’, if we are prepared to reconstruct our relationship with this ‘character’, or role, currently playing such a large part in our lives.

This requires the creation of a particular (liminal? magical? imaginative?) space, wherein executives are able to reflect sufficiently thoroughly and creatively on their present roles, and to perceive opportunities for behaving differently. It is through opportunities to consider (and thence ‘rehearse’) new forms of ‘improvisation’, that the old ‘masterscript’ - neo-liberal business/development/progress-as-usual - might gradually be transformed into something more people-centred, adaptable, context-specific, lively, ecologically-sensible and so on.

The presentation pointed to certain developments in policy-making circles, which might be seen as signs of a growing acknowledgement that such change is required. It mentioned the government’s new ‘quality of life’ indicators, which may yet come to challenge GDP-oriented measures of progress and growth. It also pointed to the increasing range of organisations experimenting with the management tool called ‘social audit’ - involving an opening up, in a rigorous, iterative fashion, to the views and demands of a wide range of ‘stakeholders’. Such a process - attempting, again, to measure success in a broader, more inclusive, way - has the potential to redefine notions of organisational accountability and, eventually, purpose.

The presentation posed the question: To what extent is ‘Tall, Dark, Handsome and No.1’ prepared to reconsider his role in the face of these challenges to his traditional power-base? People want more accountability from ‘him’ (greater proof that ‘he’ is genuinely acting in their interest) and more meaning in

their own lives – involving, perhaps, a more profound *connection* with their families, friends and colleagues ('society'), and with the cosmos on the one hand and their own bodies on the other ('nature'). But does 'he' have the wherewithal – the personal and structural capacity - to open up, yield and learn from these impulses (perhaps to discover new forms of 'competitive advantage' in the process)? Or is he locked into understanding success, progress and development in ever more basic and expedient ways?

The presentation concluded by acknowledging the current hegemony of financial capital, and how deregulated bond and money markets, in boosting 'Master of the Universe tendencies', serve to make it even more difficult for 'Tall, Dark, Handsome and No.1' to reconstruct himself. The outlook is not encouraging. An exceedingly narrow, financially-driven and econometrically-obsessed development paradigm persists, while our notions of 'success' become ever more crass. We are losing our versatility and range...

In sum, "Tall, Dark Handsome and No.1" suggested that we will only correct this crippling tendency via reflection. It is through periodical estrangement and distance from our roles, and ongoing consideration of them, that we will discover the resources (including the self-knowledge) required to craft our way – via cannily improvised interactions with the other characters in our organisational lives - into another narrative altogether. Only through provocation, followed by true contemplation, might we free ourselves from 'the master-script', and come to define 'sustainable success' with the sensitivity, honesty and imagination that, increasingly, is so desperately required.

Of course, it was to the beginnings of this process, that "Tall, Dark, Handsome and No.1" - a provocative, mixed-media performance-presentation - was attempting to contribute...