

Creative practices of hope

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Abstract

This paper tells the story of a group of community workers, community activists and academics who came together to explore 'good news stories of difference and resistance.' Over a period of seven years we have planned and hosted a creative community conference, written and performed a play and are now writing a book.

Using an organising metaphor of 'social change from the margins' we have engaged in, and collected, local stories of hope, ordinary resistances and success. Our aim was to make public and visible the everyday practices that people are engaged in. Using simple strategies such as story telling, purposeful listening, fun, laughter, food and creativity we sought to celebrate our successes and nurture each other. We believed that through both our process and our practice we could move from despair about oppression, intolerance, greed, violence and individualism to practices which are sustainable, creative and hopeful.

Keywords

Creativity, hope, community practices, narratives

Introduction

"...our time to come alive is right now, on this edge of possibility" (Macy 2000, p. 2).

The following paper is a compilation of stories, or narratives (Donald Polkinghorne 1998) about research and actions in a local community. Theoretically this work inhabits the border zones of critical postmodernism (William Tierney 1994) where people work towards radical social reconstruction in multiple ways and at multiple sites.

The work can be conceptualised as a collaborative action research project of five cycles, or stages.¹ The research of stage one informed a number of community actions (stages 2–5). Each stage informed the next through a process of critical analysis and reflection. At each stage 'data' were recorded in several different ways: by tape then transcribed and returned to the group for

¹ The naming of this work, as action research is retrospective. At the time, apart from stage 1, we did not see ourselves as collecting data, or doing research.

discussion (stage 1); as minutes of planning meetings, public brochures, newspaper articles, funding body feedback, by video recorder, as minutes of an evaluation meeting and participant evaluation sheets (stage 2); written directly by the collaborative writing group as poems and short stories (stage 3); audience feedback and performer written reflections (stage 4) as minutes of meetings, individual and group writings and taped conversations with community members (stage 5).

This information was, at each stage, thematically analysed by all members of the group/s. Key themes were then reflected upon by the group/s and plans for action(s) were made. Then the next stage of the cycle took place. And so it went over the years. Additionally, relevant theory which both informed and was informed by this process was discussed by the group/s at each stage. This theory is woven into the discussion of the stages below.

As people who actively seek change in social practices one of our aims has been to move away from the more usual 'argumentative' style of academic writing. Traditionally, the focus in academic papers is one of the "analytical, argumentative, dialectical reasoning invented by Plato" (Patti Lather 1997, p. 237). This style, while useful in some contexts, does not always engender hope and is not always accessible to practitioners. After Patti Lather, and others spoken of later in this paper, I seek here, to embrace ways of knowing and logic "that are more about the economy of the unconscious, juxtaposition, paradox, montage, palimpsest, the structure of emotions, the logic of sense" (Patti Lather 1997, p. 237). Hence, the following montage of the five stages of the project.

Beginnings

This work has taken place in a particular physical space, an edge. The Blue Mountains of New South Wales, Australia, is Gundungarra and Darug country. The Gundungarra and Darug peoples are the traditional owners of the Blue Mountains. As we work, we acknowledge the ancestors, the elders and the descendents of the traditional owners of this place.

blue mountains, powerful dreaming country

darug and gundungarra

writing creatively

writing collaboratively

around the kitchen table

yellow tailed black cockatoo appears

a magical distraction

soaking up the sun

smelling eucalyptus

listening to the bush's hum

(Lizzie Vesely)

This is a collective narrative, a story, of a group of community workers, community activists and academics who came together to explore 'good news stories of difference and resistance.' Over the seven years we have worked together 'the group' has changed composition. At present we are eight white women ranging in age from 16 to 55. We describe ourselves, in this context, as community development workers, activists, culture jammers, artists, students and academics.

Through all of our work together we have fore-grounded collaboration, creativity and imagination as a central part of inquiry and practice. We have worked to continue the cultural action traditions in community activist work by integrating 'the arts' into our critical inquiry process. This is the creative turn through which we can become artful practitioners. This has also meant that in the representations of the research project(s), we have worked to present our work imaginatively and creatively.

At the conference five of us presented at once

Interrupting, agreeing, reminding, laughing

We brought a suitcase filled with rubbish

'our baggage' we explain

We don't know that they'll invite us again

(Judy Pinn)

Inspired by Laurel Richardson (1997) we have sought to show *and* tell, to provide in our tellings and re-tellings different sorts of spaces for people to connect with our work. We have presented papers at conferences in groups from 2 to 8. We have had public conversations, created an installation and performed our findings as a play. Annie Bolitho and Mary Hutchinson, experienced collaborative/community writers, say "a community writing publication invites people to enter imaginatively into the experiences of others" (1998, p. 125). This is what we have striven for. So, in the writing of this paper, stories, quotes and poetry from the group/s are included alongside the more usual academic textual form.

The aim in telling some of our stories in this paper is to cast out threads of possibility, alternative narratives, to be grasped as they flurry by. This in itself is a practice of hope.

"Collective stories that are based in the lived experiences of people, and deviate from the cultural story, provide new narratives; hearing them helps individuals to replot their lives because they provide an alternative plot to absent or powerless texts" (Laurel Richardson 1997, p. 58).

What we have found in our public telling of our stories is that many of the practices we describe already exist but they are unspoken, publicly. They are absent/powerless texts. Another practice of hope then is to make visible, name and strengthen those theories, practices, values and attitudes that support and challenge the work we are doing.

Fractured Fairy Tales — Restor(y)ing community work

The story began in a university, any one will do. Debbie (R2) and Judy (R1) wanted to work together and support each other in re-storying their own practices as researchers and community activists.

Sitting round the table the two Rapunzels were talking about what they did each day when they clambered down red haired Rapunzels rich tresses ...

R1: We're liberation workers, championing causes. We get angry and passionate about oppression, dominating relationships, abuse and social change. We struggle to create ways of being that are not oppressive, discriminatory or dominating. We talk a lot about voice, finding voice, giving voice, being silenced ...

R2: counternarratives, subaltern speakers and marginal voices.

R1: In the real world, out of the tower, we are 'good re-constructionist workers', outraged that some people are silenced and powerless, that decisions about their lives are made for them, not with them.

R2: Mmmm.

Time passes, with more of the same. Then one day, as they were drinking tea, red haired Rapunzel blurted,

I've had enough! The work we are doing is oppressive. We always have to ask 'well, what are we doing to save the world today?' It's arrogant and tyrannical to have to always be heroic, and do large visible things that create immediate changes? Besides, my horse is getting old and tired; she can no longer keep up.

R2 (helping herself to more cake) It's all those books you have been reading.

R1: *oh come on ...*

R2: *no listen, something has to give when you begin to embrace poststructuralist theorising, with its critique of grand narratives, its concern with local, everyday actions and its recognition of fluid and changing categories of identity, (this Rapunzel was something of a show off). Beginning to see the world in this way will mean that you feel unsettled. Really it is no wonder that you are questioning our roles as heroic liberation workers.*

R1: *Boring! lets tell a different sort of story. Lets throw off this tired old angry one. How can we talk about pleasure and creativity. (she runs to the bathroom and grabs the scissors) Lets cut our hair, lets help the good news stories become visible and contagious. Let's get out of this damn tower!*

So they contacted a local community advocacy and lobbying service, Mountains Community Resource Network, whose work they were interested in. Coming from a community development tradition (Susan Kenny 1994) and inspired by Fran Peavey's (1986) story of the 'American willing to listen' they simply offered to begin a research relationship based on collaborative dialogue.

Stage 1 — Good news stories of difference and resistance

The resulting project can be conceptualised as a creative action research project where the focus was on doing research that was meaningful to all participants, made a difference in our practices and in the lives of the people for whom we worked and that was fun and interesting. This could be seen as research with(in) the 7th moment (Lincoln and Denzin 2000). This moment combines creativity and imagination in research with a critical frame of reference to challenge the status quo and support the development of practice in "real" world situations. The research and practices described in this paper are a dynamic example of meeting the challenges of the 7th moment where "intelligence, humor, imagination, courage, tolerance, love, respect" (Cornell West in Yvonna Lincoln and Norman Denzin 2000, p. 1055) are the practices required to do the work that needs to be done.

The research group wanted to purposively go into the future with this researching, publicly and consciously entwining the personal with the political. We were, and continue to be, committed to future oriented research which:

- studies the world from historically and culturally situated individuals
- works outward from their own stories to the world around them.
- produces works that speak clearly and powerfully.

- produces work that is committed to changing the world not just describing it (Norman Denzin 2000, p. 915).

So, we began around a kitchen table with a blank sheet of paper, a tape recorder and seven people with a collective concern for issues of social justice and community development work with/in an ecological context. We had no grants, no proposal, no plan, no outline of goals, aims and outcomes and no timeline. We did have plenty of food, laughter, tea and coffee.

Our re-searching conversations explored 'good news stories of difference and resistance'. These stories were recorded and returned to the group in the form of a letter. Telling stories, or narratives, can be a powerful research tool in seeking to understand particular phenomena through people's experiences and the sense people make of this (Max van Manen 1997; Kathryn Church 1995; Donald Polkinghorne 1988). Story telling as a research method is particularly effective where researchers and participants are concerned with social, political and personal change (Patti Lather 1997; Sherene Razack 1993) as they can reveal how social injustices and inequities are experienced and perpetuated, both individually and collectively. Stories can illuminate people's resistances to inequities and injustices documenting these alternative stories (Peter Reason 1998, 1994). These stories can engender a sense of possibility, a sense that life can be 'other-wise'.

We quickly developed a story telling ritual which facilitated critical reflection and quickly built relationships.

Chocolate slices, books, salads and dips
Timetables, papers, files and cream whips
Boiling jug, laughter a chorus of voices
And a tape, recording these erudite noises
(Judy Pinn)

Ritualising communication in this way helped to create a community of listeners and tellers, whose roles were both fixed in the moment and fluid over time. We each moved in and out of the teller/listener positions. And we moved towards creating places and spaces where we could tell our stories, spaces that were rewarding and nourishing — physically, emotionally and spiritually. The stories we told were questioned and recorded on the tape. Many of us had never told some of these stories as we'd been too busy doing them. After we'd each told our stories once — we'd tell our new ones.

“Communication as ‘community’ invites participation, association, locale, temporality, entrustment, and, most important, empathy. It privileges human agency” (Laurel Richardson 1997, p. 79)

This we believe is another practice of hope. These everyday success stories became our sustenance enabling us to continue to do the work that needed to be done. Below are four of these stories.

No interest loans scheme

The Lower Mountains no interest loans to assist low income families started in the Winmalee Neighbourhood Centre (NHC) with capital funding of \$15,000 that came from philanthropic funds. The scheme is managed by a volunteer community loans committee which has lent to over 45 residents, who because of their low incomes can't get bank loans but can show that they can manage to repay an interest free community loan. The funds are for essential household items that will improve the health and wellbeing of the families. People agree on a repayment scheme and as it's repaid more can be loaned. The good news is that because of the Winmalee NHC's leadership, other centres have adopted the scheme across NSW. They are examples of self-supporting communities in action.

Access Tourism

This project was to raise awareness about physical access to public and community buildings. Noel wanted to approach this issue by developing an access guide that looked like a glossy tourist guide. During the process of researching the guide, businesses, accommodation places, restaurants, and tourist attractions made modifications so that they could be included in the guide. The project raised awareness of access issues locally and created a niche market in the Blue Mountains for national and international tourists while generating employment.

Residential home in Patterson Road

The Department of Community Services bought a house in Patterson Road, a middle class, swanky street. The house was to be a respite house for people with disabilities. Many local residents objected, as they were concerned about their land values going down and a campaign to stop the residential home was launched. The local Council was to approve the Development Order and the approval was rescinded because of the objections. One of the councillors suggested mediation meetings with the residents. Noel, Mary and other activists and residents met several times to talk through concerns and issues and to confront the residents stereotyping of people who have a disability. As a result the residents recognised the prejudices and fears that

they held and backed down. When people who had disabilities moved into the house, there was a welcoming afternoon tea and lots of neighbours came along.

The **Living in Harmony Project**, over a period of eighteen months, spawned a myriad of activities aimed at promoting reconciliation and links amongst diverse community groups in the mountains. Rosie, working with a legal centre, told us about using playback theatre to help refugees tell their stories. Other activities included writing life stories, concerts, a cross cultural artist forum, student research, poetry evenings, a children's week gala day, carnivale — a rich program of music, dancing and food — workshops on aboriginal history, a youth and community day, indigenous site walkaround, and a travelling exhibition. This cultural development approach sits alongside the need for advocacy and laws regarding racial discrimination.

This story telling was not just a cosy validating of each others experiences — although there is nothing wrong with that! Researching into the future meant moving our practices forward too. So, as we actively listened to the stories being told we attempted to reflect back and critically question the storyteller. To do this we developed 'purposeful listening'. As people told their stories the listeners made notes around the following five areas:

- Connections — any connections to other stories, ideas, information
- 'Old baggage' — any taken for granted assumptions, old patterns of behaviour, ideas, ideologies that the story teller may not be aware of
- Social justice — any issues of social justice that need naming, or highlighting
- Power relations—any power relations that have not been explicitly named
- Unintended outcomes — unplanned consequences both 'good' and 'bad' that have not been noticed/mentioned.

This critical reflection process was informed by a feminist poststructuralist politics of difference (Patti Lather 1997, 1991; Michelle Fine 1994a, 1994b; Iris Marion Young 1990). In many ways we were doing data analysis on the run (after Yolanda Wadsworth 1997). A further cycle of analysis happened as we later reflected on the letters to the group and the transcripts of the stories. The main themes or questions that emerged for us through this story telling process were:

- Working in the margins without being marginalised
- Re-storying the power of the ordinary and the everyday
- The need to celebrate successes, making public our stories of what has/is working.

The first two have been documented (Pinn and Horsfall 2000; Horsfall and Pinn 1999), it is the third that I wish to pick up more fully here.

Stage 2 — Connecting and celebrating communities

“Community workers often work with a struggle story and I wanted to explore celebration and acknowledgment and how it might enhance our work and the ways we work together. Indulgence and art, soapbox and great food are not our usual tools.” (Mary Waterford).

Informed by the process of telling good news stories of difference and resistance, members of the research group began the process of organising a community conference/celebration. A diverse range of people representing various perspectives and agendas were invited from the beginning. Over the next few months the research group of seven became an organising group of approximately 40.

Central to the development of the CCC were principles of inclusion, individual ownership, valuing of community contribution, arts and creative processes, environment, overlapping layers, and space for everyone. At the first meeting of the organising group a number of themes emerged which became the public aims of the event:

- To celebrate, enthuse, inspire, and nurture people in the Blue Mountains who do the hard work of building and supporting community
- To be inclusive and encourage a wide range of people
- To create better connections with inner (Interagency) and outer agencies (unfunded and under-resourced activism)
- To raise the profile of the community sector and the value of our work, to demonstrate that what we do does make a difference, to cultivate a sense of a shared vision and create links, alliances, possibilities, networks
- To provide spaces for difference and diversity
- To promote a political agenda of social justice and sustainability (Connecting and Celebrating Communities Brochure, 2000).

The two-day program centred around four principles and practices: community mapping, community regeneration, environmental sustainability and community stories. It included political actions, good food, creativity and performance, as indicated in the following paragraphs:

A **Soapbox** for participants to speak from over lunch breaks. ‘*The Soap Box. Finally a place for you to tell everyone exactly what you think about well ... anything you like! Pick a topic, step right up and unleash your passion!*’ (from the CCC brochure 2000) People talked about the ‘Stop the women’s prison campaign’, the local council buildings policy, and community sustainability.

Motions from the floor. A social justice agenda was advanced as a group of participants promoted a strong statement to the local council about community based organisations and their participation and contribution to social capital.

Topic tables were held over dinner, allowing participant driven discussions and a place to group with like minded people and share ideas, followed by a concert of social justice music featuring performances by local choirs, vocalists and drummers, concluding with a young people's band complete with 12 young roadies.

A **Critical Mass bike ride** along the local highway protesting the transportation of nuclear waste through the mountains.

Street theatre at lunchtimes and in the breaks: "I was a rainbow. My character was making comment on the over niceness of some good things. I blew bubbles and kept saying how lovely all this community was. It was my way of exaggerating the sunny side to make it sickly sweet." (performer).

An **indulgence tent**. From the beginning we wanted to include indulgence in this event. Our ideas went from mud baths to dress-ups, massage to comics. It evolved into a 'chill out' space for participants, filled with flowers, cushions, chocolates, juice, flowing fabrics. The tent was consistent with our aim to nurture and regenerate community workers. While some were concerned at seeming frivolous this was one of the most consistently crowded spaces over the two days."Gee, I loved the indulgence space" (participant).

Plentiful good food. The importance of good food cannot be underestimated. Good food makes participants feel valued and willing to be part of making the event go well. A local voluntary group "Third World Café" took charge of this part of the work. One of their members was an active part of our organising team. They provided morning and afternoon teas, two lunches and dinner for about \$45² per person. The funds raised built a community well in India. A local/global connection and action.

A **collaborative mosaic** was created over the two days by participants. Ninety-six individual mosaic tiles were created and later joined together to form a large wall frieze. There is now a permanent artwork commemorating the event and the work of social justice volunteers."I really

² A sliding scale was used for participation at the conference, ranging from \$10, which included all activities and all meals.

enjoyed being able to contribute to making a mural that will be a lasting reminder of the event and also to have time out to do something creative” (participant).

Stories of regeneration from around the nation. A panel telling of national, regional and local “good news stories” followed by a market place of regional action groups with information tables, videos and photos.

Building a native garden at the community centre followed by a **ritual for the land**. This was led by local Indigenous singer songwriter Jacinta Tobin. People acknowledged and celebrated continued indigenous and non-indigenous environmental work.

Forum. Rosemary Morrow a local and global activist spoke about Permaculture as a community development tool. Ted Trainer spoke about environmentally sustainable living. “Very inspiring the session by Rowe Morrow — in one hour she had us identifying ourselves in such positive ways and illustrated the practice of the social capital that people bring to a region through unpaid community and reconciliation and earth work — Ted Trainer too was valuable in its simplicity and positivism” (participant).

Community Stories. This session made links and connections between the local community stories and the larger social and cultural stories of our time. It featured a story of the Aboriginal Culture and Resource Centre. Using group work, movement and drama this session also drew on the stories of other participants.

Aboriginal Culture and Resource Centre. Julie Wilson and Bev Fry spoke about their involvement in setting up the Aboriginal Culture and Resource Centre (ACRC). ACRC has facilitated a growing awareness of Aboriginal issues and support for Aboriginal people. Now every year the local Council helps to fund a NAIDOC celebration and the ACRC is an important resource for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the mountains.

This brief overview cannot hope to capture the complexity of the two days. There were multiple activities in multiple spaces with concurrent structure for those who wanted it and open spaces for those who preferred that. This taste of what happened is included to show how, in this instance, community, environment, fun, food, creativity, support and political action co-existed over the two days.

“Doing community was important throughout the CCC. It is rare for art, community, environment and individual regeneration to come together and actually ‘do’. So

often at conferences people talk about doing things but at this conference we actually did it" (Heidi Chappelow).

Stage 3 — Collaborative, communal writing

At the subsequent evaluation meeting of the CCC event it was suggested that a writing group form. There was a desire to somehow capture what happened and tell others what we had done. In many ways the CCC event was a good news story, containing stories within stories.

The subsequent writing group were motivated to make public and accessible what we had done, to continue the process of critical reflection on our experiences and to keep working together. We worked to write up our experiences in a creative and collective way, to go beyond a one-person 'report' style. We wanted to produce something that showed our passions in multiple ways and with multiple voices, and that reflected a reflexive way of writing and being. We were self-consciously writing as a form of activism; an action that had its own intrinsic value and politic (Robin Morgan 1994).

Writing collaboratively was important. We wanted to write in connection with each other. This was consistent with the processes we had been using throughout: working together with others and seeing what emerged. We didn't have a particular plan when we began. We did not set out to do something results or outcome based. We were just trying out the process and seeing what emerged.

We were creating community in our writing group practices; doing community (Horsfall 1998). We were practicing our politics about alliances. We remained interested in the contradictions, differences, gaps and silences in community which have been marginalised, trivialised and privatised by the dominant story of community which privileges homogeneity and oneness (Iris Marion Young 1990) This enabled us to re-story community and our practice(s) especially practices we called ordinary resistances and new alliances. This can be talked of as a cultural practice of hope. As we voice our practices, making them open to public scrutiny and debate, we legitimise another sort of activist work, and this legitimisation enables more of this work to be done.

We place ordinary acts of resistance alongside, and in relationship with, the dominant (often heroic) idea of activism and resistance, involving highly visible mass structural change or revolution. Both are necessary and interrelated. However, it seems that the value that is attached to the heroic by our social structures, languaging and power relations have led to the diminution of ordinary resistances as a process of social action. Ordinary resistances are often not visible,

they often don't have direct and measurable outcomes, and they often happen at a microsocial level.

Some ordinary resistances grab people's imaginations becoming mass movements (e.g. Landcare; Clean Up Australia; and Camilla Cowley's act of reconciliation with indigenous people over land rights issues in the Northern Territory). These examples illustrate that often what becomes constructed as heroic is initially an ordinary action that somehow captures the imagination and energy of the larger public. (Pinn and Horsfall 2000) At the same time many ordinary resistances stay at the local level and do not become mass movements. They are no less resistances that often change the material circumstances of people's lives. Rather than perpetuate the romantic, individual, usually masculine, heroic ideal (Tierney 1993) a more hopeful practice is to 'talk up' the practice of ordinary resistances (Stacy 1997). This may enable some people to shift from feeling that the issues and problems are too immense and can only be acted on at a structural level (by people with power and by heroes) to a feeling of hope, of possibility, and of making a difference (Horsfall 1998).

At an early meeting of the writing group we settled on an organising structure for our writing process (Winter et al. 1999). This work uses the metaphor of a patchwork text, making something new and useful from already available material. As far as we knew it had only been used as an individual process. Our group used this structure to collaboratively write and critically reflect on the CCC event. We consciously tried to explore paradoxes, contrasts, gaps and silences in our practices and in the event we were writing about. We wrote any way we liked; we imagined identities of whoever we liked. Some of our writings were reality based, some fantasies, conversations, poems.

Stage 4 — Performing Community(s)

"Sometimes 'words fall short' of capturing lived experiences" (Max van Manen 1997).

In 2002 we were ready to go public with our stories and enter another cycle of actions and reflections. We submitted a proposal to present at the Celebrations for Development and Change Conference, University of Technology Sydney, consequently transforming our patchwork text into a theatrical experience (Ambler et al. 2002). We wanted to capture in form and in content the complexity of the CCC experience.

Creating a play allowed us to use multiple voices to give shape to the CCC experience, and avoided narrowing it down to one authoritative / authoritarian voice. We were keen to experiment with using different ways to communicate with other people, so that they could have fun, and

learn something useful at the same time. This was not a new practice, although it felt somewhat edgy. “Becker, McCall and Morris introduced in 1989 the concept of performance, a play on performance art ... instead of reading scientific papers aloud at professional meetings they began performing them ... This format allowed them to present their work as a collaborative project, without privileging the single authorial voice. The script format permitted the presentation of emotion and mood. Through the use of intonation and pacing they could alter the meaning of their text, thereby openly acknowledging the constructed nature of their social science data ... Performances made the research process more visible and alive to outsiders, voices became real people” (Denzin 1997, p. 194).

As well as making the CCC event more visible and alive the stitching together of the play gave space to various different emergent meanings, creating a rich text of connections and disconnections. It also enabled us to highlight some key issues and difficulties of community practices — issues of inclusion/exclusion for example — in ways that people were open to.

“The play enabled us to re-present our ideas in multi-layers with images, movement, accessible language, food, audience involvement, and that meant people could relate to it from a number of different angles” (Judy Pinn).

We took the play to a university forum about celebration, a performance for local community workers who had been involved in CCC, a regional community workers conference and a class of Welfare students at TAFE. We offered our audiences an opportunity to watch, enjoy and get involved; to participate in our performances in many ways — singing along, indulging with us; doing community together through the performances. Feedback suggested that to some extent we had captured the material practices of community workers' lives in a multi layered, poly-vocal way, “fantastic layered insights” (audience member 2002).

*I remember Judy in an Orange wig
Heidi on a unicycle, Lesley holding her hand
I remember Susan talking with a top hat on and
Lizzie in an apron
I remember Mary being nice and mummy laughing
I remember eating around a table full of love,
Laughter, fun and excitement
These are the things I remember (Jess Horsfall aged 13)³*

³ I include the age of Jess as she joined this group at age 13 and is now fast approaching 17, this seems significant. There is a huge difference for an adolescent between these ages.

Stage 5 — Ripples

Metaphors are useful tools for helping us to re-story our worlds. Talking metaphorically allows new ideas and thoughts to be played with, creativity and imaginings to be embraced, and multiple meanings to emerge. A consistent metaphor for our work is one of social change occurring from the margins. We envisage this as a process of dropping pebbles of different colours, sizes and shapes at the edges of a pool. The ripples intersect, create disturbances and chaos in the water, disturbing and disrupting the smooth surface and centre of the pool. By centre we mean the dominant stories of our white western culture, for example, economic rationalism, development, individualism, cultural homogeneity and reliance on the hero who will solve all our problems. The smooth surface of the pond is the taken-for-granted assumptions of 'this is the way it is', that is embedded in these dominant stories. By the edges we mean ordinary, everyday resistances. When these resistances (ripples) join, coalesce, and form alliances, relationships and connections they disrupt 'the way it is'.

The dropping of the pebbles captures the idea of the many ordinary and everyday acts of resistance and alliances which people are daily engaged in (Judy Pinn and Debbie Horsfall 2000). Our theory at the time of developing this metaphor (Debbie Horsfall and Judy Pinn 1999) was that personal, social and environmental change did and would occur in multiple ways, at multiple sites. We deliberately threw some pebbles into the pool. Our aim was to support, celebrate and connect people working for sustainability and social justice in what we called the 'inner' and 'outer' agencies.⁴

What began seven years ago around a kitchen table as 'good news stories of difference and resistance' has had rippling connections with a number of other projects, large and small. The stories of these are currently being written for publication as a book by the writing group. Some of these stories have been summarised and are woven into this paper.

Below is a list, and an example, of some of these projects.

- Stop the Women's Prison actions
- Power and Passion Conference
- Women and Earth Ecofeminist Conferences
- Refugee support group
- Women Against the Nuclear Industry
- Nuclear Free Zone Group
- People for Peace Group
- Big Youth Celebration

⁴ By this we mean the people who are employed to do community work and those who are not — the unpaid activists.

- Women's Action Group
- Circo Blurto youth circus.

Circo Blurto

Slowly and consistently things are happening. Like teaching a whole bunch of other people to do community work through Circo Blurto. Encouraging young people's work to be valued, encouraging arts work to be valued, through micro arts business for the circus performers. Creating good practice by facilitating for all voices to be heard and including families and young people. Grappling consistently with issues of participation and decision-making and inclusivity and accessibility, and flexibility and creativity, and making opportunities, and doing a whole bunch of partly paid work in a gap, auspiced by a community organisation. It is the people around me and being connected to community organisations like the youth centre and the CCC which makes it possible to do so much, like start a circus.(Heidi Chappelow 2005, Circo Blurto organiser)

The work has also had an effect on participants personally, which ripples on to changes in practice. The personal can be neglected, silenced, not spoken about, when we talk about community work. Working for change, it seems important to also articulate the changes that happened for us along the way. Not to privilege them, but to place them alongside community and social changes.

“I guess what the people around me from the CCC are doing and the actions they talk about and do, makes me think about community and how to help others lives and the world, this helps me to shape decisions on what I will do later in life. So hopefully others community practice will affect me in the way that I will grow from their actions and take action myself” (Jess Horsfall, aged 16).

The participants in various stages of this work believe that the project/s has:

- created a meeting ground which provides the space to reflect and listen
- provided a supportive and challenging environment which enabled people to step out of their fear and act in the world
- confirmed the power of community action
- heard voices other than the mainstream
- mentored young community development workers
- provided an example of how telling new and alternative stories creatively can make them accessible for more people
- demonstrated that community work/work against war, global warming, various oppressive practices can be fun and life affirming.

Creating alliances has also been a central theme of this work. As well as 'talking up' unusual often unspoken alliances, we also established connections between 'inner' and 'outer' agency workers. The original group of people who met for the good news stories of difference and resistance research project were all paid workers, from a community agency and from a university. The planning group for the CCC event was hosted by paid workers but involved both paid and unpaid workers. This was true of the people who organised, participated in and cleaned up after the CCC event. The writing group began with two paid people and three unpaid activists, with some funding emerging for the writing of the play. When Jess and Judy joined for the writing of the play, Heidi for the performances and the subsequent writing of this book, the group became two paid people and six unpaid activists and students.

We do not condone unpaid work, if its important work then people should be paid to do it. What we have tried to do is to build alliances and connection between the unpaid and paid workers, to begin to model how to materially support unpaid activism — and how to get support/create alliances as activists. This remains a very real tension in the work we have done.

Another ongoing tension in our work is the issue of inclusion/exclusion. In practice we do exercise some judgment about who we are prepared to work with, who we will support, which stories we will tell. We have become quite realistic and open about this. Again this is a tension, as 'good' community workers work with the community, which comprises people whose ideas and actions we both like and dislike. However, we believe that by narrowing this down we have paradoxically broadened the usual definition. We include people doing bush regeneration and bushcare, for example, people who might not ordinarily think of themselves as community workers. So we can now say that we want to work with, celebrate and support people doing community, social justice and environmental sustainability work. This includes people from local councils, people in government and non-government services, volunteers, students, academics, environmental activists and to have space for each of their differences. In many ways this is helping to expand our understanding of community work, to work that includes social *and* environmental aspects.

A critique of these practices is that 'decentered', opportunistic and haphazard local actions do not address structural systems of exploitation (capitalism, racism, sexism, etc.) in an organised way. This criticism is premised on a view that says that people belong to one of two groups — those who possess power and those who are powerless — often along gender, economic, and racial lines. Our view of power acknowledges that this approach to power is useful but limited. Power can be understood as more complex, not so much possessed by people as circulating between them, contextually specific and unstable. This means that decentered alliances and resistances are possible ways for people to act — rather than getting caught in immobilising and despairing

discourses about their lives and practices. This approach is part of developing a cultural practice of hope where hope

“...is both a language of uncertainty and the precondition for action: it offers neither prescriptions nor recipes. Instead it points to the value of discourse whose value lies in what it suggests about the stirrings of imagination, the possibilities that are often felt and deeply experienced in the need to struggle against all odds” (Tierney 1994, p. xi)

Many people are engaged in creative resistance practices which remain private knowledge. We have found that telling the stories of these practices can, and has, engendered hope and possibility for the tellers and the listeners. They are usually stories that do not fit our expectations of the heroic liberation worker who single handedly changed the world. Instead they are stories of ordinary, and sometimes random, acts of kindness and courage (Judy Pinn and Debbie Horsfall 2000).

We have found it a challenge to have hope when despair was/is rife. However, we have worked to enable hope and despair to co-exist in ways that are enabling rather than paralysing. We have found that

“Hope can be what sustains life in the face of despair and yet it is not simply the desire for things to come or the betterment of life. It is the drive or energy that embeds us in the world — in the ecology of life, ethics and politics” (Zournazi 2002, pp. 14-15).

Here hope is not merely desire, or wishful thinking, hope is energy and action. Hope does not always come easily. Time needs to be taken to reflect on signs of hope in local, national and global contexts. Often the signs of hope are small, almost invisible and connected to other things.

A hopeful true story:

A woman undergraduate student, involved in quilt making, felt too ordinary to talk of her work in the same breath as ‘real’ activists. Yet when a large group of Kosovo Albanians arrived in Singleton NSW (as refugees) she made and delivered two beautiful patchwork quilts to welcome them. She had also been involved in a national quilt drive, where quilts were made and sent over to the Kosovo war refugees. While many of us sat feeling angry and helpless and frustrated, she had taken action.

The thread of ‘hope’ through all stages of this work has been influenced by the work of eco-philosopher Joanna Macy (1983, 1991, 2000). Joanna’s work interweaves scholarship and non-

violent activism and is directed at helping people transform despair and apathy in the face of overwhelming social and ecological crises into constructive, collaborative actions. In our own ways we are continuing with this work.

For many people in our community the telling of success stories has given people alternative stories to start embracing, allowing a different set of possibilities and wonderings to happen. Creative community practices performed within a culture and politics of hope are sustainable and life affirming practices. We have found that when hope shapes our practices and visions we are no longer trapped by practices of domination. With such practices resilience, creativity and imagination with and in community can, and do, flourish.

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Writing individually about collaborative projects can be problematic. As primary author, in this instance, I sought permission from the writing group to present our collective story(s) as an individual. A draft of this paper was returned to the group, for comment, prior to submission.

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