

Holding Gently: A Story of Social Practice

Henrike Holdrege & Craig Holdrege

In the summer of 2011 Henrike and Craig were invited to South Africa by Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff to collaborate in two courses at the Towerland Wilderness Centre (see In Context #26). Allan and Sue lead an organization called Proteus Initiative, which sponsored the courses. Our connection with Sue and Allan goes back to the winter of 2001/2002, when they spent part of a sabbatical at The Nature Institute studying Goethean methodology with us. They live in Cape Town, South Africa, are organizational consultants, and offer organizational and leadership training internationally, utilizing Goethean practice. Gael Surgenor from New Zealand, who studied with Allan and Sue, participated in the courses last summer. There she reported on a campaign she had led concerned with family violence. She described how Goethean practices contributed to the way the campaign developed and to its success. We were inspired by her report, not only because it gave us a glimpse into the achievements of a remarkable woman, but also because it showed how schooling in attentive nature observation can metamorphose and bear fruit in our work upon social tasks and issues.

In 2006 the New Zealand government decided to address the issue of family violence through a social marketing campaign. The Ministry of Social Development's Family and Community Services gave Gael Surgenor the task to lead a team to design and execute a program of family violence prevention. Gael also led a campaign on parenting.

Before the new campaign began Gael participated in programs led by Sue Davidoff and Allan Kaplan concerned with social practice and leadership. In their work, Sue and Allan are clear that they are not teaching techniques that can be learned recipe-like and then applied. Rather, they are interested in helping participants to attend more carefully and wakefully to the social processes themselves, so that they can help orchestrate change in situation-specific ways. To facilitate such awareness, Sue and Allan incorporate Goethean nature observation exercises into their courses. These exercises made a strong

impression on Gael and helped her significantly in the way she led the campaign on family violence. They were instrumental in giving her perspectives that were key to the campaign's success. And because she carried out the same kind of exercises with her team, they became an integral part of the campaign.

Preparing their campaign, Gael and her team looked closely at cases of family violence. They were faced with disturbing and in part horrendous criminal acts of domestic violence. It is easy here to blame and to condemn. But, Gael realized, it would not do much good to focus on condemnation. That would not be an approach that could foster change and transformation; and that was what was needed. In pondering possible approaches, Gael had a kind of "aha" experience stimulated by observations with prismatic colors she had made in the work with Sue and Allan.

When you look through a prism at your surroundings you see prismatic colors where something darker borders something lighter. The colors are most pronounced and clear when, say, you hold the prism horizontally and observe where a white wall meets the horizontal window trim.



Gael Surgenor (right) and Sue Davidoff (left) at the Towerland Wilderness in South Africa. (Photo: Alice Ashwell)

You can experiment with the conditions under which such colors appear by using black and white pieces of paper. When you look at a strip of white paper bordered above and below by black, you see at the one border red and yellow, and on the other light blue and dark violet. When the white strip is gradually narrowed, yellow and light blue move toward each other and eventually yield green as a new color. You then see the color spectrum that we know as the rainbow.

You can reverse the conditions and place a strip of black paper bordered above and below by white. As before, at one boundary light blue and dark violet appear and at the other boundary red and yellow. When the black strip is gradually narrowed, the dark colors of violet and red will eventually merge and magenta (a bright, rich pink) appears as a new color.

The way in which colors manifest at boundaries between light and dark, and especially the appearance of the radiant magenta, had struck Gael—just as they had Goethe more than two centuries before. She experienced how altering conditions of a polarity (a white strip sandwiched between black, versus black sandwiched between white) can bring about significant and surprising change—wholly new qualities can arise. In the family violence campaign, this experience helped her to formulate a new kind of question: Can we find “the magenta place” in relation to family violence? How could a change toward that magenta place be stimulated in the violent family member? This question became a guide in the campaign.

One result of their efforts was the formulation of an initial campaign phrase that was broadcast on television: *Family violence is not okay. It is okay to ask for help.* While the first sentence makes a clear statement about violence, the second suggests that there is an opening with the possibility of change and movement, and that there are people willing to help. This campaign phrase was then followed by true stories of men who had committed violent acts and who then had been able to escape the cycle of violence. They documented those cases of change and broadcast them.

To comply with the federal government, which funded the program, Gael’s team designed a four-year plan for the campaign that outlined sequential steps. This had to be done, but Gael knew that such an outline would have to change and develop if the campaign was to be successful. The campaign needed to be “alive” and only then could one hope that it would have a lasting effect.

This sense of “aliveness” grew in Gael and became an important guide in the campaign. It was facilitated by observational work with plants that Gael also had done

with Allan and Sue. In one exercise participants spent a day in the wonderful botanical garden of Cape Town, where you find the rich flora of South Africa represented. There are many imposing trees. Each person had to find a tree to spend their time with. They had been instructed how to observe the chosen tree carefully in all its details and then stay with it for quite some time with the imagination exercise so as “to be the tree.” From this and other exercises Gael learned the value of careful observation, and also that it is possible to enter into conversation with every living thing. If you attend to things, they tell you something significant.

In another observation, course participants had been asked to attend to growth and decay in a plant. Looking at a tree in fall, when the leaves have turned into their particular fall colors, you perceive the leaves in the process of dying and beginning decay. But if you look closely at the leaf and its stalk, you will find at its base, in the axil of every leaf, a tiny bud. This is dormant life and is the potential for new growth; out of the bud will grow a twig with leaves or perhaps flowers in the next growing season, if the conditions are right. Everywhere in the plant world you can find growing and decaying side by side, the blossoming of forms and their disappearing through decay. Plant life plays itself out in these complementary processes.

When you carefully study natural things and living processes and internalize your experiences, something like “organs of perception,” as Goethe called them, begin to develop. You begin to become more aware of “aliveness” also in other realms of your experience. And this is what happened with Gael.

If their campaign was to be alive, she and her team could not hold on to forms that had been established. They needed to keep in touch with what was actually happening and respond creatively. For example, when they learned that many people did not want to access services for help, they asked the question, “Where are the potential effective helpers?” They found that in cases of family violence it is often a friend or neighbor who, after encountering possible evidence of violence, will turn away and say and do nothing, pretending not to have seen. Their fear of interfering and getting involved in a difficult situation prevents people from asking: “How are you? Are you all right? Do you need help? You do not look well.”

Step by step Gael’s team developed content and messages that were directed toward those potential helpers. They broadcast scenes in which neighbors, family, friends, and co-workers were portrayed as cardboard cut-outs representing latent potential for help. The final scene let one of the cut-outs come to life and ask, “Are you okay?” Those mes-

sages were in effect saying: You can be instrumental in helping someone to change their behavior. Are you?

When Gael's team evaluated after some time whether this part of the campaign was successful, they found that whereas previously one out of five people had taken action, now one out of three people had. A survey carried out earlier in the campaign showed that 57% of the surveyed people believed that they could alter somebody's behavior; now it was 81%.

Gael expressed how important it was for her and her team to let go of the idea that it was "their campaign" and to see that for it to be truly effective it needed to find its roots in communities. In this way the campaign could avoid the pitfalls of so many programs that vanish—together with their effects—when they come to an end. Gael's team involved local communities in the intervention from the start, engaging mayors of towns, members of sports clubs or other local groups throughout the country. That the program with time became alive at the community level proved to be crucial. Federal funds were cut back after four years of the campaign.

During this time, however, family violence intervention had found its place within various local community groups and had in part become independent of federal funding. It had become, as Gael said, a social movement. Their campaign of Family Violence Intervention won the supreme award for excellence in 2010 from the nonprofit Institute of Public Administration in New Zealand. The team was also given a new task, namely to work on changing the behavior in the country toward disabled people.

Gael ended her report with reflections on her leadership. For that she had interviewed the members of her team with the question of how they had experienced the work and Gael's leadership. Team members felt that the Goethean exercises that Gael had met and practiced in her leadership training in South Africa were also alive in the team. As the campaign developed, they said, they learned to become more observant, more intentional and to value the time for explorations. Gael guided and encouraged them as she had done before quite naturally, but now more consciously and with more confidence. Team members felt that Gael encouraged them to be who they are. There were no strict job descriptions and each team member found her niche where she could contribute most. They said:

"We created an environment where people started to think differently."

"We listen to people."

"We have a culture of trying things out."

"We have not made big mistakes because we were able to adapt."

Importantly they felt that they were not observers or managers who stood outside the issue; they felt themselves to be involved.

Gael said about the campaign that "it did not come easy." She held the space for people; she encouraged them not to come up with an answer too quickly. She intervened as leader to guide the team in observation, to cultivate openness and interest in everything, to encourage a willingness to grapple with things. Gael herself became clearer during the process and also more comfortable with confusion. She grew more confident during difficult times in the campaign so that she could say, "It's going to be okay; let's wait and see." And also, when the tendency to hold on became too strong, "We can leave this behind." There wasn't a felt need to control or to be able to predict the future; the process itself became the guide.

Allan Kaplan, who mentored Gael, described her leadership as "fiercely gentle." He saw that her descriptions of people were not effusive and also not negative, but they were accurate; she observed situations and people in a respectful way.

Gael said of her leadership that it was about leading "with a light touch." She characterized this quality in relation to an exercise she took home with her from South Africa: the balancing of an egg. With skill and endurance you might be able to—on a smooth and horizontal surface—stand a raw egg on end. (There is a widespread misconception that this can only be done at the equinoxes. This is not the case.) In balancing the egg, you use your fingertips, carefully sensing it, and with the lightest touch bring it closer to that position where it stands on its own. You cannot stand an egg upright. You can only assist it in coming into that place. Only a light, gentle touch will do.

