

Reviving the ubuntu spirit in landscapes of practice: evidence from deep within the forest

Reviving the
ubuntu spirit

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95

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to offer a humanistic perspective on practice and prompts us to think about some of the implications for a more connected perspective on work and learning.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper takes literary and metaphoric approach to discussion to evoke and engage the audience. It uses the primary device of the thriving of forests to prompt reflection.

Findings – This paper prioritises concepts of sustainability and responsibility and aims to prompt the reader in thinking about connectedness in relation to their own life and work.

Originality/value – This paper attempts to challenge an overly economic concept of work and learning, and offers an alternative humanistic metaphor to evoke and engage the reader. It values and encourages an experimental form of writing.

Keywords Sustainability, Workplace, Responsibility, Connectedness, Humanism, Thriving

Paper type Viewpoint

Contemporary being is framed and marred by commodification and individualism according to many scholars (e.g. Žižek, 2014; Furedi, 2006, 2010). Walk around any large city and you will see advert, upon advert, upon advert, targeting individuals, with commodified items or experiences which aspire to make the individual feel better. Adverts for family health insurance do not target the collective family unit – they target and appeal to the concerns, values, or feelings of the purchaser to act as a responsible individual towards their family. You can walk past a faith establishment and find how they have been commodified – “Church for Hire!” (see Wall and Perrin, 2015, p. 16). You can visit a consumer choice website which generates Best Buy reviews of mobile phones, microwaves, or vacuum cleaners, and even browse Best Buy care home facilities, Best Buy birthing facilities, and Best Buy education. All aspects of life have been commodified towards the enhancement of the individual. The basic elements of life are now commodified: we buy soil from garden centres (earth), we buy fans (wind) for when we are too hot, we buy bottled mineral drinks (water) when we are thirsty, and we buy the earth’s natural gases for when we want heat for cooking (fire).

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A key inspiration for this paper has been the enthusiastic scientists and presenters in the Radio Lab podcast (see www.radiolab.org/story/fromtree-to-shining-tree/) – Annie McEwen, Brenna Farrell, Latif Nasser, Stephanie Tam, Teresa Ryan, Marc Guttman, and Professor Nicholas P. Money at Miami University. The author also thanks an inspirational colleague Vicky Evans for the introduction.



Of course, some might say there are five elements (e.g. in Japanese it can be recognised as 五大 or the “five great”). The fifth element (e.g. 空, *kū*, *sora*) can be translated as “void” and be interpreted in many different ways. The interpretation adopted in the context of this piece is that “void” refers to things beyond everyday experience, but which contain or are the source of strong energy. This might include things like “air”, “heaven”, or “spirit”. This notion, that which is beyond everyday experience but which is very powerful, connects with a psychoanalytical concept of The Real, or that which escapes all symbolisation through words and writing. Yet it has a powerful role in structuring the way we see ourselves and the world around us, as well as the way we think we should engage with that world. It is beyond everyday experience, something we cannot grasp as such. The 1997 movie, *The Fifth Element*, reflects the same meaning here (www.imdb.com/title/tt0119116).

Though it is impossible to “grasp as such” the fifth element, what we can do is point to, approximate, sketch, or circle what we do want to grasp (Wall, 2016). Each and every grasp has implications for how we see and engage in the world constructed by that very grasping. This can be illustrated clearly with reference to social media representations of Donald Trump when he launched his recent presidential campaign. One of the most interesting social media highlights included the post “15 Things That Look More Like Donald Trump Than Donald Trump”. Utterly relevant to approximating the fifth element, the post likened Trump to a number of objects which seemingly captured some aspect of him, without fully or directly capturing the totality of him. For example, amongst the items included:

[...] a piece of sake sushi (a slice/flap of salmon on rice), a doughnut with an extra tall mount/mess of cream on top, an ear (or cob) of corn with wispy strands of silky hair on top, and a triad of monkeys with their mouths open, seemingly making some noise [...] The “15 things” post on face value may be making comments about a particular hair style, but on second gaze, is also making comments about, amongst other things, irony, hedonism, masculinity, managerialism, and exertion of voice and power with others, over others (Wall, 2016, pp. 1-2).

The point is, we can only ever glimpse at the spirit, rather than fully define and understand it – and what we do capture is only ever partial. This stance affords symbolic as well as experiential flexibility in how we perceive and make sense of the world, but also of course, ourselves too – which therefore enables us to relate to the world in new ways. This means that adopting the fifth element, or spirit, offers a sense of flexibility and freedom to engage differently with life, work, and learning – a resource which is deeply powerful but which is also abundant as a basic element of existence (the fifth element).

It is on these grounds that it is interesting to consider an alternative spirit which is available to us, as an alternative to the commodified individualism which is perhaps too readily available in contemporary society (Wall, 2015). The alternative spirit is not new, and some scholars report it has “always been there” with human communities (e.g. Chuwa, 2014, p. 2). The spirit of ubuntu is about “humanness”, or what it means to be human. Wall and Jarvis (2015) have conceptualised this in the context of education, and describe it:

[...] as moving what it means to be human from “I think therefore I am” towards “I am because we are” or “I am because we relate” [...] This is a radical departure from the individualism in many Western educational systems but which instead amplifies the relatedness of an individual, in a social and ecological context. It moves beyond individualistic

learning to contextualised community knowledge creation and sharing [...] To make sense of productivity in terms of this new ontology of being means we have to radically reconceptualise education towards interrelatedness. Ubuntu inspired education practices will be grounded in humanness (placing high value on each individual's needs), belonging (encouraging interconnectedness of students to the learning content and to the learning community), and situatedness (recognising students' ideas and resources based on their cultural and work experiences).

Although the spirit of ubuntu may be a radical reformulation of what it might mean for some of us to engage with our worlds, evidence exists that this collective and connected way of being helps the collective thrive in nature. As it is Lapidus's 20th birthday, let us take inspiration from the Lapidus Tree, and hone in on a recent profound Radio Lab podcast (see www.radiolab.org/story/from-tree-to-shining-tree/). Scientists in this podcast tell us that the roots of trees are actually very ineffective at absorbing water and nutrients from the earth in which it lives and grows, and there was a major missing part of our understanding about how trees and forests thrive. After years of experimentation, it now appears as though the source of thriving is a substantial underground network of fungi which not only connect the trees but which enable them to act as – and for – the wider collective of The Forest.

Looking very closely at the fungi, it looks like a human hair but at a fraction of the width, and is in fact a tube. The tubes are intimately connected to the trees through their roots, significantly expanding the capacity of roots to receive nutrients through the massive network of tubes in the forest. Part of the role of the tube network appears to have a hunting function, collating nutrients and other chemicals that the trees need. The fungi is so powerful with its built in acids, that it can drill through pebbles or stones into pockets of minerals to then transport back to the trees. Indeed, scientists have even found remnants of salmon in trees (apparently once bears are finished eating their tasty salmon treats, they fling them away, and the fungi eventually absorbs the nutrients).

What is even more indicative of an ubuntu spirit is the way the fungi and trees live together. For example, if a tree on the edge of a forest is damaged or senses a form of danger, the network seeks relevant nutrients or other chemicals perhaps from the other end of the forest. The chemicals or minerals may be used to heal the tree, or even to repel the danger, for example, apparently trees can release stench which repel harmful beetles. Another example is when a tree is dying – it appears as though the remaining valuable minerals in the tree are deposited in the network, not only for the wider community to utilise, but is specifically transported to one of the youngest trees. In this way, it seems to have an inbuilt sense of sustaining the wider community. Of course all of this is subject to scientific debate and advancement, but as a working theory of how a forest thrives, it closely resonates with the spirit of ubuntu and its concern for connectedness and collectiveness. Living deep within the forest seems to be a place where belonging and well-being is a priority over individual gain and the commodification of life. What would it be like to be part of the fabric of this sort of landscape? What can we do to start to cultivate this in our everyday experience – so that we can feel connected and collective for greater well-being? For me, weaving the spirit of ubuntu into daily or even sporadic writing and conversations, creates a virtuous cycle of markers or coordinates for us to change, ever so slightly, the world around us. It also places our attention, so we can see and feel in our moment by moment noticing (Ramsey, 2011, 2014), how things are very much connected, collective, and supportive of well-being.

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