

**Stories from Community Cultural Development,
apocryphal or emblematic?
Mining the Seams of Personal Practice.**

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Brian Joyce

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Abstract

The practice of Community Cultural Development (CCD) is shaped by ideals, ethical standards and socially democratic values. Principles of doing good, altruism, social change, participation, collaboration, even ‘community’ itself are embedded as the dominant operating paradigms. CCD practice has thus attracted a number of assumptions and operational touchstones in its brief history. Drawing on stories from 40 years of CCD work, I question how well have I lived up to these standards in my own practice. These stories focus on several specific projects including: *The Ribbons of Steel* project marking the closure of BHP Steelmaking in Newcastle in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW), my writer-in-residency at Windale (NSW), my time with Pipi Storm Childrens’ Circus, and my work with Australian Aboriginal communities. In undertaking this journey the essential questions I address are:

How can stories reveal a deeper understanding of the principles of our work?

What can be understood from these stories of our relationship to the communities in which we work?

Such questions require a deep reflection upon and analysis of my own career. Identifying and investigating the underlying philosophical principles, interrogating how well or not I have applied them, and what lessons I have learned in the struggle to cleave to a principled approach lies at the core of this thesis. While I approach this examination from a particularly individual perspective, I situate my work in the broader practice of CCD to demonstrate how the stories may be emblematic – seams that we can mine for knowledge. In so doing I arrive at a deeper understanding and clarity around what are the essential and foundation impulses and principles of CCD work.

Prologue

I was standing at the gates to BHP Steelworks in Newcastle; it was November 9th 1999. It was the day of the closure of the BHP Steelmaking plant after nearly 90 years of operations and I was not alone. Around me were the families of those who were about to lose their jobs, some two thousand people. BHP was the defining industry of Newcastle. Newcastle was called ‘Steel City’. This assumed reality existed regardless of the fact that both the University of Newcastle and Hunter Health Services had become larger employers in the region: the identity of Newcastle was Steel City and this closure was seen as a betrayal. The closure had been foreshadowed and it was accepted, begrudgingly in some quarters, that it must happen. It was the common story of industrial capitalism: the bottom line overruled any emotional attachments communities or workers had for what they perceived as ‘their’ company. Companies are always owned by shareholders and decisions are always made by Boards of Management and the decision to close the Newcastle Steelworks had been made long ago in the mid 1960s around a table in the BHP Board management offices in Melbourne: they just hadn’t bothered to tell anyone who worked there until recently. A couple of years ago the town received the news BHP steelmaking in Newcastle would soon come to an end. Originally the closing date had been 2005 and this premature closing in 1999 had caught some, many, unprepared. Emotions were running high on this day, on both sides of the gate. Those of us standing outside the company gates could see the BHP Workers (because they could only be referred to as a cohesive identity, a Community with Capital letters) assembling down near the furnaces to walk out the gates for one last time.

I did not work at BHP nor did I have any family who worked there. Like everyone in Newcastle I knew some people who worked there and like everyone in Newcastle I was familiar with the Plant, its varied coloured smoke that clung to washing, the continual trains moving in and out, the gas burning atop chimneys all through the night, sparks in the dusk and dawn, billowing clouds of steam from the cooling towers and coke ovens, loud crashes and booms echoing across the nearby suburbs causing one to stop and wait for a siren. It seemed one had to

drive around the huge site whenever you moved from one suburb to another on the north side of the city - it couldn't be avoided. BHP Steelworks was part of my understanding of Newcastle but I had never worked there, until the last six months.

As part of the closure, the BHP Board had decided to mount an arts festival or program of cultural activities to mark the event. This was to be a tri-partnership with the Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council for the Arts, Newcastle Community Arts Centre and BHP along with some other smaller local cultural organisations. It was to cover a range of arts media from visual arts exhibitions, commissioned writing, videos, live performances, community activities, cultural collecting and curatorial projects, etc. Its brief and vision was also to involve the BHP staff and workers, their families and the surrounding community as much as possible in the activities. At the time I was Artistic Director of a local theatre company, Freewheels Theatre In Education, and I was well known as a Community Cultural Development (CCD) worker with a strong track record for a variety of work often focusing on celebratory performance and working with community participants. I had been approached to consider the role of Artistic Director of this Festival to be called *Ribbons of Steel* - the various strands of the BHP story and experience interpreted and presented across a range of media and cultural outcomes. Like many in the town I was suspicious of what was seen as a sop to the community to allay the fallout of negative public opinion that was expected to accompany the closure. I had turned down the offer and a team of outsiders was brought in from Melbourne, or somewhere - and in the mind of the community it was Melbourne because this was the worst place you could come from, as this was where the BHP Board met.

When it became evident that this *Ribbons of Steel* event was going ahead I was again approached to assist this team. It was recognised there was little local knowledge on the creative team, especially in terms of performance. I was asked to be responsible for the central piece of the festival, a performance season on-site at BHP to mark the closure. It was to be written in collaboration with a committee of representatives from the workers and to incorporate them alongside their

families, other community performers or participants and professional performers. This component of *Ribbons of Steel* was to be overseen by Newcastle Community Arts Centre, for which I had been Chair for some years previously. I accepted the position of Writer and Co-Director of the performance with the intent of being part of a significant moment in the history of Newcastle and wanting to assist in giving voice to the various experiences associated with the history and closure of the site. This production had three performances in a large shed and designated outside area on the BHP site and played to full houses over the weekend 2 weeks previous to the gates closing.

As I now stood at the gates I noticed many of the cast, participants and audience in the crowd around me and amongst those walking towards me from inside the BHP site. When the two groups met it was an outpouring of emotion. Families and friends called for one another in the throng and came together like metal filings around magnets. The sound of back-slapping and congratulations, affirmations of 'bloody good', 'right' and 'on yer' attached themselves to nothing in particular other than a general sense of pride and achievement in this moment of ending. This was definitely an event in Newcastle history. I stood there thinking all the stories I had written and told only a few weekends ago were simply beginnings.

Out of the throng Dave Egan approached me. Dave worked in the Coke Ovens on the plant and had been sceptical when we first met - about the whole project and anything I had brought to them. His was a common enough response to our initial approach. He ended up being a performer in the final show, performing alongside a Butoh dance group from Sydney, quite a journey for him over the past 4 months, on top of him losing his employment. He approached me with his two kids hanging off his legs, his arms down around their shoulders. He wasn't crying but you could see he had been. He stood in front of me and looked down at his kids to explain to them.

"This is the fella who did the show"

They looked at me and kept hanging onto his legs as he shifted his gaze to me.

“This wouldn’t be like this if you hadn’t done that show.” He gestured to the people around us. “Thanks a lot. I mean it thanks, it made a difference. Good on yer,” and he leaned forward.

We hugged while I said “Thank you” and we slapped each other on the shoulder as we parted.

The raw emotion of the event was washing over me after that, when Steve Ford a shop foreman and small meticulous man who had used the cultural festival as an opportunity to learn about photography waved to me. Photography was an activity he always wanted to pursue, maybe even as a business, and now it looked like he might have the time. He came over to where I was standing. He was a more considered man, more thoughtful than Dave. It gave me the opportunity to gather myself. It was the first I had seen him since the performances.

“Glad you came.”

“Yea” I answered enthusiastically, thinking it was a question. He smiled and I knew it wasn’t.

He nodded at me in the reserved masculine code of the site, which seemed slightly at odds in the current environment but which I now understood contained much more than its minimalist gestures. “You did good, thanks.”

And again I said, “Thank you”, and I meant it. We chatted and looked around at the crowd. I asked him why he didn’t have his camera with him and he showed me he did, slung behind his shoulder.

He looked around at all his mates and fellow workers. “Just not taking photos at the moment.”

The crowd was moving around like a single entity, workers from all parts of the site. Slowly small groups, families mostly, started to move away, there was to be a picnic at a local park and another at a local club. Across the crowd I saw ‘Aub’ (Aubrey) Brooks. He was one of the main spokespeople for the workers, a long-time employee from a family of BHP workers with over 125 years of service between them and one of the main voices in shaping the *Ribbons of Steel* project, because he wanted it to be “right, ‘n the truth”. When we first met I recognised him as someone I had to be on good terms with and who would not tolerate ‘stuff ups’ or excuses. He had seen me after the first performance and been pleased, especially as I had made changes, adding more material only a few hours before the first performance and sought him out to run it past him. I had not extended the same courtesy to the senior management and bosses. He caught my eye between the heads. He raised his chin and gave me a nod and I returned it with a smile – the minimalist code. Aub didn’t smile, he was serious with me, he saved his laughter for those he had known for longer than six months but I was pleased to receive his acknowledgement and acceptance in this, his place.

This event and these incidents provoked a number of questions and issues for me, about who I am and what I do, about my role and practice as a CCD worker. The practice of CCD is shaped as much by ideals and principles of what is usually referred to as socially democratic values. As such it is often aspirational in its application: we set goals of high ethical standards of action and motivation. How well have I lived up to these in my work? Such questions require a deeper reflection upon and analysis of my career over the past 40 years. Investigating these underlying philosophical principles, identifying them and interrogating how well or not I have applied them and what lessons I have learned in the struggle to cleave to them lies at the core of what follows. What is my relationship to the communities I have been involved with and how might the stories that describe these interactions provide insight into these issues? Addressing these questions is the journey of this thesis.