

## Reimagining Ourselves and Our Work: A Challenge to My Fellow Anthropologists Some Thoughts upon Receiving the 2008 Omar Stewart Award

Pennie L. Magee<sup>1</sup>

*"In order to continually reimagine ourselves through our work lives, we must have a part of us that belongs to something beyond the status quo" (Whyte 2001:169).*

I am honored to receive the 2008 Omar Stewart award from the High Plains Society for Applied Anthropology. I know that many of the previous recipients of this award have a much more direct connection than I do to Dr. Stewart and his work. But I believe that we all share his deep conviction that anthropology is relevant in the here and now, and that it is our calling as anthropologists to confidently, yet with great humility and compassion, step into the fray.

I'd like to share with you two experiences that have shaped my thinking recently about what it is, exactly, that we are meant to do as anthropologists.

In January of this year I was completely tapped out from the demands of a profoundly unsatisfying consulting contract. Recognizing that the time had come for some solitary reflection, I packed some simple provisions, two bottles of wine, and my dog into my car and headed for a small cabin in the Rocky Mountains. I felt my numbed senses come alive again on my walks with my dog, as the fierce winter winds challenged my breath and whipped icy tears into my eyes. Every nerve in my body stood on alert in the evening darkness when the fur on my dog's back ridged sharply into a clear sign of alarm at some unseen presence hovering near the lonely dirt road upon which we trod.

Each time I returned to my cabin after one of these encounters with the harsh elements of nature, I was grateful for the comforts I found there: warmth, food, drink, my favorite books, an impossibly complex jigsaw puzzle depicting glorious beetles, and best of all, utter silence.

I woke up each morning before sunrise, took my dog out for a quick walk, made some tea,

turned off all the lights, and opened the curtains of just one window. For a full hour I sat, watching the sun gradually cast its glow on the north face of the mountain range. Each evening I observed the same ritual, watching the sun's light fade into darkness and bring out the stars in the icy velvet night sky.

I found a comfortable rhythm over those five days, alternately nestling in the snug cave of the cabin and striding out into the cold and wind of the winter mountains, always attuned to the changing light. Looking back on that time, I realize that I had created an effective way to clear out my body, mind and soul of the clinging cobwebs of doubt and frustration about my current work and my role in it.

When my mind had quieted a bit, and my body had reawakened, I felt ready to listen to another's perspective. I reached for the poet and corporate consultant David Whyte's *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity*. His words rang clear and true to me, "The antidote to exhaustion is wholeheartedness" (Whyte 2001:132). And, "The severest test of work today is not of our strategies but of our imaginations and identities. For a human being, finding good work and doing good work is one of the ultimate ways of making a break for freedom" (ibid.:60). And then,

"Good work done in the same way for too long, or done in the wrong way for any amount of time, eats away our sense of being right with the world. Often, in order to stay alive, we have to *unmake* a living in order to get back to *living* the life we wanted for ourselves. It is this cycle of making, disintegration, and remaking that is the hallmark of meaningful and creative work" (ibid.:76-77).

I knew I was not living wholeheartedly; in fact I was barely living halfheartedly in that moment as I contemplated my work. I had been

consumed by the rigid and unforgiving aspects of the client corporation. Imagination and delight were not permitted in that work environment, as people kept their heads down and their voices metaphorically low so that they would not become the next targets of a merger or layoff. Even though key people in the organization acknowledged that the research and recommendations I offered were relevant and well-founded, I could not gain traction to move the project into the implementation phase.

I saw that it was time to “unmake a living” so that I could move forward. I decided not to continue with the project and with the client. I could not lower my own voice just to stay on the consultant payroll. I deeply believed in the data and perspective I had provided them. But I understood that it was not going to be my time to harvest the seeds I had planted. I could be content to have been the seed planter and to let my ideas grow on their own merits.

I returned home refreshed and ready to approach my next work project with renewed wisdom and energy. I soon found myself invited to participate in a three-day summit. Our task was to think about how we might respond to the growing evidence that we are on the brink of a cliff where reside the dragons of the end of fossil fuels and the market economy, along with multiple disasters stemming from climate change. I accepted the invitation because I thought it would be interesting to see what I could contribute to the discussion as an anthropologist.

On that Friday morning of the first day of the summit, I joined some thirty others in a hotel conference room in a hotel in Boulder. We sat in a large circle, and introduced ourselves by name and with a brief explanation of why we had come to this place on this morning. Outside, the chill wind howled and keened, rattling doors and windows. The harsh smell of industrial-grade disinfectant mingled with the thick odor of kitchen grease from the hotel's restaurant in the space adjoining our meeting room. We could hear the muffled voices of newscasters and sports announcers coming from the television on the bar.

With the preliminaries out of the way, the facilitator invited a petite woman in long,

embroidered skirts to open the sacred space. She knelt on the sterile, institutional carpet and laid out a large cloth rich in symbols and words of blessing in calligraphic form. She placed a candle at each of the four directions and lit them. As she invited us to offer prayers of thanksgiving and of blessing, she lit a bundle of sage and let its smoky herbal scent waft over us.

As the hours came and went, I encountered a very different experience than what I had envisioned would take place. The facilitator, a psychotherapist, was ultimately unskilled at guiding a healthy group dynamic. The weekend became a dive – not to say near-sinking – into a bottomless pool of fear: fear of loss of material comforts, fear of death, of massive plagues, fear of war, fear of political oppression, of torture, of starvation, of friendly and hostile aliens from outer space, and so on.

At one point on the second day, as emotions were running untrammelled, someone suggested that we all join hands in a circle. Suddenly the tumultuous emotion took on a life of its own, and people began wailing, tears running down their faces. It was a palpable, living entity in the room. As the facilitator encouraged the outpouring, I understood very concretely how the 1978 mass suicides in Jonestown, Guyana could have happened. I looked around me and found a half dozen kindred souls who were doing their best to hold the space intact. The experience felt profoundly wrong to me. It was not a healing catharsis; rather, it was an exploitation of people's very real and deeply felt fears of the unknown.

In the days following the summit, I tried to more fully understand what I had witnessed. I began to understand how mob violence and self-destruction can happen, and I saw how easy it is to manipulate human emotion for one's own ends. I also understood in a very visceral way how much fear is out there about our human future on this our planet Earth.

The words of deep ecologist and Buddhist Joanna Macy reminded me that there is another way. In 1978, she chaired a week-long session titled “The Prospects of Human Survival” at a conference hosted by Notre Dame. She set the tone of the session by asking participants to introduce themselves via their personal

experiences of how the global crisis had affected their lives. She wrote that in the process, emotions came to the surface, "touch[ing] some raw nerve connecting us all... I learned two things that week: that the pain for the world which I carried around inside me was widely and deeply shared; and that something remarkable happened when we expressed it to each other. Instead of miring ourselves in doom and gloom, the opposite had happened. We had turned some key that unlocked our vitality" (Macy 2000 In Plotkin 2008:367).

Since I first wrote down my thoughts for accepting this award, we in the U.S. have seen a rapid unraveling of our economy, and we have lived through many weeks of unnerving political discourse leading up to the presidential election. In this globalized world, all nations are connected, and so we see that our domestic problems have a ripple effect on the rest of the world. The future is uncertain, and we have a choice to make. How are we going to respond to our current situation? Are we going to respond with fear, or are we going to step up and make our anthropological perspective newly relevant?

Can we, as anthropologists, find the key that unlocks our vitality? We can and must be involved in the profound change we see all around us. We may feel uncertain about the outcome of this change, but we have a crucial set of tools to offer those around us. Because fieldwork is the cornerstone of our knowledge, we share a grounded understanding about the processes of change in communities, whether caused by natural disasters, government policies, or grassroots movements. We know how different groups of people achieve self-determination, protect their environments, and defend their lands and livelihoods.

Each of us has particular areas of interest and experience as practicing anthropologists. Can we take another look at what we think about our personal expertise, and ask ourselves to recalibrate what we think we know. For example, are we willing to reexamine our assumptions about the pre-agricultural communities we and our ancestral colleagues have studied, in light of our new understanding about the place of fossil fuels in our future? Too often we frame the research with the assumption,

even unconsciously, that these communities are in some way "less than" because they live without the ubiquitous presence of petroleum and electricity. Can we imagine what we would see differently if we had spent our time in these communities because we believed that we could learn from them how to live within a small carbon footprint instead? How might we reframe our understanding of all we think we "know" about our ethnographic work? In the process of rethinking our assumptions, might it not be possible to discover newly relevant implications for our changing world?

It is tempting to be content to hope that our local and national leaders will find a way to solve the current political, economic, and environmental crises. But as David Whyte observes,

"Almost always when we ask hard questions about leaders and leadership, we have to ask hard questions of ourselves, too. We have to take an inventory not only of the gifts we have to give but of the gifts we are afraid of receiving. What are we afraid of, what stops us from speaking out and claiming the life we want for ourselves?" (Whyte 2001:54).

Whyte was speaking primarily to those who work in corporations when he said this, but I believe we must ask ourselves the same questions when we think about how and why we carry out our work as anthropologists. What are we afraid of? What stops us from looking at the world as it is today, instead of as it has been or as we wish it were? How can each of us reexamine our gifts and use them in new ways? How can we open ourselves to new gifts that can give fresh meaning to our personal lives while at the same time helping our neighborhoods and towns meet the coming challenges? ○

## Notes

1. Pennie L. Magee holds a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Florida (1990). Her current interests include energy and food production issues. She may be reached by mail at 398 Leonard's Road, Boulder, Colorado, 80302, USA, by telephone at 303.473.9994, and by e-mail at [pmagee@indra.com](mailto:pmagee@indra.com).

## References

Macy, Joanna

2000 *Widening Circles*. Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers.

Plotkin, Bill

2008 *Nature and the Human Soul: Creating Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World*. Novato, California: New World Library.

Whyte, David

2001 *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity*. New York: Riverhead Books.