

ECCI-9 “Transformations”
Lodz, Poland - September 2005

PRACTITIONER’S PRESENTATION

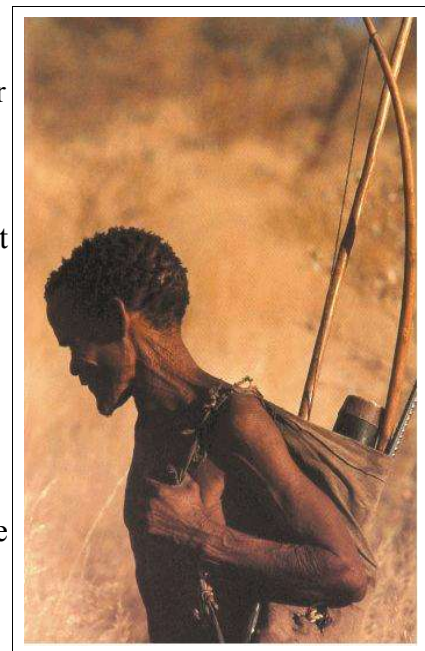
A Hunter’s Story. The struggle for balance between routine, innovation and creativity.
by Marcel van der Pol, Keridwen, training & performance

The Great Dance

This is a presentation of a trainer/consultant in the creative field, who is also a biologist and a theatre maker. This is not a scientific presentation, based on elaborate research. In this presentation I like to share with you some of my experiences and reflections on creativity, starting with the story of the hunter and gatherer, who is still living somewhere deep down in all of us:

Imagine this hunter. Still part of the natural world he follows his hunger. He perceives the traces. Carefully he steals upon his prey. If he succeeds, there is enough food for the days to come. If he fails... more hungry days... maybe even death. There is so much to consider, so many impulses to interpret. The hunter tunes in with his surroundings. He knows how to get the best changes to prevail. He has done it so many times. Most of his actions are reflexes. But he stays alert. The interactions between him, his prey and nature are like a dance: leading, following, planning and improvising. That’s what our hunter calls the Great Dance of Life.

As a trainer/consultant I like to use this San (Kalahari Bushmen) metaphor of “The Great Dance” very much. I like this for three reasons. First, creativity is like a hunter’s dance: get into the moment, tune in, open up, follow, lead, and create. That’s the balance of routine and improvisation. Secondly, using a metaphor is also an adequate way of getting out of the moment and into a different point of view, like the San’s view. Thirdly, ethology and ecology easily provide me with the right metaphors to work with.



Dynamic balance

From a biological point of view the described hunter is part of an ecosystem, a dynamic balance. An ecosystem may be as small as a tidal pool or a rotting log or as large as an ocean or a continent-spanning forest. Each ecosystem consists of a community of plants and animals in an environment that supplies them with raw materials for life, i.e., chemical elements and water. The ecosystem is delimited by the climate, altitude, water and soil characteristics, and other physical conditions of the environment. Dynamic balance means it takes energy to maintain an ecosystem. If you remove the energy, the balance shifts and finally the ecosystem falls apart. When a disturbance occurs, the ecosystem itself (all the dynamic interactions between the living and nonliving components), will counteract the disturbance. If the disturbance is small enough for the ecosystem to handle, it will restore the balance. If the disturbance is too big, the ecosystem will collapse. If so, nature has to start from scratch for building up a new and complex ecosystem.

What does the dynamic balance mean for our hunter? For him and his kind, the most adequate way of survival, including the road to prosperity, is staying part of the ecosystem. Survival means knowing everything about you in relation to your environment, so you can optimize your hunting routines (minimize the risk, maximize the success). Innovation means carefully reorganizing known behavioural patterns, tactics, tools and techniques for greater successes. Creativity means thinking 'out of the box', improvising, quick and adequate responding to a new and unpredictable situation. If you are not able to be creative in the right moment, you are doomed. For our hunter the Great Dance of Life means just that: optimizing the routine, adjusting by innovations and being creative when necessary.

A white pebble for a black rhino



In East-Africa I came over an intriguing custom, practised by adolescents of a hunting society. They proved their capability of being an adequate hunter by stealing upon a black rhino and putting a stone on his head. The black rhino is a ferocious animal and very fast. One wrong move and your hunting life is over. Imagine you are such an adolescent. Highly focussed you approach the rhino from behind and against the wind. You perceive all kinds of external stimuli. You filter, select and assess the sensory input. You compare with your best-known best practise (your routine). Inch after inch you crawl closer by. You are so

alert! What does that high pitched sound mean that comes from the left? Is it relevant? Is it dangerous? Will the rhino react? Will rhino flee or attack?

Right at the moment your hand with the white pebble move above the rhino's ears, something happens (maybe some small bird raises its alarm call). Instantly the rhino is aware of your presence too close by for his comfort.

This custom is very dangerous. For our hunter it's a matter of life and death. As long as the hunter he is able to assess the input of external stimuli and to react adequately, he is rather in control of the situation.

If you are this hunter, what will you do?

If you react based on routine, you know what to do. You can choose between several familiar options: freezing (and hoping the rhino forgets you are there), running for your life (the rhino is much faster than you are), climbing a tree (if you can find one in time), praying (and hoping your prayer will be fulfilled). However, I expect reflexes will take over.

If you react based on innovation, you reflected on the ritual beforehand. You must have seen your elders performing this same custom. They told you about it. They taught you how to do it yourself. While reflecting on their experiences and their teachings, you probably will rearrange all the facts you know about the rhino, about the situation, about the custom and about yourself. After that you'll probably innovate a more adequate 'hunting proving'-practise.

If you react based on creativity, you won't consciously know what to do. The subconsciousness or unconsciousness takes over and you improvise. Possibly due to the enormous stress of the situation you fall 'out of the box' and you find a complete new solution to your problem.

I made a little fun of this black rhino-adventure. However, I do have a tremendous respect for all those adolescent hunters trying to prove themselves by putting a small pebble between the ears of a life black rhino. I like telling their story quite often when facilitating my "develop your artistic-creativity" workshops. Innovative and creative techniques, like we exchange during congresses like this 9th ECCI-congress, can be used for solving varied problems. Of course we are quite capable of that (no need to invent a proving ritual). Most of us no longer are hunters and gatherers. Step by step we became relatively independent from our surrounding world. To some extent we are in control of our ecosystem. We use innovational and creativity-techniques for shaping our own future.

Instant creativity

In my creativity-workshops I am interested in the hunter-metaphor: this instant creativity of the adolescent hunter. If he is able to create and sustain a dynamic balance between routine, innovation and creativity he can enhance tremendously his chances of survival. He can build up a routine (or different alternative routines) He can discover and implement an innovation (or innovations). Still, on the supreme moment it can happen that both routine and innovation fail. Then he needs all his creative powers. A more sustainable dynamic balance makes adequate innovations and creations possible.

The participants in my workshop try to optimize that dynamic balance; that is the balance of routine, innovation and creativity in the here-and-now. So many people go for routine in situations, where routine isn't the best solution. I think that people need to understand the surrounding world. They like to control their situation. In every society people tell each other stories about themselves and their world, about how and why and what to do. When you know those stories, you know most things you have to know about life, about the past, about the world you live in, and about possible challenges to come. That kind of knowledge makes it possible to predict and to anticipate. Then there is no need anymore to be constantly and totally aware of all external stimuli you encounter. You know what to do. You can select and assess and choose what's important in the here-and-now. That's safety. That's what I call "the circle of safe playing" (a gift from my theatrical background).

Circle of safe playing

People need to have a circle of safe playing. Otherwise they have to be constantly and totally alert. Whenever you think you understand the situation you are in (you are able to predict and to anticipate, even control) the circle of safe playing is there. Now there is enough energy left for new opportunities. For young children this circle of safe playing is very important. Their process of understanding the world has just begun. Propose to a child that you read out its favourite story and you are obliged to stay on the right reading track. No change is allowed. Perhaps with a smile, maybe sulking, the child will correct you every time. Of course the predictability of the story reflects its need for a predictable world, his circle of safe playing.

This anecdote of the child and its favourite story is often told to me as a good example of how bad children are able of being creative. No way! In my opinion children are very creative! They are just in the process of establishing their basic circle of safe playing. The whole world is still a great wonder to them. What do all those external stimuli mean? Please, let me find myself a circle of safe playing, so I can go and explore the world.

Working with small children I try and help them to establish their circle of safe playing, by giving them the opportunity to predict, to anticipate, to be in control. When they succeed, they are more than willing to challenge the unknown. For example, let them give you permission to change the story. Let them provide you with new ingredients, new names and new situations.

Exploring the unknown

When children are master in their own circle of safe playing, they are very good in make-believe. Maybe you do remember the Roald Dahl-story about snakes and quicksand. A child is playing on his own in a large room with a yellow and black patched carpet. In his fantasies 'yellow' is sand (safe ground or quicksand) and 'black' is a snake-pit. If this child really wants to cross the room safely, he has to jump from one yellow patch to the next. What will happen, if the sand really is quicksand? What will happen, if the distance between sand patches is impossible to cross? Dahl increases the suspense in his story. You almost believe the child will never cross the room safely. And then he falls. The child hears the snakes hiss beneath his feet.

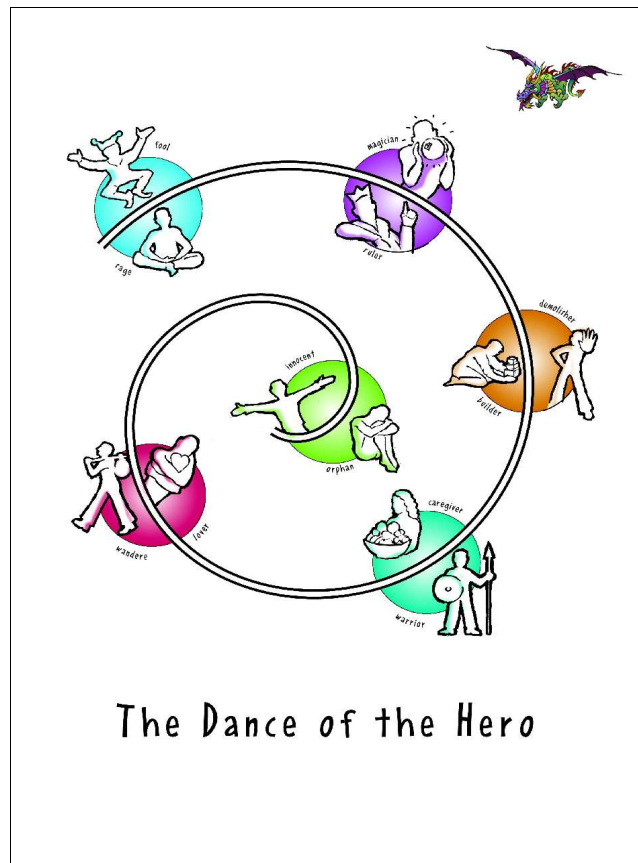
I always wonder what will happen, when outside the room the bell of the ice-cream retailer sounds. I guess that the child won't die in his attempt to cross this room full of snakes and quicksand. He will enjoy his ice-cream. When the ice-cream is finished he just steps back into his fantasies and again he has to fight for his life.

This child knows how to wander in his dynamic balance of routine, innovation and creativity. Within this child the hunter is still alive.

How about us, the adults, the professionals? The society we live in is rather complex, with many challenges (no problems naturally) and very demanding. Are we still able to handle all those external stimuli? Is the internal hunter still alert? What is the quality of our circle of safe playing? Be honest, and carefully scrutinize your own circle of safe playing, your own dynamic balance between routine, innovation and creativity. Isn't it so, that quite a lot of people prefer the routine in thinking, feeling and acting? Isn't it so, that the world changes that fast we have to establish new circles of safe playing time and time again? First by clutching at every bit of routine we know. Then, when a small circle of safe playing resurrects from chaos, by carefully exploring new possibilities of innovation and creativity. In a constantly changing world we spend too much time in building up circles of safe playing. Almost no time or any energy is left for instant creativity. Instead of providing for adequate circles of safe playing, the dynamic balance between routine, innovation and creativity tends to degenerate into a static balance of rooted patterns. What would the chances be of our hunter within with rooted patterns?

Wake up call

The aim of my workshops is being a wake-up call for the hunter within to crush his rooted patterns. I want to help this hunter finding back the assurance he or she is master in his or her own circle of safe playing. I want to guide the hunter within being ready for instant creativity when necessary and innovations when desired. When the hunter within gets the chance to come out again, current creative problem solving sessions will be far more successful. It is not just that the problem solving techniques differed, neither that the perspective on the problem at hand moved; the workers on the problem, they themselves changed. They released their own hunters. They discovered that when the hunter is master in his own circle of safe playing then instant creativity is having fun in putting a white pebble between the ears of a black rhino. They experienced that the state mind of the hunter putting a white pebble between the ears of a black rhino makes unexpected creative solutions and innovations possible.



The Dance of the Hero

Helping people to release their own hunters within, I preferably make use of my ‘impro-theatre of metaphors’, like “The Dance of the Hero”. In the workshops people create their own metaphors for situations, questions or problems. Next they step into their metaphorical story. Then they let it go. The story becomes an unexpected adventure (about hunters, pebbles and rhinos?). The storyteller changes into a play actor, the principal character or the protagonist. How will this story unfold? That depends on the protagonist’s instant creativity. Stepping in and out of the story at will gives the storyteller the experience of being master in his or her own circle of safe playing. Going with the flow of his own story, the protagonist is condemned of getting lost. He endures what he doesn’t know he knows. He encounters certainties and options, possibilities and impossibilities, grave dangers and great successes. He can go for advice and aid to other heroes and heroines living within, too. Desiring to get a second chance the protagonist always can change back into the storyteller and start a different version of the story.



Theatre Masqué

Of course you can make use of nonverbal versions of the ‘impro-theatre of metaphors’, like ‘Theatre Masqué’ (= the 9th ECCI-workshop ‘Masqueraid’). By preventing people using verbal language you prevent cognitive logic thinking as well. Put an empty mask on someone’s face and you change him into a puppet on a string. Change the storyteller into the puppet master and the puppet becomes the protagonist of the story. The unfolding story reflects on the surface of the empty mask. It is easy for both puppet and puppet master to get lost on the story’s pathless way.

Finding the treasure

Both in the verbal and the nonverbal version of the ‘impro-theatre of metaphors’ people experience they finally become like hunters skilled in putting a white pebble between the ears of a black rhino. The circle of safe playing is established and the dynamic balance became really dynamic and flexible. That makes a good starting-point for finding really creative solutions or the treasure or whatever you are after.



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Marcel van der Pol

Sources of Inspiration:

1. Johnstone, Keith; **Impro**.
2. Johnstone, Keith; **Impro for storytellers**.
3. Zipe, Jack; **Creative Storytelling**.
4. Morris Desmond; **The naked ape**.
5. Stanilavski, K; **An actors handbook**
6. Erickson, Milton H.; **My voice will go with you**
7. Pearson, Carol S; **The hero within: six archetypes we live by**

8. Sams, Jamie; **Dancing the dream**
9. Storm, Hyemeyohsts; **Seven arrows**
10. Van der Pol, Marcel; **The dance of the hero (the book)**
11. Van der Pol, Marcel; **The dance of the hero (the internet-game)** on www.thedanceofthehero.nl, spring 2006).

About....

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Marcel van der Pol and Keridwen offer combinations of training, coaching, and performances to individuals and organisations who want to be on the move or to remain strong and playful.

Marcel van der Pol is the driving force behind Keridwen. By trade he is biologist. Since 1986 Marcel has been active as a lecturer in higher education, as a trainer/coach in management skills, in teaching/training skills, in personal growth and artistic-creative development and as a theatre maker.

Workshops/training:

Tales & Theatre

(playful instruments in creative problem solving - ECCI-8 Enschede)

The Dance of Creation

(from questions to answers in a journey through fantasy - ECCI-9 Mainz)

The Gordian Egg

(mobilising creativity in thinking, feeling and doing)

The Dance of the Hero

(your discovery of personal leadership with a little help of some heroic friends)

The Bird of Paradise

(about developing organisational cultures)

The Arrow in the Bull's eye

(tales & theatre as educational instruments; relaxed, playful and effective teaching and training)

Performances:

- **A King needs a Dragon**

- **My Grandfather Redhead**

- **Rich as a Queen**

- **Pax Vobiscum**

- **Egoongoon in Ngorongoroland**

- **Jakob**

- **Red Sand on Greenland**