

CBODN's OD-ICD SIG

"Forging Identity in the Fiery Furnace of International Affairs"

Atim Eneida George

September 23, 2010, 6:30 to 9:00 pm

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Meeting Notes

Opening and Introductions

Eighteen participants were present from diverse backgrounds. Chief George began the meeting with a participatory exercise called, "That's Me." She then asked participants to introduce themselves with their names, by sharing what was written on a card they had drawn from a box, and to say why they were here.

Overview of OD/ICD SIG and Ground Rule

Kristen Barney, SIG Leader, provided an overview of the SIG Mission and Principles, and reviewed the Chatham House Rule (see <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/about/chathamhouserule/>), under which the meeting's discussions were conducted to support a safe environment for deep sharing.

Readings

Atim George read three addresses she had written for other occasions. Overall these pieces focused on the individual act of choosing to be powerful and creative when facing overwhelming odds, and the legacy that the courageous acts of our ancestors leave for our identity as change agents today. Ms. George read the pieces, described below, as though she were speaking to the original audiences and simultaneously to the OD/ICD participants.

- › **Let's JAM**, a speech honoring Jazz Appreciation Month (April 2003) in Lagos, Nigeria, focusing on Jazz as a gift from African ancestors to the world and as an instrument of healing, survival, and transformation that honors all humans as kin.
- › **Jadesola Akande's Unfinished Business: A Tribute**, celebrates the lifework of late Professor Akande, a self-proclaimed "unrepentant feminist" who tirelessly promoted civic participation in Nigeria to help the vulnerable, the marginalized and under-served. The Tribute urges us to take up the Professor's "unfinished business."
- › **Who Is She and What is She to You?**, tells the story of Atim's great, great, paternal grandmother, and the action she chose to take at the moment her two small sons were taken from her to be sold on the slave auction block in Richmond, VA. By "[transcending] her socially ascribed status as victim to become an actor, able to effect change, however small or incremental," she left a guiding legacy to subsequent generations, including to Atim, for whom her great-great grandmother's action is an "essential ingredient in my efforts to understand who I am in this complex, dynamic and rapidly globalizing world," and is something Atim chooses to pass on to others.

At the end of the readings Atim opened the floor for sharing.

Discussions and Sharing of Collages

Participants shared initial reactions to the pieces, and during the conversation Atim discussed her collage artwork. The following themes emerged from the conversation:

- › **Our Ancestors: Their Choices and Our Resources.** The choices of our ancestors live in us today. We are here because of them, yet we forget to honor them or see them as a resource. "What would the ancestors say?" Do we listen and heed them? The wisdom has been available for millennia. We don't need to know their full stories. Their blood flows in our veins and we can draw on that.

Ultimately we have one common ancestor. "Beneath the skin, we are all kin." Ubuntu is an African tradition that says, "I am because we are; we are because I am." It was appropriated to throw off apartheid.

Wisdom can be simple, such as instructing children, "ya'll pray," when they are to be auctioned into slavery; it does not have to be complex. It is within us, and it can be found in our ancestral traditions.

Sankofa is a West African principle meaning, "go back and get it." It is represented by a heart or by a bird with its back turned and egg in its mouth, meaning that ancient solutions can be powerful and helpful. For example, mud brick housing can be appropriate and effective.

- ▶ **Art and Spirituality as Resources for Courage and Creativity.** As discussed in the book, *The Seven Life Lessons of Chaos*, chaos gives rise to innovation and creativity. Living in a place like Nigeria teaches us to benefit from chaos. A term for creating is "gathering medicine," meaning gathering that which heals or combining multiple traditions that heal and move things forward. "Putting together" is the quintessentially African American way of joining two kinds of consciousness in within a single brown body. Putting things together is a creative act that generates something new. For example, fire and water make steam.

Creating artwork is a valuable method for processing what is happening, for exploring polarities and paradoxes, and for expressing discontent. Through it we can embrace that which is different.

Artwork can also raise issues. For example a picture of a girl with one leg, called the "One Legged Beauty Queen," raises the issue of land mines. It raises the question about humanity, "why do we create these devices?" We live in the same house we all build.

The vertical (human-divine) connection allows us to be connected horizontally (human-human). We need to love the divine in others even if we don't love their beliefs and actions. How can we focus our energies on the good in people? Thich Nhat Hanh's approach to Buddhism is a valuable resource.

- ▶ **Embrace Paradox and Set the Planetary House in Order.** There is paradox in the fact that we discover the individual by discovering the collective, and we can discover the collective by discovering the individual. The more attention we give to either end of a paradox, the more we can discover the other. Living in another culture, we can see the paradoxes; that helps us to see the paradoxes in our own culture or country. There are paradoxes in developing countries (e.g., in Nigerian, "everything is possible and impossible"). There are also paradoxes in the US, such as the U.S. Capitol, a major symbol of freedom, being built by slave labor. And that in America -- one of the richest countries in the world -- one in seven people lives under the poverty line. Seeing paradox in another country allows us to embrace it in our own.

We need to set our planetary house in order. There's a lot to be proud of, and at the same time there seems to be a selfish streak or lack of generosity in current discourse. We need to muster courage to slow down and course correct.

- ▶ **Implications for Intervention.** There is perseverance and determination in nations we work with. What does that mean for lender country? What is going forward? There are paradigm shifts in how we think about these relationships.

Following the discussion, Atim shared a symbol and two stories:

- ▶ Atim drew a symbol: a spiral/question mark with a cowry shell as the dot at the bottom. For her the symbol says: "Question Authority; it is healthy in a democracy!"
- ▶ Atim told two stories, one about animals traveling to a feast who took a shortcut and got caught in a trap with the traditional African trickster character. Because they told the truth, they were able to free themselves. A second story was about two "Area Boys," (toughs or thugs) who tried to

trick a wise old man by asking him whether a bird in their hands was alive or dead. By not falling for their trick, he turned their attention back to their power and choices, saying that its life was in their hands.

After the stories, the group divided into small groups for discussions of the readings and conversation.

Take Aways

The group convened and individuals shared what they or their group had drawn together as their “take aways” for the evening. Major themes are presented below:

- › **Living in Our Own Worlds – Moving Out of Our Own Worlds.** We are all living in our own mental world, with our own lenses and perspectives, even when we share a house and kinship. The fun and challenge are to build bridges between worlds.

There are paradoxes at all levels: within countries and institutions, and within individuals as we live out polarities like fear and love. We are in paradox in relation to the world.

- › **Choosing How to Focus One’s Energy.** How can we transfer connections we do make to generate positive change? It’s nice when we can feel good by sharing connection, and, how do we keep having an impact and causing action?

There is a struggle between creating peace (e.g., in making artwork, in using multiple lenses, and in focusing on healing and commonalities), and impetus for change (e.g., feeling anger about realities like those faced by the great, great, grandmother). One has to live with anger, and one also has to survive. One can’t be angry all the time. How do we create peace and still create an action? If we are taking the postmodernist approach of always looking through different lenses, does that mean there are no actual realities and injustices? If we focus on healing and commonalities, where does that leave the push for change?

There is something called the “truth of reality.” When I am aware of it, there is freedom. It doesn’t have me and I can face it. We can rationalize things away in our minds. For example, if one continually avoids managing one’s finances, one avoids the “truth of reality.” Seeing what one truly needs to address sets one free.

- › **Commitment to Action.** We can see our people and villages as needing to grow, just like a farm. When we see the apple withering on the branch, we ask why. We investigate: was there too much sun, were there insects? We do something about the withering. We may have different lenses and we can all see withering happen. We can see when a woman is withering and needs support. (For example, when women get caught in human trafficking.) Part of the solution is to not stay in one’s own perspective, and to be open to different ones.

The prescription to act is quintessentially American: we invented the rocking chair to be in motion and go nowhere. We have the belief we can have an impact. This sometimes works out well, as we can see in the example of the Old Post Office Pavilion. Citizens got involved and found a way to renovate that cost less than tearing down.

- › **The Dynamics of Helping and Being Helped.** There is also the question of whether the apple withering on the branch is willing to participate, willing to be helped. Sometimes with women in development there can be resistance.

Resistance can be a form of listening. It’s a starting place. The withering apple drops and the seeds are planted.

- › **Working at Multiple Levels of System.** We need to work at different levels of system, the fruit, trunk, and roots. In particular we need to pay attention to the roots. Sometimes men sit and watch women wither.