

Braziers Park - A brief account 2004 to 2007.

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Introductory notes

Like any long-established human group, Braziers has become multi-layered and multi-stranded and different participants and observers may recall remarkably different events and impressions over the same period of time. Processes at different depths may apparently be going in opposite directions simultaneously. The same meeting may be experienced by some of those present as wonderful and the best ever, by others as horrendous and never to be repeated...

The following is an attempt to provide an overview. It inevitably omits a great deal, and many individual incidents could be pointed at that reinforce my conclusions and perceptions, or totally counter them. Even so, I think what is written here would be accepted as a fair summary by most of those involved.

Crisis

Various long term weaknesses became acute in 2004. Few new Members had been admitted to the Society, (whilst the existing membership aged, in some cases ceasing to take an active role) and the resident community had also gained few new members in recent years (and several moved on, for various reasons) There were several constructive weekends under the title 'Aims and Values', but this process was not followed through to consensual resolution. Communication within the organisation and the resident group was frequently argumentative and emotive and during 2004 became particularly acrimonious. The flow of overseas volunteers was diminishing (there was one particularly critical review of Braziers on a website for international volunteers). At the same time, fewer groups were using the facilities, and very few events organised by Braziers were taking place, or attracting enough paying participants to contribute much to the finances. Income was declining. This gave weight to the question of financial viability, which was the subject of a commissioned report. (Conclusions were pessimistic about the viability of continuing to operate the site successfully).

The financial pressure was indicative of a deeper crisis of confidence – in the organisation's purpose, and ability to carry it out. There was much dissension about what its true aims were. The words 'education' and 'research' were often used, but few members had much experience or personal investment in either field.

There was a lot of distress and distrust, and little agreement about constructive ways to proceed.

Response

I had first known Braziers, as a visitor, course attendee and meeting participant, 20 years previously. For several years I had personal links with residents whilst I was living and working in another Oxfordshire intentional community. In the summer of 2004, I decided it was time to move on, and arranged to spend three months on retreat on the land at Braziers Park. During this time, I became more aware of the situation there and the potential, and I formed a view as to the key changes needed to remedy the situation. I proposed I be given authority to attempt the necessary changes, and

guided this proposal through various meetings and discussions. In November 2004, at a Special General Meeting, the members, by a large majority, voted to appoint me to a clear leadership role for three years, with the remit to develop financial viability and overall sustainability at Braziers.

Commencement

I took up the post on 1 January 2005, and quickly found that things were deteriorating faster than I had realised. The cottages were occupied, but in the main house there were just two very elderly residents and one young American volunteer, eking out his scant cash until his flight home.

Strategic concerns had to be squeezed in alongside the essential daily operations, whilst observing and interviewing and gathering information. Early priorities were:

- Reassurance of residents and of Members (no scape-goating, and responding to all issues by seeking solutions).
- Shifting the culture, which had become one of blame and powerlessness, with frequent reference to the past ('this is how Glynn/Norman would have done it') and the 'perpetual present' (we always do it this way'). This required frequent challenges and reminders. I did not exempt myself from this.
- Service-orientation (Introducing new working practices and more planning)
- Less time spent in meetings and committees, and more time spent carrying out decisions. Some were uncomfortable, such as abandoning cultivation of the walled garden that year, in favour of attending to the gardens around the front of the main house. A greater focus on what needed to be done.
- Bringing confidence and enthusiasm, and sheer industriousness, to the work was important, as was gradual success in attracting new residents able and willing to work hard and well.

Resistance and battles

I believed that I would have to challenge long-established ways and that there would be reaction and opposition. I sought security of tenure for three years to allow me to weather any such storms. I was still surprised how reaction and resistance manifested, and how strongly.

Some felt healthy and refreshing, even if genuinely testing at the time. Some interactions felt to me to reach a robust level of authenticity and emotional honesty, and individuals spoke out about fears and distresses. Other communications were unbelievably bizarre and erratic. This featured more in communication with those who did not live in the main house, especially those who did not live at Braziers at all, and primarily, but not exclusively, in the medium of e-mails.

Some participants held on to views of how Braziers had functioned (sometimes actually more mythic than evidence-based), and spoke of a need to defend and preserve the 'heritage'. This resistance shifted issue and shape whenever I was able to identify and resolve a particular issue.

By the autumn of 2005, several individuals were regularly using meetings and e-mails to attack and undermine me, and the Committee of Management were openly trying to limit what I might do. Those who trusted me, or were seen as my allies, were driven

off the committee, or repelled from attending 'open' meetings. Some who witnessed this found it so unpleasant and sustained they were surprised that I did not leave at that time. For me to remain during that episode, it took a great measure of personal resolve, an ability to return to a larger perspective and a commitment to some of those residents and Members I felt deserved better from the management. I also saw that many people coming through the house that spring and summer had had significantly enriching and transformative experiences, and believed that this was worth serving further.

These attacks eventually coalesced around a 'disciplinary' procedure. The Committee attempted to maintain a high degree of secrecy, but once they suspended me and required me to leave the property, it was impossible to insist it was a strictly 'confidential matter' that other residents were not to know about. This suspension was the pivotal point: it was seen to be outrageous and was lifted a few days later, and led to a storm of discontent at the subsequent AGM, culminating in a change of Chair.

Had the committee been able to think clearly, or understand community processes, it might have sent the whole matter to a full meeting of the community and resolved it within a few days. Instead several weeks of confused and secretive communication created distrust that endured for several months of the new regime..

There had been an ambiguity about what behaviour was permitted in the community and what was not. Sometimes this was uncomfortable, but the resident group by and large learned to accept such fuzziness. But this disciplinary process had the result of prohibiting expression of anger, and requiring an outwardly 'polite' communication at all times. This suppression of the emotional element of the community processes does not serve anyone well, except to conceal strong feelings from those uncomfortable with them.

The damage done then has still not been rectified.

Achievements

- Braziers is excellently placed, with a characterful building, so that increasing its use as a weekend venue for courses was well within reach. Giving high value to cleaning and clearing the house, to providing reliably good meals, and to maintaining a welcoming and vibrant atmosphere, quickly bore fruit. Diversity of groups visiting increased (although later an unintended preponderance of yoga retreats developed). Many repeat bookings allowed relationships with tutors to develop, to mutual advantage. There were some occasions when two or three groups would be scheduled simultaneously, making use of different parts of the facilities, and increasing the energetic charge for all present.
- Finance quickly turned around – income improved rapidly (by 10% in 2005 and 50% in 2006, compared to 2004 figures), and expenditure was reduced in 2005 and held steady in 2006).
- The resident group slowly increased in size and rapidly increased in 'professionalism', to the point where all available accommodation was allocated by September 2006, and a year later several more people were wishing to move in than there could be room for.
- The numbers of overseas volunteers rapidly climbed to the optimum we had set of three to six at any one time. They were often highly educated and talented contributors to the community.

- A new spirit of optimism gradually prevailed, and a ten year plan was sketched out, with hopes of addressing Braziers' educational mission, and of bringing some of the neglected buildings into fuller use.

Failings

- The resident group has not found a robust process that accommodates everyone's differing needs for communication and involvement. With such a state of transition, this may be unsurprising, but still the wheel must be re-devised again and again!
- Some building improvements have taken place, but far less than hoped for.
- Identity and purpose are still in flux – with an unresolved tension between a self-renewing resident group with comparatively high turnover and the membership of Braziers Park School of Integrative Social Research with a comparatively very low turnover.
- This finds most expression around the Committee of Management and the 'Sensory-Executive process'. There has been much progress in the governance, but still it is flawed, and probably requires drastic change of the overall structure of the project.
- Ideas – integrative social research is still as nebulous in the minds of most participants; still little study takes place and there can be an embarrassing lack of intellectual rigour in most of what is written and spoken. The life for those living and working within the community can be a very stimulating, supportive and educational experience, but very little structured documentation or care of this has been achieved.

Recommendations

- Discover which of the ten year plan objectives are really the focus for energy, and gain ownership of, and investment in, a few of them by the resident community and absent members. Pursue these to fruition!
- Continue to improve working and co-living practices, and routines;
- Continue a strong emphasis on service and develop more collaboration with course tutors and organisers.
- Improve communication amongst the membership.
- Improve competence of Committee of Management members and residents in their particular responsibilities.
- Education and ideas: give this much more energy, and allow resulting excitement to lead the project through the next five years.
- Achieve high-quality completion of one building project soon, and then focus on no more than one or two at a time.
- Network with other communities, and with others engaged in similarly studying processes of which we are a part.

Reflections

These three years have shown that short-term finances can be healthy, and that a group can live and work together here relatively harmoniously and productively. The

big change was in decisiveness and accountability, both of which had for some time been inadequate to the needs of the organisation.

Longer-term financial needs have not been addressed: if the surplus generated in 2006 were produced every year, and the culture continues of self-help and volunteering allowing building work to be completed at a fraction of the usual market-price, long-term viability may be attainable. The site neither prohibits nor determines this, but rather the collective commitment, intelligence, responsibility and resourcefulness of the organisation: if leadership and governance were in good shape, finance need not be a source of anxiety.

Most energy, dynamism, freshness and pleasure occurred in my first six months. This stimulated resistance and opposition, which dominated the next 18 months. The Plan for the future and preparation for handover was achieved at the expense of much else in the last 12 months.

Ongoing tensions and differences can be healthy, but to be so requires frequent movement and readjustment. The Society seemed to have lost this ability: Maybe events over the next few years will show it has now regained it.

Making a success of Braziers appears to require great efforts on the part of many people. Is it worth it? One easy answer is that, often, those efforts are fruitful and beneficial in their own right, and therefore worthwhile: the interactions and collisions of collective life may often feel uncomfortable, or worse, and still be to the advantage of ourselves directly and the others who benefit indirectly from witnessing or experiencing the subtle outcomes. We can each become more insightful, wiser and capable of being happier (and maybe, of being more miserable) as a result. This is what living in any community can provide.

Braziers School of Integrative Social Research adds a few other ingredients:

- “Education” – it is intrinsic to the organisation that the residents do not just live as a self-referential group, but exist in order to provide education for others. Well-addressed, this focus could provide an important counter-balance to the tendency to become collectively very introspective, which may be encouraged by a poor application of the intention ‘to become more conscious’ ...’
- “Process” – the centrality of ‘process’, of recognising that we are all participants in (and contributors to) changes beyond our individual lives, brings enormous relevance and vitality to the project.
- “Unlike minds” – One of Braziers’ particular strengths, and weaknesses, is a strong attachment to the inclusion of ‘unlike minds’: this diversity can encourage perpetual process and impede any stable resolution. This can be both very liberating and very de-stabilising.
- “Experimentation” – the heading under which most innovation and change has been introduced at Braziers, even if those experiments are seldom recorded, assessed, and adjusted in the light of experience.

Braziers can provide a space where some of the usual rules we live by in the dominant culture are held at bay for a while, and other behavioural and attitudinal possibilities arise, even if only temporarily. This is precious. To attempt to preserve it is probably to suffocate it, but to live it is ultimately a deeply relevant and valuable service to the

bigger processes we are undergoing, as a species and as an element in the ongoing evolutionary story

24 February 2008.

Addenda, 5 April 2008:

I have been surprised in drafting the above, how difficult I find it to regain a healthy perspective: I believe I started the job with a high capacity for detached perception and engaged action. Having been drawn into the dramas and conflicts entangled at Braziers, I have found it very difficult to fully extract myself again.

Having said that, some comments may be in order about “Sensory”.

I treat it as an adjective, describing a particular type of group consideration of an issue. Any group or facilitator may find it useful at times to divide consideration of an issue into ‘sensory’ and ‘executive’: a time for ‘broad’ thinking, and a time for resolution.

‘Sensory’ consideration is not burdened by any need to reach a decision. Imagination, intuition, creativity and ill-discipline can all find their place here, helpfully. In theory, it allows for fuller, deeper and broader consideration of any matter before it.

‘Executive’ consideration of an issue engages with the need for decision, ideally, well-informed by ample ‘sensory’ consideration beforehand.

The word was used frequently throughout my time at Braziers, but seldom with clarity of meaning.

For some it was an abbreviation of “Sensory / Executive Process”, or “Method” (an abbreviation that notably downplayed the significance of the ‘executive’ aspect). For some it was an adjective, describing certain types of issue. For others, a noun referring to a particular regular meeting (Also called the “Sensory Committee”). The terms are not self-explanatory to the uninitiated.

In practice, the lack of accountability of SC, or sense of responsibility for/to others, often allowed it to be spectacularly self-indulgent and not even consider gathering information from outside a particular meeting, even if those present were clearly less informed about the issue than those outside that meeting. Alongside the ‘formal’ expression of this theory through SC and COM, which frequently fell down through lack of communication between the two bodies, and plurality of views as to how to enact the theory, there was a slightly more effective ‘informal’ expression of the theory. Many ‘executive’ decisions were taken by appropriate individuals, and sensory consideration frequently took place informally within the resident community and amongst the wider membership. (One might say this is simply an observation about how most human collective activity is conducted.)

Confusion about this differentiation, and how to benefit from it, often obscured other differentiations that might enrich Braziers School of Integrative Social Research, but sadly often added tensions and misunderstandings. Examples would be the divisions between ‘innovators’ and ‘preservationists’, or between residents and ‘outside members’. These tensions would sometimes be ‘fought out’ under the guise of ‘Sensory-Executive’ divisions. These significantly complicated and cut across other issues of governance that remained unresolved. (for example the relationship between a resident community and charitable status and for example the relationship between the educational aims and emotional attachments to property and people.)

An interesting issue to be worked out at Braziers School of Integrative Social Research that has bigger (possibly global) relevance: how to evolve/develop a governance that serves better the whole system, when the system is a tense partnership between two, or more, groupings, that perceive their differences more strongly than their commonalities, and are therefore prone to compete for power within, or over, the overall process.

One common answer is to seek or generate a 'vision'' that everyone can be required to unite in service of. This teleological approach can be an expression of a poorly connected, (or poorly conscious) dependency on intellect: the elevation of ideas and mental constructs over actual experience and embodiment. With an added gloss of sentimentality masquerading as emotional intelligence. This can legitimately be seen as one of the big divisions at Braziers that deserves integrating, but is usually only recognised as such by those on one side of it.

The deeper one digs, the more divisions and differentiations one can find, constantly enlarging and re-vitalising the drive towards integration.