

THE GRACE RESEARCH JOURNEY:

UNVEILING THE MASKS

Jocelyn Muller

I am a Woman of AfriKa!

AfriKan soil holds me steady, with each step I take,
AfriKan winds fill my lungs, with each breathe I take,
AfriKan drums carry my voice, with each thought I speak,
AfriKan women rejoice, with each word I dance.

Each step,
Each breathe,
Each thought,
Each word,
shows Afri-KAN!
Mayibuye AfriKa.

This document reflects my experience over the last three years as a GRACE researcher and tries to express the learning that has occurred at three levels: the level of person, problem and method.

I have chosen to voice my truth as openly and honestly as possible. I choose to voice my truth openly because it is my belief, that you become all that you are willing to express, in word, in thought and deed. I believe that one of the most calming and powerful actions you can do to intervene in a stormy world is to stand up and show your Self and voice it openly and honestly. In this way it is possible to make powerful connections with other people.

I come from a black, essentially middle-class background. I grew up in apartheid South Africa. Compared to the majority of South Africans, I have lived a relatively privileged background that included opportunities (albeit limited) for education, travel, and cultural experiences. However, early in my life, I followed a personal and political path that challenged the status quo. While my recent personal path has not been overtly "political" on the surface, I have always had a deep and abiding yearning for peace, justice and equality in the world. I sought to give this aspect of myself meaning through research.

As a researcher, I wanted to find meaningful expressions of my values, yet often found overwhelming constraint and resistance, sometimes within myself and sometimes imposed from the outside in the world. The GRACE project sought to awaken those precious and powerful ideals that are rooted in african feminist traditions. The GRACE journey was intended to call forth the written and spoken voice of african researchers, to be claimed and reclaimed again and again as we slowly peeled away masks often imposed upon us by society but generally also by ourselves. Through the TAI process I was inspired to the fullest expression of my heart through individual and collective acts. I was able to discover the profound possibilities in claiming my personal, individual and professional power.

I now believe that it is possible to find connection in the midst of alienation, to find inspiration in the midst of cynicism, to find nourishment and meaning in the midst of impoverishment, to find hope in the midst of despair, to find wholeness in the midst of fragmentation, to find peace in the midst of conflict. As GRACE researchers, we share this hope for a new vision of reality.

Through GRACE and particularly the TAI, I have discovered the possibilities inherent in discovering one's own truth and living fully as a person and then as a researcher from this truth. In discovering my own truth I have been able to recommit to my ideals of always reaching towards making a critical difference toward the betterment of humankind. I know that I have the power to act forcefully out of conscience to shape a future that is consistent with my values. I have been able to reawaken my personal and professional autonomy to determine my own destiny and to act individually and when appropriate, collectively, to organise against any constraining factors. Through the TAI I'm in the process of repudiating patterns that I have created, or that have been imposed, that inhibit the full expression of my being as a person and as a researcher. Slowly, slowly I have been able to peel away the layers of who I am and who I am becoming. This journey has been painful. I have had to redefine many personal relationships. But it was necessary. How could I claim to be a facilitator for change when I was not willing to change myself? How could I assist with "empowerment" processes when I was in chains? In doing so I had to face my deepest fears and insecurities. And still am, and this is ok. I am becoming and much as I am.

In this way I live life with intent, creating my past, present and future with truth, self-love and absolute joy. To realise all my dreams, by being fully present in each moment, in each day until my life is filled with the lightness of just, being.

GRACE has awakened a thirst for knowledge. I will always pursue knowledge because each piece of new knowledge is like a lantern. I want to light every lantern in my life until it burns like a flame. "I only believe in fire. Life. Fire. Being myself on fire I set others on fire. Never death. Fire and life. Les Jeux." Anais Nin

Through this I have learnt that making personal and social changes is the fire that fuels my soul. The power of making change is profound. My commitment to my own process of change provided opportunities to question my values, define and refine my priorities, act consciously, and feel my personal power. It is with this power from which I act that translates into a resonating change. This has required me to open my heart and face the demons within. Through GRACE I have identified that by opening my heart, I discovered prospects for action that will carry me beyond the negative forces of fear, insecurity, passivity, contempt, frustration, cynicism, and despair; anything that keeps me from living my wholeness and creating a world of peace and equality.

I've developed the skills and knowledge to confidently practice participatory and appreciative methods of inquiry. I've turned to ways of doing research that returns to "subjects" the value of their own knowing and the capability to produce and use their particular ways of knowing as a guide in their own action. These empowering research methods are founded on the beliefs that humans long for a feeling of wholeness; wholeness requires connection to others; connection demands participation; participation leads to understanding; understanding implies responsibility; and humans cannot experience wholeness or freedom without responsibility.

Participatory research provokes, envisions and values differences. Research must be meaningful to those it is intended to serve, and the best way to create this meaning is through involving participants as co-researchers. Research, to be of social relevance, needs to be oriented toward action in practice. Participatory and appreciative inquiry is expressed through mutual engagement among individuals throughout the research process from the identification

of issues, concerns, and problems to plans for action and researching that action to implementation to evaluation of the research endeavour.

During the GRACE: SA journey I have learned to listen. Hearing the stories of women and discovering with them to change the structural and personal obstacles to that they encounter offered a way to begin to practice research as I envisioned it in my TAI discovery I dream. The act of listening to and being present with the research participants provided a strong foundation for change. Listening, asking and sharing your reality, is an act of courage. As a researcher I have learnt to facilitate a growing awareness amongst the research participants, through our “circles of trust” our morning coffee conversations we talked together about changing the path of development as envisioned by them, defined by their personal and collective values, I believe this was a revolution. Through dialogue we developed a vision of what is possible in practice and in connection with others.

I now value my time of reflection. I find ways to get in touch with what matters most to me. I do this through solitude, practicing yoga, reflection, playing music, dancing and spending time in nature. These tools allow me to delve into my inner world that is often abandoned due to external pressures. I find that which is most sacred to me, that which is my truth and passion. During this time I contemplate ways to express myself more fully from this sacred space. For instance, through the morning pages I have recorded my reflections and discovered new ways of acting in my research and personal life, nurturing the spirit within. My goal has been to manifest love in all facets of who I am in my life.