



Reflections on Reflecting

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1: RESISTANCE

The Search for the Map

When I first started trying to keep a log book of my partnering journey, I experienced profound cognitive dissonance. As a seasoned Chief of Party and academic, I had spent decades mastering the art of the *correct answer*. I was expecting a syllabus, a roadmap and a clear set of deliverables.

Instead, I encountered ambiguity.

This section documents my initial resistance to the "unknowing" required by partnership brokering. It explores how my need for control, disguised as a need for structure, was the first barrier I had to dismantle.

The Expert's Dilemma

For many years, my professional value has been tied to my competence. In the development sector, competence looks like a Log-Frame. It looks like a Gantt chart. It looks like Certainty. When these guardrails were removed, I felt exposed.

I wrote in my first journal entry with palpable frustration: *I am really struggling with this... I wanted a template and I wanted to know exactly what was expected so I could deliver it perfectly.*

I realized that my expectation of a syllabus was actually a demand for safety. If I have a syllabus, I can control the outcome. If I can control the outcome, I cannot fail. My resistance revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of the Partnering Principle of **Openness**. I thought openness meant "transparency of information" but in that moment, I realized openness means "vulnerability to the process."

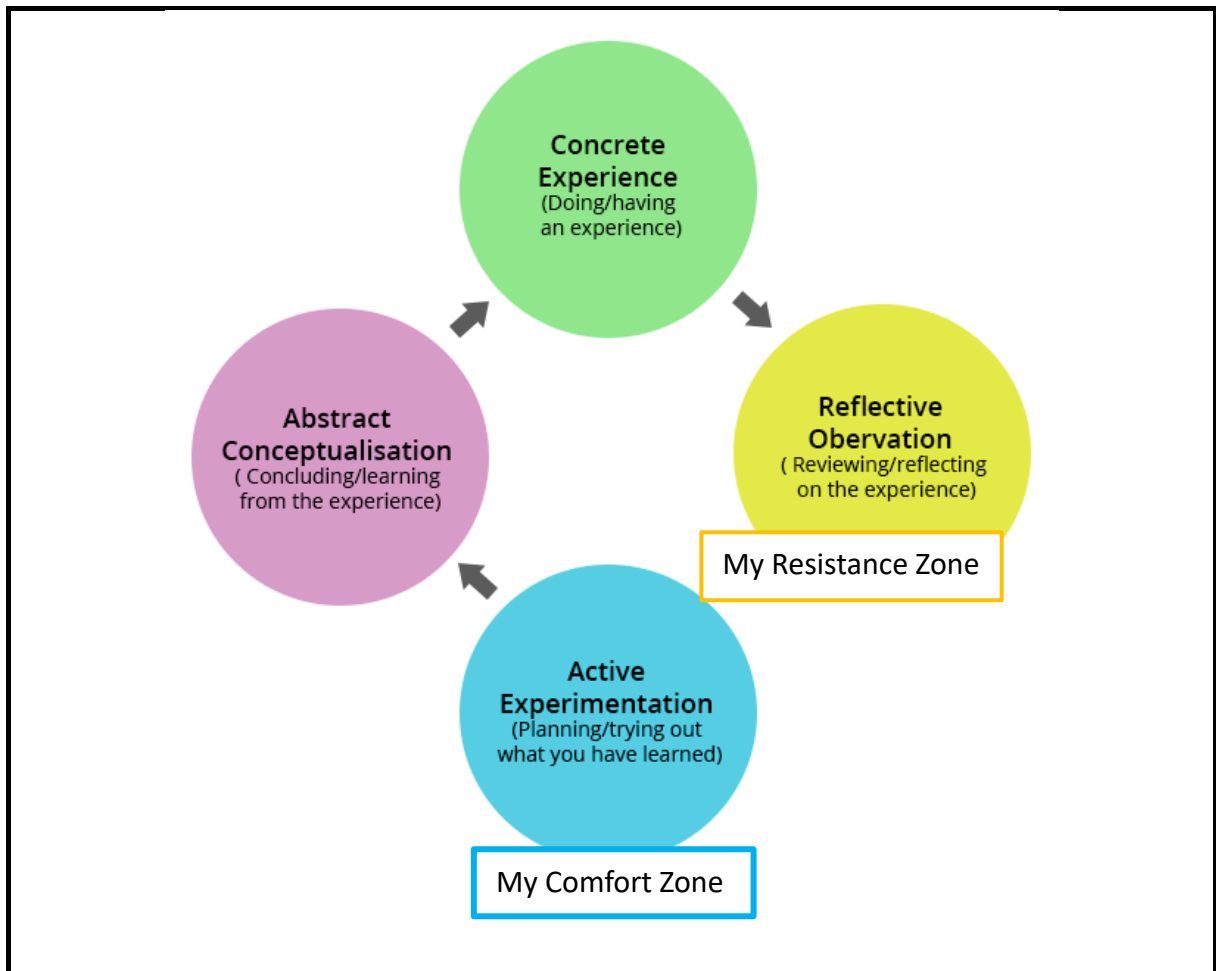
By demanding a rigid structure before the work even began, I was closing myself off to the emergent nature of partnerships and partnership brokering. I was trying to broker a deal with the requirements of the programme rather than allowing myself to experience it.

The Noise in My Head

The anxiety of "not knowing" drove me to move. I decided to record my next journal entry while walking, unable to sit still enough to write. The medium itself was a message: I needed to be active and to do.

In listening back to that recording, I identified the source of my resistance. I am a classic **Activist** in Kolb's Learning Cycle. My default setting is *Active Experimentation*. When I hear a problem (or silence), my brain immediately jumps to: "How do we fix this? What is the solution? Let's move."

I confessed in the recording: "I am thinking about how I think." And what I found was noise. The noise of a Chief of Party trying to manage the silence.



The insight:

The partnership brokering process often requires us to sit in Reflective Observation: to watch, to listen, to wait. For me, this feels like inactivity. It feels like wasting time. My internal "Fixer" screams that if we aren't moving forward, we are failing.

Why does this matter for partners?

Because it directly impacts the Partnering Principle of **relishing diversity**.

If I run a partnership meeting in my default "Activist" mode – fast, solution-oriented, decisive – I am privileging the loud, fast thinkers. I am systematically silencing the "Reflectors" and "Theorists" who need time to process.

By rushing to fix the silence (because *I* am uncomfortable), I am erasing the diversity of thought in the room as well as the principle of **inclusion**. I learned here that **Equity** is not just about who is invited to the meeting; it is about the *pace* at which the meeting is conducted.

The Takeaway:

I entered this section looking for a map. I left it realizing that **the map is not the territory**. To become a partnership broker, I had to stop trying to *structure* the experience and start learning how to *inhabit* it.

2: THE MIRROR

If Section 1 was about the noise inside my head, Section 2 is about the masks I had been wearing to hide it. As I deepened my reflection, I began to see the gap between my intent (to help) and my impact (exercising control). I realized I had been operating as a Janus, looking two ways at once and satisfying neither.

This section deconstructs the "fake lives" we create in development work and identifies the moment I understood that true brokering requires the courage to be silent.

The Janus Dilemma

In Roman mythology, Janus is the god of beginnings, gates and transitions. He is depicted with two faces: one looking to the past, one to the future.

I realized I had become a Professional Janus.

- **Face 1 (Looking Up):** Turns toward the donor (USAID, private funders, etc.). This face projects certainty, compliance, logic and adherence to the Gantt chart. It promises that the investment is safe.
- **Face 2 (Looking Down):** Turns toward the Local Partners. This face projects empathy, flexibility and partnership. It promises that their voices matter.

The Conflict: For years, I believed that **partnership brokering** meant standing in the middle and managing this tension. I thought my job was to translate the messiness of the partner's reality into the clean lines of the donor's report.

But in my reflections, I began to confront the cost of this level of control. To keep both faces happy, I had to control the flow of information. I became a shock absorber, filtering out the risks. By doing so, I was violating the Partnering Principle of **Mutual Benefit**.

- If I protect the donor from the partner's reality, the donor never learns to adapt.
- If I protect the partner from the donor's constraints, the partner never learns to navigate the system.

I was not brokering a relationship, I was providing a buffer zone.

The Fake Lives We Lead

This need for control led to a startling confession in my journal: *We create fake lives.*

In the development sector, we often construct **personas** for our partners. We allow them to participate, but only within the boundaries that we (the partnership brokers or donors) feel safe managing. We invite them to the table, but we write the menu, set out the cutlery and the construct the seating plan.

The Partnering Principle at Risk: OPENNESS

I realized that **openness** is not just about sharing budgets, it is, far more importantly, about sharing *uncertainty*. By presenting a curated version of the project to the donor and a curated version of the donor to the partner, I was fabricating a fake life for the partnership.

I was actually prioritizing *harmony over honesty*.

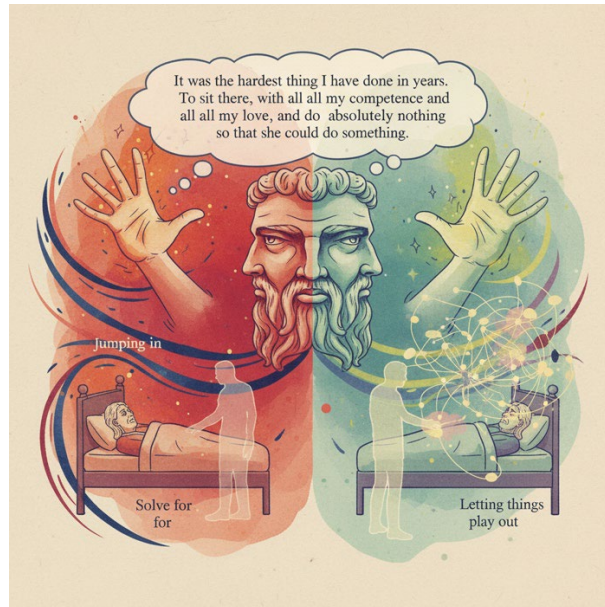
The Turning Point: The Hospital Bedside

The intellectual realization of **control** became an emotional reality during a personal crisis.

I was in the hospital with my mother. The surgeon entered the room to discuss a complex procedure.

- **My Instinct:** My "Dr. Nderu" persona (the Chief of Party, the Fixer, the Daughter) wanted to take over. I wanted to interrogate the surgeon, translate the medical jargon and make the decisions for her. I wanted to be the Janus face, mediating between the Expert and the Patient.
- **My Action:** I bit my tongue. Literally.

I sat in the chair, hands folded, and I let the silence hang in the room. I let my mother, in her vulnerability, find her own questions. I let the surgeon speak directly to her, not through me.



The Insight on EQUITY:

In that hospital room, I learned what **equity** actually means for a partnership broker. Equity is not about giving someone a microphone. Equity is about the person *with* the microphone (me, the donor, the expert) shutting up long enough for others to realize they have a voice. I had been using my need to help to actually silence people. True brokering is the discipline of withholding your own power to create space for another's.

Synthesis: Breaking the Mirror

This section marked the death of the "Janus" approach. I realized that I cannot be a wall between the donor and the partner, I must be a window.

- **From Control → To Vulnerability:** I must stop managing the relationship and start *facilitating* the friction.
- **From Fake Lives → To Real Risks:** I must allow the partners to see the rigidity of donors, and allow the donors to see the partnerships messiness.

This realization was terrifying. It meant stepping out of the conforming role I had perfected and moving into the unknown. It meant entering the Chrysalis.

3: THE CHRYSALIS (The Pain of Transformation)

By this point, the intellectual concept of "letting go" had become an emotional reality. I entered what I call the **Chrysalis** phase. It is a state of dissolution – where the old structures of the **Expert** are melting away, but the new wings of the **Broker** have not yet formed. This section explores the discomfort of Negative Capability and the profound lesson on agency that I learned at an airport departure gate.

The Squeeze: Negative Capability

The poet John Keats coined the term **Negative Capability** to describe the ability to embrace uncertainty, mystery and doubt without needing to immediately explain or rationalize everything. For a Chief of Party, this is terrifying. My entire career has been built on reaching for fact and reason. I am paid to know. I am paid to resolve doubt.

The physical sensation of the squeeze was the pressure of sitting in a partnership meeting where the path forward was unclear, the tensions were high and any solution was nowhere in sight.

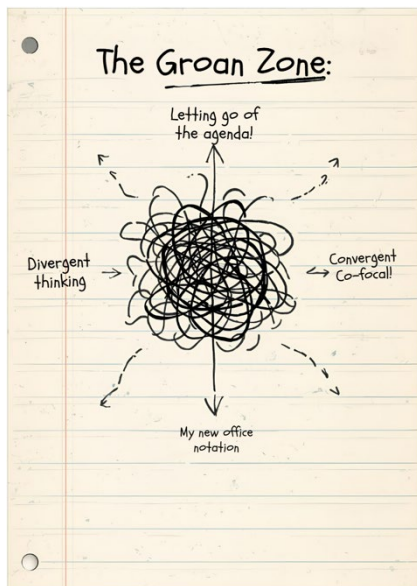
The Old Instinct: Force a consensus. Vote. Decide. Move on.

The New Discipline: Stay in the mess.

I realized that by always rushing to clarity, I had often bypassed the necessary conflict. By so doing, I was robbing the partners of the "Groan Zone"¹, the difficult, messy middle where true innovation happens.

The Insight:

To be a partnership broker is to hold the container for anxiety. It is to say to the group: "*We do not know the answer yet, and that is okay. We will stay in this zone until it emerges.*"



The Departure Gate: A Lesson in Agency

The most profound lesson on **Courage** did not happen in a boardroom. It happened while sending my son to university.

I spent weeks preparing him. I bought the right bedsheets. I organized his schedule. I lectured him on time management. I told myself I was doing this to help him succeed. I was being a good mother, or so I was telling myself.

But standing at the departure gate at the airport, I had a devastating realization: I wasn't doing it for him. I was doing it for me.

I was organizing his life to manage *my* anxiety about his independence. I was "brokering" his transition so tightly that I was leaving no room for his own agency. If I smooth every path, how will he learn to walk on uneven ground?

¹ Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making – Sam Kaner

Parallels to Partnering:

I realized I treat my local partners exactly like I treated my son.

- I **fix** their proposals before the donor sees them.
- I **smooth** the meeting agendas so no one gets upset.
- I **provide** the templates (buy the bedsheets) so they don't have to struggle.

The Partnering Principles at Risk: COURAGE & MUTUAL BENEFIT

This was a failure of **courage**. I lacked the courage to trust their agency. I lacked the courage to let them fail, recover and grow.

By over-functioning as a partnership broker, I was training my partners to under-function. There is no **mutual benefit** in dependency. If I am the only one carrying the weight of the process, we are not partners, we are a parent and a child.

The courage to not do:

Old Definition: Courage is the bravery to lead the charge, to speak up, to take control.

New Definition: Courage is the bravery to sit back. It is the strength to trust the capacity of others, even when they are doing it differently than I would.

The chrysalis phase taught me that true help is not fixing the problem for the partner. True help is trusting the partner to fix it themselves, and standing by their side while they do it.

4: THE ALCHEMIST

(The Magic of Synthesis)

Section 3 was about the pain of **letting go**. Section 4 is about the power of **letting come**.² As I emerged from the Chrysalis, I began to see that my role was not to build the partnership, like an **Architect**, but to facilitate the reaction between the partners, like an **Alchemist**.

This section documents the shift from **doing for** to **being with** and the discovery of the **third space** – where the lead of conflict is transmuted into the gold of innovation.

The Power of "With"

For decades, my career was defined by the preposition **for**. I worked *for* USAID. I designed projects *for* beneficiaries. I wrote reports *for* headquarters. "For" is transactional. It implies a hierarchy: I have the resource / knowledge and I am bestowing it upon you.

I began to see a subtle but seismic shift in my language. I started writing about **being with**:

- Sitting *with* the discomfort.
- Planning *with* the local partner.
- Thinking *with* the donor.

The Insight:

With is relational. It implies a flat hierarchy. In the **Groan Zone** (referenced in section 3), I learned that I cannot solve the problem *for* the group. But I can be *with* the group while they solve it.

² The concept of 'letting go to let come' is taken from *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* – Otto Scharmer

This is the essence of **mutual benefit**. It is not just about exchanging resources (money for reports). It is about exchanging *perspective*. When I stopped trying to be the **Expert** who knows the answer, I became the Alchemist who mixes the ingredients so the answer can reveal itself.

The Third Space

The most exciting realization for me was the concept of the **Third Space**.

Space 1: The Donor's world (compliance, log frames, risk aversion).

Space 2: The Partner's world (community, complexity, fluidity).

The Trap:

I used to think my job was to force Space 2 to fit into Space 1. (The **Square Peg in a Round Hole** dilemma).

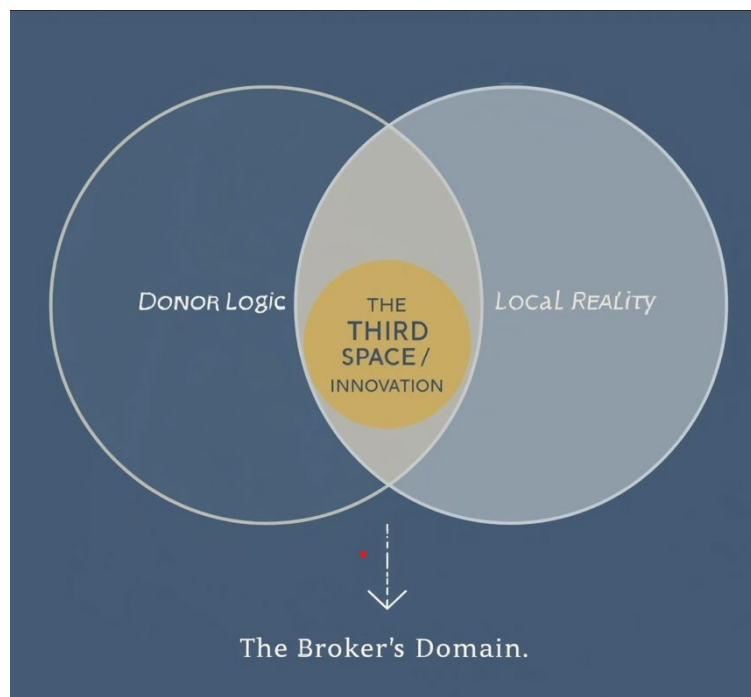
The Alchemist's Formula:

I realized that true partnership is not about assimilation; it is about creation. $1 + 1 = 3$

When we bring the rigour of the donor together with the reality of the partners and we hold the tension without trying to "fix" it, we create a **Third Space**. This is where **Value Creation** happens.

It is a new entity that none of the parties could create alone.

The Donor learns **flexibility**. The Partner learns **systems thinking**.



The Result: A project that is both compliant *and* effective.

The Partnering Principle at Risk: VALUE CREATION

If I act as a buffer (as mentioned in Section 2), I prevent this collision. I keep the chemicals separate to avoid an explosion. But an Alchemist *needs* the reaction. My job is to contain the reaction safely, it is not to prevent it.

The Shift: From Architect to Alchemist

When I started a more reflective process, I identified myself as an **Architect**.

- **The Architect:** Loves blueprints. Hates surprises. Measures success by how closely the building matches the drawing.
- **The Flaw:** Partnerships involve people and people do not follow blueprints.

My reflections have moved me to aspiring to be an **Alchemist**.

- **The Alchemist:** Loves experiments. Expects surprises. Measures success by the quality of the transformation.
- **The Strength:** The Alchemist knows that the "gold" is actually hiding in the messiness of the process.

Synthesis: The New Competence

I started this journey fearing that "ambiguity" meant "incompetence." I end it realizing that **ambiguity is the raw material of my trade**.

I no longer need to be the smartest person in the room. I need to be the person who makes it safe for everyone else to be smart.

I have traded the safety of the **correct answer** for the possibility of a **better question**.

I am no longer just a Chief of Party.

I am *also* a Partnership Broker.