

Goetheanum World Conference 2023

I was surprised by my decision to attend the world conference. The desire to ‘reshape the world movement’ definitely called me. What needed reshaping in the movement? What needed reshaping in me? Where did the balance lie between ossification in old habits of insularity and our enthusiasm to meet the world? These questions seemed alive in the invitation and in the unfolding conference. To capture a little of what it was like to be there, I want to share three experiences when I could sense the shift in the zeitgeist at the Goetheanum.

An awakening

On the first afternoon we gathered in the main hall with its raked seating, the celebrated coloured windows, the dramatic designs of the ceiling. The air was stuffy and the hall almost filled with people murmuring with delight as they made contact with each other. Of course, most of the audience were from Europe and most from middle Europe, but there were also North and South Americans, people from Oceania, Africa, a few people of colour amidst a lot of pale skins. Some of us fanned ourselves with the multiply folded A2 sized programme and one or two with a lace or sandalwood fan as the ventilation seems a little inadequate when the temperature rises above the mid 20s and the room is filled with a large group full of anticipation. Then the audience quietened as a trumpet noteⁱ was heard from above us, in the location below the translators’ booths.

At the same time, the curtains opened and an artworkⁱⁱ was gradually lowered into sight. It was large, perhaps 4 x 10m. a powerful felted fleece work expressing the nature of our times in its swirls and spirals of natural colours, lightness interacting with darkness in a palette of creams, greys and browns. It spoke to me of chaos and uncertainty, of a world and a human experience shrouded, clouded, polluted, damaged. I was moved to tears.

As we all beheld this work, the trumpet piece continued: stammering, stuttering, flowing in a chaos of notes and stridency, melody and discord, reaching an uncertain silence only to burst into sound again. It was a powerful clarion call of pain, of urgency, of questioning, of reflection.

We will speak with inclusivity

At the beginning of the forum on ‘Anthroposophy and public debate: how do we communicate?’ Gerald Häfner, told us that people in the group had asked if he could use German rather than the English that had been advertised. ‘How many people would not be able to understand if we used German?’ he asked. About ten of us raised our hands, a small minority of the 60 or so members of the group. He nodded, and said, ‘Then we will use English.’

English, as the world’s lingua franca, was the main language spoken at most of the elements of the conference. Not every speaker on the main stage or elsewhere spoke English, so translation was needed but in general, English was preferred and attempted. Of course, there were also speakers of a range of other languages, but this decision to prioritise English had a big impact on me. I understood that this was probably not popular with the majority of people attending who would probably be much more comfortable with German, but it was an example of forcing everyone to shift out of their comfort zone, not just those of us from beyond middle Europe.

The young people are in the room

At the closing ‘festival’, a serendipitous element was included. Johannes Kronenberg, of the Section for Agriculture, a young man in his 30s, acted as the MC for the conference and did so with care and grace, humour and lightness. When outlining the program on the final morning, he told us that a new element had just been added. The previous afternoon, a young man had invited those born after 1980 to meet

ⁱ Trumpeter, Jens Bacher

ⁱⁱ *Guernica de la Ecologia*, Claudy Jongstra, 2021-3

on the terrace to the south. Together with Magdalena Ries (who I had experienced as an excellent and sensitive facilitator in the 'Courage for Vulnerability' workshop) he facilitated a meeting where those who gathered spoke about what lived in them. This young man and Magdalena then facilitated a taste of this experience for all of us.

Those who had met the previous day, streamed onto the main stage from all parts of the audience. When they had gathered, Magdalena and her co-facilitator invited those on stage who felt a fluttering in their body telling them that they needed to share, to stand up and speak about what lived in them for just one minute. They especially invited those who were a little unused to making such a contribution. They then deliberately created a warm silence for each speaker to enter. What followed was a passionate, singing, intelligent and moving 15 minutes where individuals from around the world spoke with nervousness or confidence, with joy and with pain about what lives for them.

One young man articulated and embodied an idea he and a friend had been sharing about the challenge of action in this time of polycrisis. 'Many of us are fearful about taking our first step and we exist in a kind of limbo,' He demonstrated, standing on one leg, yet to choose a first step. As he stood there, out of balance, we could all experience the instability and discomfort of that state. 'Yet,' he said, 'if I take a step, in whatever direction, all that imbalance is released.' He demonstrated by letting his raised foot find the ground. 'Then I can seek direction, find others to join me, and make a difference.' He continued, demonstrating stepping forward into the future with increasing confidence.

For me this image of 80-100 young people taking the stage, speaking from their hearts and being heard, was an image I will carry of the future for the anthroposophical movement. This kind of speaking can save us. Honest, heartfelt, full of ideas and initiatives, socially wise.

One young woman from Korea, spoke about the anger she had experienced at the last world conference where it seems she endured much more frustration and less inclusion. 'This time,' she told us, 'I am only a little bit angry'.

We are taking steps in the right direction. Let's keep moving that way.

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