

## To Look Again, and Find It All the More Wonderful

The 9th Worldwide Biography Conference, 14th to 18th June 2017 at the Goetheanum  
**Witness - Trust - Peace:** A Review, beginning at the end and working backwards.

**It's Sunday, our final time together in the plenum**, and the great barn-like meeting hall, the *Schreinerei*, is filled with life, laughter, words of gratitude, and hugging. We are celebrating in our farewell. Once bare walls now tell a story with vibrant, colourful graphic regional maps of the homes of some 120 participant biography workers from 21 countries around the world. From left to right the west wall now bears visual testimony to the work processes and experiences of individuals and groups over the course of five days and four nights. In the far right corner, a giant, hand-drawn biographical chart of the life line of the Worldwide Biography Conference not only looks back into the past but onward into the future.

*A colleague* shares perceptions about her inspiration to chart the biographical arc of all conferences so far.

*A group of colleagues* presents its creation of a work of art, colored threads woven onto a hexagonal frame.

*A colleague* asks a biographical question at a tense moment, strengthening our humanity in the process.

**Each time we gathered** again for the 90-minute evening plenum, following the daily working group sessions, we offered up our experiences in very brief presentations. In this way we shared with one another, as well as daring to "speak to the stars". As biography workers, dialogue is our element. Conversation is our medium, our art form. As human beings, we are used to meeting our limitations in both the horizontal and vertical realms. Perhaps we could have achieved more, had our intention to speak to the stars been more conscious. Yet, we most surely contributed to our professional conference community and to the "spiritual economy" of human beings.

During our days together, we had been striving to work in new ways. Individual initiative and working groups became the signatures of this conference. There were no keynote speakers or lectures. Ideas were put forth by anyone and everyone; some were taken up spontaneously. In "How Can the Destitution of Soul in Modern Times Be Overcome?" (GA 168, Zurich 10.10.1916), Rudolf Steiner encourages "the individual life together": *autonomy in association*. Perhaps we approached this ideal. This conference was not ordinary; and while some may feel it fell short of the extraordinary, it was not, could not be typical. Working with the vision of the conference organizers, we co-created this experience in real time, imperfectly.

**Our meals** were taken at the *Speisehaus* restaurant below the Goetheanum, in the open air, under an arbour of sculpted trees, where leaves waved, light and shadow danced. Generally, we sat together in language groups, perhaps for ease of expression, perhaps for a needed break from the struggle of language differences. One benefit of meeting at the Goetheanum is the availability of technical facilities and experience in providing simultaneous interpretation for the plenum sessions (in our case English / German). The working group sessions, however, were often more challenging where many languages were represented. Like blood circulation, shared language is a vehicle for social vitality: *we can really go somewhere!* Language differences, on the other hand, can be exhausting, can become barriers. From the outset, frustration awakened us to the very significant role language would play in the conference. We longed to feel free in our exchanges, but in reality communication was often stifled. By the end of the conference there was evidence that we had managed to adapt. Patience became a bridge and a slower pace of working a welcome practice.

**Our professional community** is diverse. Of course we possess many different ways of thinking. We practice in different ways and use different titles, e.g. biography worker, consultant, coach, counsellor. We have followed different paths of formal education, self-development, and professional training. We differ in our understanding of what biography work is, e.g. a counselling practice, an instrument of healing, self-development, spiritual scientific schooling, research. Transcending all of these, however, there is this mood among us, this feeling, a shared feeling: *we all love this work!*

*A colleague* expresses feeling a connection with a "being of biography" that permeates our encounters.

*A colleague* experiences this connection as being potentially more important than theoretical content.

*A colleague* says: "Where we love deeply, there is difficulty."

*A colleague* acknowledges the miracle of conversation.

*Maybe one thinks that to be strong one should create a form. But it is much more relevant to establish a truthful relationship than a form. When one loves, one goes to those one loves, not to an empty form. The point is that you come together, not because you agree, but because you love being together. This is the healthiest form.*

Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), addressing a youth gathering in Breslau am 09.06.1924 (GA 217a).

**Over three days respectively**, we engaged ourselves with the themes of social threefolding: freedom, equality and humanity. Each morning, after communal singing and our conference verse brought to expression in silence through eurythmy, we began with short, spoken contributions towards the theme of the day by four colleagues, out of their individual perspectives. Directly following this, a creative, interactive, social artistic-*dynamic!*-process, inspired by the theme of the day and involving the whole plenum, culminated each morning in the formation of twelve working groups, which then gathered after the break to work further with the theme for 90 minutes.

Each day the first afternoon session allowed for opportunities to tour the Goetheanum, visit art exhibitions, practise eurythmy and Spatial Dynamics, to join specialist workshops and professional networking meetings, including the further development of the Worldwide Biography Conference.

For the second afternoon sessions colleagues joined their pre-chosen 'professional research theme groups' for 90 minutes to share and explore frontline experience in biography work concerning: community, vocation, networking, adversary, social art, threshold, crisis, dementia, karma, consciousness soul, leadership, salutogenesis. Understandably, committing themselves to just one of so many important research themes was not so easy. The fair and even distribution of participants, striven for by the organizers, was not entirely fulfilled: some groups were oversubscribed, others undersubscribed. Whilst not all difficulties could be addressed, most surely awareness for the qualities of sacrifice, commitment, and service was potentized.

Thus, during each of our three full days together, we broke out into 24 working group sessions!

Evening plenums were dedicated to sharing the harvest of our experiences in the group sessions, revealing unexpected courage and enthusiasm through creatively inspired, social artistic presentations. The mood was playful and challenging, sometimes confusing, even painful, often graced with awakening. Our conference verse opened our day and led us into the night, reminding us: "Strive for peace. Live in peace. Love peace."

*A group of colleagues speak the Lord's Prayer, each in turn, in their native tongue.*

*A colleague guides us in creating an experience of a collective heartbeat with the eurythmy gesture "qu" ([as in "quality"](#))*

*A colleague teaches us all together how to create a virtual, audible "rain storm" with our hands and feet: **Amazing!***

**Our third full day together**, the 'metabolic pole' of the conference, was dedicated to the exploration of fraternity / sorority / humanity and the economic realm.

For the purpose of this conference the organisers coined the term "humanity" for this realm of social threefolding. For some, but by no means all, this leap out of conventional threefolding terminology was very challenging, particularly in the German language sphere. Some colleagues connect the practise of humanity more with the cultural realm of spiritual freedom, others more with the socio-political realm served by equality of rights. Still others felt inhibited, even disturbed by the application of "humanity" in the exploration of associative economics. Could we have worked better in relation to this realm, had we held a 'shared idea'? Perhaps (assuming a shared idea were achievable). Maybe it was good that someone inspired the organizers to choose to use the term "humanity". Rudolf Steiner often recommended searching for new representative terms to advance spiritual scientific research. Wrestling with an idea can encourage the development of consciousness and the striving to transcend polished, dogmatic interpretations. Uncomfortable as it may be, we know that adversity aids the development of consciousness. Something stirred up becomes more alive!

*A colleague salutes paying clients who support our work and also our needs, such as housing, food, travel.*

*A colleague boldly speaks of the seed for altruism in production and consumption: **we work for one another!***

*A group of colleagues dance provocatively to Pink Floyd's well-known song "[Money](#)".*

*A colleague holds silence with grace.*

*A colleague is impatient.*

At its core, development in the economic realm between human beings is all about truly practising 'humanity' with one another, about developing sensitivity and respect to be able to perceive and act in accordance with real needs. The exercise of spiritual tact is intimately connected with the further development of morality, as an integral task of consciousness soul development. If any art is suited to awakening and enhancing faculties by which to become more human, then it is biography work. If any are poised and ready just now to contribute to the humanization of the economic realm, as a realm for practicing humanity, then surely it is biography workers. This is no small thing, and a quest we would do well to promote.

At the outset of the day, we each found our twelve working groups by choosing just one coin from an exactly prepared collection of twelve coinages placed in the centre of our plenum ellipse. We milled around the room, pausing to compare our small, shiny acquisitions with one another, until, as if by chance, we found a group to belong to, a group of colleagues all holding the same currency.

**Our second full day together**, the "heart" of the conference, was dedicated to the exploration of equality and the realm of socio-political rights.

Overnight the three concentric seating ellipses in the plenum hall had been arduously interlaced with coloured yarns, a skein for each chair, its thread winding around and through the space, twelve different colours which would eventually yield the formation of twelve working groups. All of us, 120 individuals, bending like "The Gleaners" in Jean-François Millet's (1814-1875) painting, took up and followed their own personal threads. Over, under, over, under, winding through interweaving pathways. Here and there tangled clusters formed and resolved themselves, whilst other areas remained relatively open, requiring little contact. There was pushing and pulling, bumping and hurrying, contortion and accommodation, calling of instructions and requests, and much laughter; some were silent, patient, resigned, curious, observant. Finally, ten colleagues gathered at each one of the twelve tables, all holding the same color yarn: **Brilliant!**

A *colleague* notes the invisible field of safety weaving between us, as we get more real with one another.

A *colleague* asks: "Why are we not more open?"

A *colleague* talks of loneliness.

A *colleague* crosses the room to say: "I struggle with that, too."

A *colleague* really feels each one is responsible for carrying their own thread in order to create the whole.

**In the midst of our conference**, after lunch, some gathered to evaluate and discuss the past, present and future organisation of our international conferences and professional networking. Those assembled in the plenum were openly invited to present their questions, comments, ideas (first gathered on flip charts in small breakout groups). Further than this we did not come. Inevitably we could not help but succumb to a few old patterns. Familiar social dynamics accompanied our efforts, both helpful and taxing: enthusiasm, openness, interest and commitment, asserted agendas, the voice unheard, the voice heard repeatedly, a "knotted up" feeling, the problem of semantics.

In connection with the representation of the worldwide community of biography workers, the term "fellowship" became a focus of much controversy, involving such issues as perceived association with secret societies (UK); perceived meaninglessness in the German language (DE/CH); perceived identification with "intentional community" like that found in *Fellowship of the Ring*, the famous trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973); perceived gender bias (USA). (The term is in fact etymologically and academically gender neutral; the word derives from the Old English *feolaga* meaning "one who shares something".) Notwithstanding, some degree of consensus emerged around the need for a name for the ongoing organisation of international conferences, in service of professional development and public awareness.

A *colleague* suggests we simply play ... but no one asked: "What would that look like?"

A *colleague* asserts that strong-willed self-interest should die.

A *colleague* proposes we consider what needs to be let go of.

A *colleague* would like to get to know other colleagues more closely.

A *colleague* expresses now feeling part of a great professional society.

A *colleague* enthusiastically suggests ideas which have already been tried in the past.

A *colleague* declares: "We are failing, flailing, falling."

A *colleague* says: "I am looking for inspiration, encouragement, and protection."

*... the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each "eye" of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering 'like' stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look at it closely, we discover that in its polished surface all the other jewels in the net are reflected, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring.*

Francis H. Cook (born 1930), on "Indra's net" from *The Rigveda* (c. 1500-1200 BC).

**Our first full day together**, the "head" of the conference, was dedicated to the exploration of freedom and the spiritual, cultural realm.

On this happy morning, groups were formed via ideas. Following four brief presentations on the theme, we were asked to approach another individual and exchange ideas which had captured our attention. We rose and moved around the plenum hall. Some connected immediately, others hesitated; facilitators helped here and there, and everyone found a partner. It worked. Then, as pairs, we were asked to find another pair with which to exchange as a foursome. And then, foursomes were asked to combine into groups of eight. Many struggled to remain interested in the ideas as the task of relating grew more complex. Language differences heightened the challenge, self-expression became painful, if not impossible; some were overwhelmed and discouraged. In this particular exercise, unwitting genius revealed itself. While some found joy in the exploration, others felt that leadership was lacking, that we were "swimming", and as a result one gift of this process was confirmation of the importance of developing the capacity for *inner* freedom.

**We opened our conference on a Wednesday.** In a Mercurial mood, light-hearted and enthusiastic, we connected and reconnected, eventually settling into a Jupiterian domain comprising three concentric ellipses filled with glowing faces. Throughout the conference, six colleagues, holding two interlocking triangles around the inner ellipse, and three more colleagues, the keepers-of-the-microphones, moving with devotion in and out from the periphery, together carried the moderation.

As long-standing mentor for 'biography work' in the faculty of [Karma and Reincarnation in the General Anthroposophical Section of the School of Spiritual Science at the Goetheanum](#) (which hosted our conference), Paul Mackay joined us for the first two opening plenum sessions. In a brief contribution he spoke about three "points of recognition" which are vital for the human being: 1. in recognising that everyone longs for meaning, we encourage individual initiative; 2. in recognising that each human being is sacred, we promote dignity in meeting; and 3. in recognising that very real needs exist in the world, we seek to care for others with sensitivity, by "practicing humanity". Paul also expressed surprise, interest and resonance with the use of the term "humanity" in connection with the economic realm of social threefolding.

Upon reflection, statements made from the very outset by the conference organizers about their goals and hopes appear prophetic. They spoke of promoting the work out of spiritual science in collaboration with the Michael School, the practice of the art of dialogue / conversation, and the encouragement of research and experimentation. They spoke of how we may move away from past structures, which have been imposed or become habitual, and, through this conference, step boldly towards the potential of new forms for the future. They spoke of striving for a “quantum leap” forward on behalf of the worldwide movement of professional biography work.

Careful reading of “[A Brief History of the Worldwide Biography Conference](#)” reveals an ongoing search for the new, which continued with this conference, especially in having taken up social threefolding as a central theme. Did we penetrate the theme sufficiently? Would a requisite pre-conference study have made a difference? What if the afternoon sessions (professional research theme working groups) had also been dedicated to threefolding? Head-Heart-Hands, Body-Soul-Spirit, Imagination-Inspiration-Intuition, Salt-Mercury-Sulphur, etc.. We would certainly not have run short of triads!

**Even so, bear witness to trust in peace:** Fully one-third of all 120 participating colleagues arrived already having prepared themselves to facilitate 24 working groups during the central three full days of our conference! And the task was not easy! For indeed, since the conception of this conference in March 2016, it was a mighty struggle for many to understand the organizers' painstakingly prepared and coordinated vision. Communication was a big challenge and often failed in clarity and brevity. Yet, a conference was birthed, and its being was surely working around the world long before our meeting at the Goetheanum, as surely as it still continues working now.

Speaking of “already working” and in part in response to the struggle (for some) with the word “fellowship,” an offering: In English, the word “conference” typically refers to a meeting, but it can also refer to a group with a common purpose, a governing body, or association. Thus, as a worldwide network of biography workers, we actually constitute a conference *already* (which happens to come together for a biennial meeting). Could we go so far as to recognize ourselves as gradually becoming a conference in the etheric? It is a beautiful thing with anthroposophy, this forever trying to do something that is for the future. The poet Mary Oliver (born 1935) would call us “early risers.” Are we not deeply interested in an existence that is less about form and its material and more about metamorphosis in the etheric? It may be that our conference is *already* contributing to this (long) transition, and threefolding will surely be a help.

*A colleague* underscores that we exist between form and freedom.

*A colleague* says: “We can know where we want to go and go, or admit we do not know and go anyway, trusting we will meet.”

*A colleague* says: “Ideas are like shooting stars. We recognize something, but it often takes a long time to make a change.”

*A colleague* suggests that our organisation is the seed-core of fruit, fallen to earth, now taking root.

*A colleague* quotes the old man with the lamp from Goethe's fairy tale: “The time is at hand.”

## Epilogue

The architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) designed homes with “front” doors that cannot be seen from the street and called the way to such doors “the path of discovery”. The approach to the Goetheanum is similar. Climbing the hill one glimpses it here and there; and it takes a long time and much effort to arrive at the full view. Gravity grows with inner anticipation. Is it not also so with our Worldwide Biography Conference?

A new initiative is already working towards our next meeting. We know that those who become involved will contribute countless hours of work. *How might we help them remain inspired? What encouragement can we offer? What protection?* And with this, finally, we arrive at the beginning of the 9th Worldwide Biography Conference 2017, with its title in focus, now firmly sharper still: **Witness - Trust - Peace.**

Our gratitude to Leah Walker for bearing witness with her review at the request of the organizers. *Editorial collaboration resulted in a compromise between American and British English.*