

## Is Gestalt therapy outside of beyond politics?

- Some thoughts after following the EAGT-Conference at Stockholm

by Peter Schulthess

With some distance after the Conference I like to formulate some thoughts about the organisation and the process of our conference. Is a Gestalt conference – to speak in Joe Melnick's terms – rather a strategic system or an intimate system? What implications for the organisation does this definition have? How did the European Conference deal with nationalism and internationalism? And: Why was the Congress' Gestalt community unable to deal in an adequate way with the background of the terrorist attacks from september 11th that happened shortly before the conference was held? Has Gestalt turned into an unpolitical method of social healthcare, neither able to respond to the political and social surrounding environment, as well as to one of the focal points of the congress' departments was called "society"?

Nobody could know before, that some terrorists would use commercial airplanes and attack the WTC-towers and the Pentagon two days before our conference. It was and still is a shock to our world and ethic's, to experience and witness such a brutality, that only is known from war. But this time nobody declared war, there was (and still is – even if the US and the NATO are bombing now Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries of the world with over 2 million starving people who would need food, not bombs) no enemy, who took the responsibility for these acts, causing over 6000 death's and turning part of Manhattan into rubble. Most of us came by airplane to Stockholm, had to manage own fears of following terrorist acts, some of us came from America a few days before or have family in New York and had to hear it all from the TV-news, not knowing if friends and relatives have been injured. It took time and a big stress of mixed heavy feelings to find that out. Others could not come to the conference, because they could not get out of their country. So some workshops with American colleagues had to be cancelled. We all stood under a shock during these days. How can this be integra-

ted in a conference well prepared in advance?

From my point of view the integration of the obvious failed, in many ways: The starting panel (in a dark auditorium of a theatre called circus) had a terrible problem to name the theme. I heard that some of the participants would rather have denied the actual situation and tried to open the congress as planned, doing "business as usual" and divide the participants into different "intros" in different places, related to the sub-themes "Society", "Therapy", "Organization", "Research".

There was no other meeting during the congress where all participants would have been together. All the time was reserved for workshops, no other panel with keynote speakers and main discussions. So when from one group the idea came up, to send a letter with a statement of the European Gestalt therapists to President Bush, there was no place to work that out during the congress. Shortly before the closing ceremony, there was the first chance to discuss it. No rules how to find a decision, have been established, just statements pro and contra to such an effort were made and, there was no more time to work out a better letter, that could have been a mature statement of a professional psychotherapeutic community, being aware of social and political responsibility, knowing that ten thousands have been traumatized in Manhattan and even more as shocked witnesses all over the world and would need professional help from psychotherapists and knowing also, that a war as an announced answer could easily turn in to a world wide war, causing millions of deaths, insured and traumatized people. Gestalt therapy with it's not only individual approach but also organisational and social approach could give a serious statement for consideration by the American government, couldn't it? The Congress leader decided, not to send this letter, because of the voiced objections, without any vote. There was no interest to find out majorities. It seems the project has died as soon as there was no confluence among the participants. That might be all right in an intimate system but for sure not in a strategic system of an organisation, which I consider a congress to be.

Where has the "response – ability" of Gestalt therapists to social and political

events and crisis disappeared? Paul Goodman would have turned around in his grave, if he would have had to witness this helplessness of the European Gestalt community! Let me tell you three negative highlights from this discussion: several colleagues said, Gestalt therapists should behave unpolitically, remain psychotherapists and not make statements to the political situation of the world! Another colleague lead a improvised workshop during the congress on the subject of terrorism and the opposite pole of terrorism. She was not able (or willing!) to name, what the opposite pole of terrorism would be, but she said, in using the concept of polarities she would not be able to distinguish between "victim" and "perpetrator", so she could not take position in any letter. What an abuse of a therapeutic concept! And a third opinion said that there was no need to a declaration in the name of the whole congress, but everybody could do it in his or her own name. That's a way of privatizing public affairs and forgets that in an official statement there is more power than in a private one: the whole is more than just the sum of the individuals!

There have been other problematic ways to deal with the needs of intimacy in a strategic system of a congress looking to the polarities of nationalism and internationalism. The congress was meant to be international, welcoming 400 persons from 32 countries from 6 continents. A good chance for dialogues between Gestalt therapists from all over the world. But in a strange way nationalism came up: At the beginning people were told to stand up in groups, showing the country they are from. This continued at the very celebrated evening gala dinner in the famous town hall of Stockholm with singing nationalistic songs from the representatives of the countries, mostly on a artistic level of school children. Pure regression and "confluenza epidemica", as Nancy Amendt-Lyon named this phenomenon in an article. The whole congress was accompanied by accord on music with the melody of an old Swedish folksong, with new lyrics specially written for Gestaltists. A Gestalt-hymn. Why? The need of getting in a confluent mode together? And dividing ambivalently again in nationalistic, confluent groups? It seems Europe has a to handle a good deal of efforts to overcome nationa-

lism and growing into something bigger, where nations are background, not figure.

So the more serious chances to come into dialogues (the theme of the congress was "invitation to dialogues") happened in smaller workshops and between the official parts. The organizers seemed to be afraid of the power and dynamic of a meeting with all participants together and even suppressed dialogues in the summary of the last morning: We were split up in small groups in a warehouse hall and had to work out a little non verbal show about "highlights, frustrations and next steps". You wonder that nothing substantially came out of this setting? It was a pity to do this exercise, a waste of precious time. The tools of Gestalt-self-experience with creative expression have been abused in a setting where thoughts, reflections, discussions – dialogues should have been planned. It supported regression, not professionalism. Also we Gestalt therapists use our brain and intellect in our daily work and professional action, so why not also at the end of a congress? Could you imagine a congress of psychoanalysts ending with putting some couches on a stage and letting people just associate freely about the congress?

I'm sorry I sound rather critically, but I think these things have to be pointed out in order to learn and do it the next time in Prague (2004) in a better way. Besides my critiques I also appreciate the big work of organizing this congress. I know by own experience how much work that means and I know that it's not easy to find the good form and right balance between intimate needs and strategic needs. Many of the workshops have been very enriching to me and I'd like to finish with my personal highlight during the congress: it was a workshop called "moments of meeting", organized by Mikael Curman. Exponents of the Boston "process of change study group" (Ed Tronick, Alex Harrison and others) discussed about meeting points in theory and practice with exponents of Gestalt therapy (Margherita Spagnuolo-Lobb, Malcolm Parlett, Mikael Curman and others). This was a very careful discussion on a high level, pointing out differences and common ground. After a while they changed place and others sat in the inner circle of the group and went on discussing. It ended with a big circle discussion, where

everybody could participate. Could not this have been a model to deal also with other themes in a big auditorium? I'd love if the organizers of the Prague-meeting will feel encouraged to do so.

The congress was held in the area and houses of an open air museum, showing the history of past centuries of Sweden. No perspective of Sweden here and now or future is shown there. I hope this was not meant symbolically, that Gestalt therapy belongs, after 50 years of history, already in a museum. I think our method is too young and alive therefore, but it's time to celebrate not only in a regression- and confluence promoting way our congresses, but also to show that we have grown professionally and prove this also in statements to the larger world.

*Peter Schultbess*

Zürich, Switzerland, October, 2001

**Veronique Vermeir:**

Dear colleagues,

It's great to notice that many of us are participating in this dialogue!

Struggling against the tendency of being of no importance, I will try to formulate some of my thoughts.

What I really liked in Palermo was: the process groups and the central meeting rooms, places that were big enough, the movement between decentralisation and centralisation, the movement between active co-creation and receiving... intimate and managed as well. This helped me a lot to feel of relative importance, to be responsible in a way that fitted to my own potential, and to feel supported by clear and flexible boundaries, represented by people or infrastructural elements.

In gestalt therapy we know the importance of not only expressing feelings, but in the same time explore their connectedness with field conditions, limit them, differentiate them, confront them with others, choose direction and create for "good forms".

Differentiation as growth out of confluence.

Maybe we are sometimes too "lazy" to differentiate, to install workable professional rules, boundaries and people who take the responsibility to guide this process in a "firm" way.

Maybe, arrived at a conference, and especially when confronted with an unex-

pected event in the field, we need time to be aware of, feeling accepted with, and let go our initial intentions and expectations, and "empty" us for a new figure to form. This is indeed a kind of crisis-intervention, and this process has to be supported and guided by a responsible group or committee.

In Stockholm, would it have been a good idea, to invite those individuals that needed support and/or were interested to "process" there and then what happened in New York, to ask for a "committee" responsible to guide this process as persons and professionals, in permanent deliberation with the conference committee? To create an ongoing "project group" to integrate the experience of an intrusive political event. Only by going through differentiation we can grow into integration.

So I hope for Prague: less "collective" emotional expression (catharsis is for the freudians), more management of concentration, differentiation and creation of clear figures. I also hope for an environment where in I can feel as important as I am together with all the others. Let's hope nothing of dramatic impact like the terrorist-crash happens then, but in any case, in a more or less degree, a large group of conference-participants can initially be seen as a "borderline" field full of ambiguities (more than neurotic or psychotic), and therefore it has to be healed and educated by clear and well organized experiments to create good forms to integrate all the present anxieties and desires.

Warm regards,

*Veronique Vermeir*

Belgium, January 13, 2002

**Judy Graham:**

Dear Colleagues,

I'm American. I lived in New York for 15 years prior to coming to London. I felt the 11 September attack personally. I couldn't go to be with friends and family in New York. I thought to myself ..if I can push through my fear of flying and get myself on an airplane, I will be with the Gestalt community where I have always found a place, a home. In shock, exhibiting all the characteristics of trauma victims, I sought to meet my needs to feel safe, to talk about what was happening, to find comfort, to comfort others, to express the

range of feelings I was experiencing.

On the second day the conference, the plenary session included participation in the 3 minute silence held throughout Europe. Barely able to speak, I asked the organiser to make an announcement for several of us who wished to extend the 3 minute silence and spend some time together. It was obvious that I was upset. She told me that it was better if the announcement came from me personally. I was shocked by this insensitive response and spent the whole of the 3 minutes trying to string together the sentences of my announcement. I don't know how I managed to get up in front of the 400 people in that auditorium but I delivered my announcement ..time and venue of our session. The venue turned out to be difficult to find in the maze.. and the door was locked when we finally found it. Others couldn't find the venue at all. Obviously, there was no extended session for us.

The next day by chance, a fellow American shouted to me on his way to the workshop entitled "Attack on America". I had been unaware of any such workshop. I had an opportunity to discuss with Europeans who were also distressed about the events of 11 Sept.

During the final plenary, I sat in my circle with my head hanging down between my knees. Noone noticed me or asked me what I needed. I had to leave and wait outside until the end of the conference.

Carmen, you said "nobody expressed with enough strength his/her needs so as to call attention of 400 people assembled there... noone had a clear necessity to try to emphasize with enough energy to move the environment.."

Well, I tried to show my needs, ask for what I needed....and I found a hostile response. I was shocked by the lack of humanity among a group of 400 therapists. I felt invisible and/or a recipient of projections which were out of awareness. I have been trying to recover from this experience since the conference. Nancy, thank you for speaking out. I appreciate this process and have had to push myself to express my hurt. I hope that I can recover my respect and confidence in EAGT and our members. I hope that the humanity which I have always valued in Gestalt will begin to come through the concrete wall

of deflection and denial. Please don't disappoint me again. Gestalt theory talks about dialogue..staying in contact when we have differences. Yes, Gestalt is political but it is first of all human. I best send this without editing or I fear I will change my mind and stay quiet.

Sincerely,

*Judy Graham*

January 16, 2002

**Malcolm Parlett:**

Dear Colleagues

I have been in writing purdah for the last few weeks and have not responded to the various discussions post-EAGT Conference in Stockholm. I think a dialogue/collaboration in thinking IS required, and Peter's thoughtful letter (along with Nancy's earlier one in News and Notes) is a good beginning. I want to appreciate all those — especially Margherita — for ensuring that lots of people have been contacted and various types of open communication have been considered.

My sense of what happened in Stockholm was that the field conditions were about as unhelpful as they could be:

1. The whole world was in shock, in the sense of not having enough supports to integrate a colossal world event (support in the sense of having time and space to digest what had happened and make coherent meanings out of it, and support in the sense of recognised familiarity — they were missing altogether ). In Stockholm we were very close to the event in time and many of us who were there were close to it in other ways as well — and the Gestalt community as a whole was close to it, with a felt connection to New York, (where there is probably the world's greatest concentration of Gestalt therapists, where we started collectively as a defined therapeutic approach, and from where many of our trainers came, including Laura and Isadore). The point is that we were not immune to that collective world-felt shock; we were part of it. The acute difficulty in assimilating it meant that we did so in the most superficial and inept ways; and we didn't mostly realise that therapeutic treatment of shock was applicable — people needed comforts, quiet spaces, an unfrenetic timetable, emptiness, peace and quiet — all of which at conferences are in short supply (they are designed to stimulate and arouse).

2. Most people across the planet with a strong concern about what had happened were seeking to integrate the news through watching a lot of TV, reading newspapers, talking to friends, reading and writing emails, and doing all these from the security of home — many people across the world cancelled travel to stay near their loved ones. By contrast, mostly we were NOT with our loved ones, nor in the comfort and supportive conditions of our own circle of intimates — we were at a professional conference, in a foreign country, sleeping in strange beds, eating different food, and trying to adjust creatively to a logistically difficult conference site. In addition to being unsettled and away from necessary supports, many people (as has been pointed out) felt some anxiety in the act of travelling itself.

3. The timing of the conference turned out, of course, to be very unfortunate. If the destruction of the WTC had not taken place, a number of problems in the conference would still have surfaced — in particular (I suspect) the socially fragmenting and physically 'centrifugal' tendencies being far greater than the cohesion-increasing and consolidating 'centripetal' ones. On the other hand, if people had not been in shock — some in extreme distress and shock — it is possible that there would have been enough collective resourcefulness to have creatively adjusted to the conference situation as we found it, and for there to have been some daring innovative corrections to some of the things which did cause problems...(that is, IF they would have been regarded as 'problems' under more benign conditions).

4. The Gestalt community is not the politically active community that Paul Goodman may have envisaged. There was that emphasis in the early days, with people such as Elliot Shapiro, Paul, and the Perls's themselves. But the politics was never very foreground, compared with the therapy tradition itself — which was seen as 'political' only in the sense of affecting people's attitudes and outlooks to life. One has only to look at the number of articles in Gestalt journals that have an overtly political emphasis to realise that it is NOT an approach overall that dwells on political themes. So here, given that an extraordinary historical and global political story was being enacted at an astonishing speed,

and with little access to the media, newspapers, internet, friends etc, to offer 'meanings', it is hardly surprising that the Gestalt community could not act with more sophistication and understanding than probably any other group of helping professionals, coming from all over the world, with all sorts of different political beliefs, priorities, attitudes to America, and experiences of terrorism in their home countries. That the debate was so superficial, unsatisfying and divisive was not surprising. When, I ask you, in normal times and at other conferences, have we ever had political discussions and examination of our different political values? We haven't. In other words, we had no prior relevant collective experience that would have helped us. (It is paradoxical that the Conference theme was seeking to broaden the general Gestalt ethos in a wider-than-therapy direction.)

5. The events in New York and the waves spreading out across the global field, meant that ANY major conference-type event taking place at that time would have been overshadowed. There was a colossal competing figure with huge energy attached to it. The suggestions about how the conference could have been changed to accommodate the shift in the field are all well and good, but anyone who has organised a conference knows that trying to run a huge event like that is not easy — most of all it is not easy to change venues, timings, and programmes at the last minute, without there being a formed community first. Hardly any conference leads to a formed community happening, at least not one that would be sufficiently robust to withstand a complete abandonment or rearrangement of the conference programme in the light of a huge shocking event. Conferences are not designed for that. In this case, especially given the layout and geography, the collective decision-making style that the organisers had, the absence of some speakers, the difficulties in internal communication, and other features of the Conference that Peter and Nancy have described, ALONG WITH the various field characteristics and processes I have mentioned, it is not surprising that various limitations, hurts, disappointments, confusions, retrospective regrets and resentments have arisen subsequently. I do not consider that anything else much could

have happened which would have been much better, given the total circumstances comprising our shared field. Condemnation and self-condemnation are not, I think, necessary. This said, I agree with others, that there are always lessons to be drawn about conference designs and strategic management of these odd, but usually enjoyable, occasions.

*Malcolm Parlett*

January 9, 2002

**Carmen Vázquez Bandín:**

Dear colleagues,

Here are my reflexions about Peter's writing:

When I'm reading Peter's writing, I don't understand well either his questions as the aim of his reflexions. For me it's clear that, by making his comments public, he intend it for somebody and he expect something from this somebody... But from whom? And What?

Is a Gestalt Conference rather a strategic or an intimate system? How should an European Conference deal with nationalisms and internationalisms? Is Gestalt Therapy only a method of social healthcare or also a political method? How can a meeting be organised with the terrorist attacks of September 11th as a background?

If I'll start from "is Gestalt Therapy only a method of social healthcare or also a political method?", it brings to my mind a paragraph from Michael Vincent Miller and Isadore from's Introduction to "the Gestalt Therapy" book:

"Gestalt Therapy, especially as it is spelled out by Goodman, takes for its starting point [...] the exchange that goes on unceasingly between the human organism and its surrounding environment in all areas (the italics are mine) of life ties person and world inextricably to one another."

And the whole book is full of references to inseparability between the human being and the world he's living in. For me is clear that Gestalt Therapy can be political as we – its members – want it to be. Did we want, in Stockholm, to make the Gestalt Therapy Conference a political issue? In my opinion, no. According to Gestalt Therapy, a figure does not emerge in a forced way; it does not emerge with "the suggestion by anybody", nor can anybody push it...; nor can anybody "crush" it, nor silence it. The figure emerges on his own, when it achie-

ves "attention, concentration, interest, concern, excitement and grace (PHG, p. xxvi), it imposes itself. And the figure of the events from "September 11th" didn't emerge, according to these requirements, at any time in these conference. Neither, in my opinion, did anybody do anything to restrain it.

And nobody expressed, with enough strength, his/her needs so as to call the attention of 400 people assembled there.

Regarding the way of integration of nationalisms and internationalisms... I think that a European (or International) Conference must encourage, in the first stage of its development, the "differences" of its members. It's like at the very beginning of any workshop where the members should introduce themselves. It's difficult to introduce 400 people, but not 26 countries. How can they "introduce" them? It is a requirement to the ability of the Conference organisation crew. And, at the end, their aim had to be "the union of the differences".

In my opinion, a Conference, Meeting or Congress should take into account two elements: the "technical" aspect, in this case, the attributions on what to do in Gestalt Therapy and, on the other hand, the "social" aspects, that is, the possibilities of the participants exchanging human and personal experiences. Personally, I like to know from my Gestalt Therapy colleagues "who they are" and "what they are like". How can you do it? It's an important part, again, of the ability of the Conference organisation crew, but I don't feel "in epidemic confluence" dancing and singing folkloric dances with 399 colleagues, cause "I accept to do it", and I don't "do it because I'm not aware and I'm not conscious of other necessities": I'm making a choice (even if the activity will not put me into a transcendental state, or I wouldn't necessarily have proposed such an activity, maybe it would better to have, in some moment, a more "intellectual" activity).

And when, during the Conference, "a world crisis" take place, and if I should be one from the organisation crew, I should not change anything if it shouldn't be a personal necessity – and I should say it so as it is – because to organize a conference implies a certain leader status and a leader cannot (speaking in a psychological way) impose his necessities as the necessities,

until it's the background of the group and becomes a figure.

I think that to organize something requires a basic plan and structure where flexibility and enough spontaneous organization to resolve the "here and now" of each moment of the real situation.

So, if I'm not from the organisation crew, and I'd have a clear necessity, I should try to emphasize with all my energy the orientation and manipulation to move the environment in the direction of my needs.

I don't guess the necessities of nobody. In Stockholm, somebody divide his confusion and his stupor with me, and some other told me his sentiments and his necessity of support, and I gave them all heart and all my capacity. And, as for the general development of the Conference, when something wasn't my necessity, I tried to change it, counting on others (sometimes I obtain a good result, sometimes not); this give me the chance to participate in what I wanted to and not to do what I didn't want to do.

*Carmen Vázquez Bandín*  
January 16, 2002

### Reflections from the Conference Project Group:

#### • Introduction

We are pleased to recognize the late reactions and expressions of some conference attendee's experiences from the conference. To us, it seems that this wasn't possible for most attendees at the time of the conference, and we have sensed a strong silence afterwards, apart from a few colleagues in Sweden and USA who have shared their appreciation of the contact we had.

In retrospect, there are many "black holes" that need attention and this summary is an attempt to give some experiential substance from the Organizer's perspective.

It all started (in this perspective) in Palermo, October 1998. The decision was made that the 7th EAGT Conference would be held in Sweden and Barbro Curman took the responsibility to organize means for this to happen.

Here is was Barbro expresses about this beginning:

"In Palermo 1998, when I said yes to the invitation of Gestalt Academy of Scandinavia being the host of the 7th EAGT Con-

ference, I did it out of a thought that we had been a training institute for today 25 years and still lived our life rather isolated from the rest of the Gestalt world. When I came home from Palermo 1998 after this rapid decision at the conference in Palermo to anchor my decision at the Board of Gestalt Academy and at my former Co-Director Assar Hansson, I was met with true enthusiasm concerning this possibility of letting the Gestalt world come to us. The Board supported with project money so we started to build a project organisation."

This enthusiasm initially collected several Swedish Gestalt practitioners to discuss how we would structure this conference – what we wanted to offer as our unique perspective of Gestalt, to the European and International Gestalt community that would be interested in attending the conference.

Barbro continues:

"When I think back of this time it is like far away in time. In perspective, through painful experiences, I understand how impossible it is to plan such a big event and believe that the same group of people will be able to keep their enthusiasm and power all the way through.

2-3 years is a long time and lots of things happen in everyone's lives during this time. The work of the project group has a history of serious illness in a couple of cases, other life crisis and organizational crisis around us. We had to re-organize ourselves several times.

Through all this there has still been a kernel of persons, who have been there all the way through. I will especially mention Lars Berg, who has been like the inner wheel from start to goal. Without Lars I would at times have felt very lonely in this huge task. Worries around economy was another dilemma. Looking back I find it crazy that one single institute is the responsible risktaker of a conference of this size and for the benefit of all Europe. Stockholm is on top of that a very expensive city. In my experience I took the ultimate responsibility, knowing that this conference had to cover itself economically or with support from sponsorship before, during or after the conference. Gestalt Academy is a non-profit organization and is although a big organization not built for arrangements like this. Being one of the founders and in a leading position for 24 years, I

knew it only too well. – Today, I know that we managed to cover the costs just on the limit – what a relief!!"

It's apparent that the original ground for a conference, in the beginning of planning, shifted severely during the planning process and there were many lessons to be made in terms of administration, economic support and – not the least – how to maintain a living vision of our goal, in order not to lose important individual contributions because of work exhaustion.

Barbro worked hard to keep us together and Lars kept up the spirit by continuously nagging everyone in the group to give their text contributions to various graphic pieces that needed to be sent out or published at the Conference Website.

After having received the immense amount of presentation proposals, the leaders of the four Application Fields realized what a huge task they had taken on, to organize all the presentations – especially Helmuth Klingenberg, who alone (with a couple of co-responders) initially had to handle nearly 100 proposals on Psychotherapy.

The summer before the conference was exhausting for all of us, being non-professionals in handling this kind of administration, but nevertheless formed us into a tighter team and opened our hearts for each other in a way we probably wouldn't have done without this stressful situation.

Barbro writes:

"Along with the difficulties there were also lots of creativity in the project group. We became at the end very close, sharing a strong faith and trust in each other as we again and again succeeded in inspiring each other. Margherita shared our faith and was of great support to me and us. It was almost a spiritual kind of faith. When the worst things happened suddenly a new person like Peffe appeared like from nowhere and right in the middle, and so we kept going. At the end I finally found the connection with Gestalt linked companies who liked to contribute financially as exhibitors etc."

Peffe Brzezinski, Executive General:

"In the encounter with the Project Group I felt recognized both for my "outer" competence in Tourism and for my "inner" growing competence in the Gestalt realm. I experienced myself as a colleague of people I respect and highly value."

Gudrun Andersen, co-responsible for Social Events:

“What I most clearly carry with me after the conference, is the feeling of fellowship in the Project Group; creating together for an important reason.”

• Introspection

In the Project Group we have asked ourselves the question of how the world events, during and after the conference, affected us – and what were the consequences for our experiences of the conference?

This question was apparently the main issue in what we have written to each other about our experiences.

Barbro Curman again:

“This issue/question stands out as the background for the whole conference and I believe that it has had an enormous influence on everything happening during these days. For me the professional issues very much disappeared and all my attention went to how to keep the conference together and cope with the situation.

Tuesday afternoon September 11, I was with Monica (from our group) in a shop in the Old Town of Stockholm to buy scarves for us volunteers so that participants would recognize us. The women in the shop were all stiff and started to talk about aircraft which had flied right into the World Trade Centre in New York. Monica and I were standing there with our then so meaningless scarves, bought them mechanically and sat down at a café to try to understand what had happened, called the others in the group. Met them later, cried together, shared how confused and helpless we all felt....

What can we do when the world is on fire? Is it possible to run a conference then? But most participants are on their way! My own reactions – my family....How is this for all people who are far away from home? Colleagues from USA, colleagues with links to USA? Who will come, who will not? How can we meet them with dignity and respect for what has happened? And still keep the original reason why we wanted to meet as colleagues..

We shared what we felt and I managed after this support to make decision for Wednesday the day before the start of the conference. We will need to meet regularly, continue to share our feelings, continue

to plan in spite of. Tuesday evening – we need to meet our families – this event frightens all of us!!

When I came home one of our colleagues from New York was on my phone – in shock.

We talked, again after an hour and then in my home. She joined us in the project group next day. Contact is what we all need. Sari from our project group born in New York, now living in Gothenburg, was struggling how to be able to leave home and go to Stockholm. I tried to support her in her own choice. She came.

We met at 9.00, 16.00 and 20.00 during Wednesday, the day before start. In the afternoon we were all there. We meditated together, shared our reactions and slowly emerged how we wanted to meet this so unexpected situation and still hold the organization together. During the evening we had invited the EAGT Executive Board and Anna Maria Norén, Director of Gestalt Academy. How do we cope together in this hard situation? We met to get to know each other a little before it all started...What do we need to change in the schedule to meet this so totally new world event?

Looking back four months later we should have asked the Board of EAGT for support to arrange a crisis group to be able to offer crisis intervention and a meeting point in a special seminar room ongoing during the whole conference. We managed to support some participants in a personal and contactful way. The feedback we have got from them is that they have been able to cope with this trauma in a constructive way. For others the conference turned out to be a painful experience.

In perspective our impossible task becomes more and more evident:

- to be prepared to meet what was totally unexpected;
- to have a holding function when everyone was affected or in crisis;
- to balance in a very vulnerable political situation;
- to keep the organization going in spite of much insecurity and lack of information;
- to fulfill what we had promised and participants had paid for;
- to be able to cope with a big system of 400 participants having need for safety and close sharing and needs to meet all together....

I have not been able to grasp to whole picture until now, four months later. After the conference I often described my life as if I had been in the war and needed calm and peace and just to be home. My colleague Lars Berg in the project group, describes that for him the conference disappeared like in a dream as if it has not been real.”

Lars Berg:

“At the time in Palermo, when I knew I would be part of the planning of the 7th EAGT Conference, I was in a period of international curiosity and expansion. Today the circumstances are different.

For me, the conference became the extreme polarity of outward attention and once the conference had started I felt totally emptied from outward energy. My feeling was that, by the completion of the Conference Secretariat and by putting the large banderoles up at Cirkus the first day of the conference, I had done my part of the job.

I had in mind to just float around during the conference at Skansen, enjoying the movement of dialogues we had initiated. This never happened, though.

The New York attacks impacted my experience of everything at the conference and I felt tied to the responsibility before a number of colleagues and friends – especially the americans who had come, in spite of all – which put me in conflict with my attention on what was practically needed to do to complete a functioning environment.”

Peffe Brzezinski:

“Fog – is the first word that comes to my mind. The rest of the world, with its madness, disappeared as in a fog. There and then I switched off the outer world. For me, there was only Skansen, Cirkus, the City Hall, a Project Group, voluntaries and 400 delegates and a hysterically amount of practical details to handle.”

Gudrun Andersen:

“My way of functioning in this crisis situation, was to focus on “doing”; I became resolute and even more focused on my task – which was: fulfilling the Social Events. During the dinner in the City Hall I had great difficulties to let go of my responsibility and just enjoy.”

These expressions makes it very clear that the way we functioned in this traumatic situation, was to hold on to, and carry out,

our “business” – all those things that might work as a security in a chaotic field.

There is also evidence that we did quite a good job in responding personally to those attendants that approached us directly with their despair, chock, grief or any present state. That was graspable for all of us, being trained in responsiveness to another human being.

However, we seem to have failed in responding to a greater need – a kind of collective need – that was “over our heads”.

Gudrun puts it like this:

“In retrospect, I can see that all that happened was too much for me to take in. The situation became overwhelming, partly due to my family history of strong war experiences. Therefore I delimited my awareness to things that were graspable for me, and put all my energy there.”

Some of us in the Project Group were closer to some colleagues and did what we could to make contact with them; however, there was still a conference to prepare, which was ground for a conflict.

Lars puts it like this:

“When it became clear to me that we would have a crisis meeting on Wednesday morning, September 12th, I tried to reach Penny Backman and Joe Melnick at the hotel they usually stay at, when they are in Sweden, but they weren’t there (later it became apparent that Penny hadn’t made it out from USA before the attacks). I reached Barbro Curman who had made contact with Susan Gregory and Elisabeth Revell.

Sharon Snir from Australia would come on Wednesday and I had a phone message from her on my answering machine in my studio, where I stayed overnight those days. On Thursday morning I tried to reach her at “af Chapman”, where I knew she would take in, but noone answered.

Later I reached Elisabeth Revell at Hotel Hasselbacken and got to know that Sharon had joined Elisabeth at Hasselbacken, having given up af Chapman.

I went to their hotel and enjoyed breakfast with Elisabeth, her husband Alvin, Sharon, Ansel and Nancy Woldt and Sylvia Crocker. All of them were vulnerable and in grief, and we closely shared some of our feelings about what had happened, but we also had fun and enjoyed being together.

Simultaneously, I didn’t want to lose

my responsibility for the practical details that I designwise had for the secretariat, so I broke up from breakfast and rushed to Skansen to finish up there, before the conference attendants would start streaming in in the afternoon.

Maybe this conflict made it difficult for me to feel present with our guests; I felt a strong need for withdrawal from any social responsibilities and, at the same time, I did what I could to stay in contact with people around me.”

#### • Aftermath and Conclusions

It’s obvious that the conference had a very strong competing figure in the terrorist attacks in New York, and it’s unlikely that any attender was unaffected by this in his/her experience of the conference. The paradox is that in order to hold this shock and make some kind of crisis intervention on a group level, we would have needed someone who was less affected and would be able to clearly see the collective needs. That would likely have been an “alien” from another planet, as the terrorist events affected a whole world. Noone could stand outside the impact of this trauma.

Barbro Curman concludes:

“As I see it we shared a trauma, which was not enough reacted upon when we were together. And maybe it was not even possible to react then when we were all in a shock stage more than as I said above to create a special crisis room with ongoing possibility to share. My hope is that the dialogue will continue between different people and between different perspectives so that something constructive and learning will come out of this NOW.

At the same time we were all victims – this event was a heavy concern for the whole world. The ability to respond was also influenced by the fact that in this big group of 400 participants there were a great variety of political opinions more in focus due to the terror event and more delicate and even meaningless to express and share in a situation when many participants were in a personal crisis.

In practice we as organizers were alone and maybe made us too alone in the holding function. We managed to a great deal I think but we should have been able to share more of the political and therapeutic responsibility with the EAGT Board

and other colleagues. We were organizers on behalf of the EAGT Board. In a vulnerable situation like this we would have needed some support. And as we were all affected – who would have the ability to respond fully to the situation? And still this was the need!

I find it natural that much of what we had planned as figures of one background und aroused other kind of reactions and for some participants even painful reactions in connection with the new background. We made some changes others not. We shared back and forth and many of us felt a need not to let the terrorists be allowed to stop people from their original wishes with this conference. The balance of meeting the new situation but not let it take over fully. I fully understand that people experience this differently. For some participants it was right to and they were able to gather, sing and dance, for others it was a lack of respect and they had no wish to join.

Today I feel great humility and tenderness to all of us being at Skansen in the middle of this trauma who nobody was able to overview there and then. We did what we were able to THEN. And from my perspective I am still proud of the fact that we were able to keep the conference going the way we did and I am also sad that our way of doing it became painful for some participants.

So strange – how is it possible that 400 professional people (including us in the project group) are unable to create a concrete crisis intervention work there and then?

As project group we had invited to initiatives ongoing. Our colleagues in crisis would have needed our support. I truly regret that we as organizers, EAGT Board or other experienced colleagues did not have the ability to realize this there and then.”

Lars Berg:

“This feeling of a need for withdrawal has prevailed all autumn. The events of the 11th of September, has been background for me all the time, and in October, when I got closer to the departure for a Bearing Witness retreat at Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland, I was in turmoil. USA had started bombing in Afganistan and the packages containing Anthrax bacteria was spreading fear around the world.

Did I want to expose myself to the risks of flying at this time of insecurity in the world?

I was in decision agony until the last day I could, without having to pay for the tickets I had booked, before I made my choice: I wanted to go!

I was determined to not letting the terrorist's actions role my life, and important events that I was part of – as I remember that we also reasoned in the Project Group for the conference, regarding the EAGT Conference; not letting terrorism stop the meaningful event we had built up for.

The retreat in Auschwitz was also impacted by the September 11 events, but not in the same way. The distance in time was apparent, people had had some time to deal with their reactions and were able to talk about their feelings in quite another way than we could in Stockholm in September.

Another fact that was a difference was that the Auschwitz surroundings are so strongly imprinted by its own suffering, so the NY attacks and the feelings from that, rather deepened the experience of the concentration camps.

It's not until today, in early January 2002, I feel I have started to reach a new kind of openness to contact with my broader environment. The work I did as part of the Project Group, as well as the events of September 11 and its aftermath, has contributed to a deeper contact with my inner realm and a stronger sense of connectedness with humanity."

• Suggestions

Last, but not least, we have put together a list of suggestions for the planning of the next EAGT Conference in Pague; learnings we have made from our own planning experiences.

*Barbro Curman:*

- Be prepared to meet the most unexpected (create a crisis group in advance in collaboration with the EAGT Board);
- Let two colleagues from the EAGT Board be part of the project group (more continuity of political/strategic parts of the conference – not enough with meetings as we had);
- Arrange a more clear contract between EAGT Board and organisers during the conference and as a whole;
- Very important that EAGT through their members share the risktaking through a special fund. The members need to take responsibility if they want conferences;
- Suggestion to invite organisations within and without EAGT but linked to Gestalt to pay for an exhibition table at the conference both an advertisement, a money support and an overview of application of Gestalt;
- If possible, find a conference place where everybody can stay overnight (was not possible in Stockholm), saves a lot of time and frustrations and make small groups possible;
- If possible, have a room for all participants available all the time (expensive) if needed;
- Important – prolong the conference one day – so much to happen in a short time, as the political meetings are expanding and are not supposed to disturb the seminar schedule, doesn't work any more;
- A stable project group around Ester – we ended up with a good group but needed more on the way and especially around marketing and economy – to have enough money support to be able to have a solid administration going from the very beginning as the inner wheel of the conference.

I wish Ester and her group all the best for the next conference and hope that we

will have another world situation then.

*Peffe Brzezinski:*

- Be careful about costs;
- Try to get international sponsorship (EU, UN...);
- A well prepared administration from the beginning;
- It has to be simple to pay for the conference!!!
- Utilize the modern IT technique (e-mail, www) for:
  - registration;
  - payment;
  - abstracts, posters, presentations program, schedule, localities;
  - news, changes.
- "Get-together" is important. All along the conference;
- Schedule presentations as soon as possible (first to come – is first to serve?);
- Make the conference one day longer = extended possibilities of staying in the environment for the conference (Prague) for sight-seeing and meetings;
- A conference site with good space for everyone to stay overnight and get together;
- Plan for localities for spontaneous meetings;
- Minimize the amount of rooms- and time changes, once the conference has started;
- Limit the amount of languages;
- Make a student cost alternative;
- Have a tight contact with EAGT.

On behalf of the Project Group for the EAGT Conference 2001;

*Barbro Curman*, Project leader;

*Lars Berg*, responsible for the Graphic profile of the conference;

*Peffe Brzezinski*, Executive General;

*Gudrun Andersen*, Co-director Social Events.

***Let us know what you think!***

You are welcome with your reactions to the discussion above. Write your reflections, for publication in the next EAGT Newsletter, and send it to either *Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb* or *Lars Berg*, (see address information on pages 4 and 7).

If you attended the EAGT Conference in Stockholm, you are also invited to write for the *Nordic Gestalt Journal*. Issue #10 will cover the conference with writings from

attenders and workshop leaders – and a collage of photos from the four days in September 2001. Send an e-mail to [ngj@berg-egenart.se](mailto:ngj@berg-egenart.se) for more information.

To support your writing, you can soon visit the *Freedom X-Press* website, where you may find inspiration to express yourself as a Gestalt practitioner: <http://www.freedomxpress.net>. This website is an extension of a writer's workshop at the EAGT Conference, edited by *Sharon*

*Snir*, Australia, *Elizabeth Revell*, USA and *Lars Berg*, Sweden.

I also want to announce the possibility for you to refresh your memories of the EAGT Conference, by visiting the conference website and the Photo Gallery there.

The web address is:

<http://www.gestaltakademin.se/eagt2001>

*Lars Berg*, Editor