

ALL THINGS NEW

March, 1984

In the past month, it has been difficult for me to understand what went on in India during the plenary of the International Exposition of Rural Development. We've had a number of good reports from delegates and steering committee and Joel, but somehow the real happening just began to come clear last week in Chicago.

I know the image is trite, but as near as I can tell, this event has placed us in a new world. I want to witness to four aspects: they have to do with the Delegates, the ICA Staff, the North American Continent, and the IERD itself. Each has undergone a change that puts us in a new situation of mission.

First, the delegates. Jim Oberg told the story of the Canadian Indian people who went to India and the change they experienced, but I think it also applies to all the people we know, to a greater or lesser extent. The Indian delegates from Canada have lived for generations out of the self-story that they had nothing, that they were the dispossessed. And their typical stance towards that situation was one of whining, self-pity, or resentment towards the society that put them in such a deprived situation. What they met in India was a people who had far less than they, and who were proud, dignified and creatively self-sufficient with their nothing.

According to Jim, this was a major affront, a radical humiliation to them. But more than that, it was an occasion for them to see a new possibility for life. He reports that they returned with a sense of mission--a commitment to get everyone else in Canada to realize what great gifts they have and what a possibility to use them for the benefit, not only of themselves, but for the rest of the world. Concretely, they decided to form themselves into an organization (called Replics), they adopted a logo--which they changed by coloring in the center to represent the heart of the matter--and they resolved to sponsor the second International Exposition of Rural Development in Canada in 1990 with themselves as the backbone of the steering committee. This no-people has become a people because of the encounter with the otherness of India and its reflection on the possibility for life back home.

I believe something like this happened to everyone who participated, and if this is true, then there is something new in history--a fledgling people with a sense of mission just waiting for an opportunity.

Second, the ICA Staff. For years, we have lived out of the self-story that we are the best facilitators in the world, and that our methods are the top of the line in enabling a group to get its wisdom formulated. So we sent our best and brightest to New Delhi to run this extraordinary plenary in 13 languages with all the methods in our corporate kit-bag. And the participants rebelled. They took over the meeting and re-did the procedures. They signed a petition to the effect that what needed to happen was not happening with the formal structures we had designed, and they left some people at home during

the village visits to be sure that there were designs that let them do the interchange they had come to do. And everyone agrees that it was a much better meeting for this having happened.

The reaction to that experience in our corporate psyche is interesting; now it is hard to find anyone who will write ANY procedures. The image of an "open process" has gotten to the point that people will inflict on a group the need to do its own organizing, just as sort of a knee-jerk response to being politely informed that we were off target with our initial plans in India.

Now what has been made quite clear is that we are in a new age of facilitation. And that the methods which worked in the age of research are not those for now. We are in a time of interchange (except the word is too simple). We are in a time when there needs to be interaction between at least two perspectives, skills, value-systems, information systems and mythologies. It is not the case that we don't know what to do; now it's the case that someone DOES know what to do, and we need methods to get that ability known and used throughout the world. For example, once our forte was the brainstorm method in which anything anyone said was received as valuable, and in the gestalts, new insight emerged. Now, in the interchange mode, NOT everything said is valuable, and there ARE some answers better than others. This doesn't mean that everyone can't participate, just that there are some additional forms of participation that we need to develop.

We people of the methods have just been informed that there are new methods to be developed, that the new edge is beyond participation--it is contribution. People want to do more than just to participate, now they demand to contribute their gifts to the historical process, and we have to develop the methods that let this happen. ICA is a changed group of methodologists as a result of the IERD.

Third, the Continent of North America. For years we have lived with the consciousness that North America is both the economic capital of the world and the place of defensiveness about its wealth; that we have the best educational system and the least aware people; that our culture is imitated around the world yet we are guilty about it. In short, we cringe in some kind of guilt when we are lambasted by peoples of the developing world for being absorbed only in our own good life and uncaring about the world.

What we have found in this IERD, both in India and in the 18 months preceeding it, is that this continent is composed of millions of people who care passionately about the world and are looking for ways to focus their service so that it makes a difference. Maybe this was not so in the 60's and 70's. But the 80's which have been called a time of commitment are certainly seeing people from a wide variety of situations responding to the call for service. This group of agency heads that met here some weeks ago and are meeting again next Tuesday are all people trying hard to be effective in rural development. And they are seeing the IERD as a vehicle to getting things accomplished.

This is a different working environment from any we have experienced.

Now the task is not awakening, it is aligning ourselves with the forces of good and making them effective. This continent now has in itself a massive movement of those who care; our task is to give it form before it attaches itself to some cause less than service to the world. It's like a book of matches that has been lit; it will either be used to ignite something significant, or it will quickly burn out and be good only for throwing away.

Now probably number four was contained in the above, but I'll say it anyway. It has to do with the IERD. Part of my delight with this campaign has been that it is a chance to pull together the fruits of our past 25 years and make them available to the globe. It has appeared as a culmination, a completion, the end of all we set out to do 25 years ago. And I had been looking ahead, trying to figure out what we should do next. We were planning to discern and document the approaches that work in development around the world (of course most of them would be things we had discovered) and make that book available to every human settlement. Then, having performed that service, we could go find something else to break loose.

What we have found is really embarrassing, it's so obvious. But it took a comment by some delegates in Chicago to get through my skull. Someone asked about the book from India...the one which documented the learnings, the one which laid out the approaches that work. The delegate stood up and said, "I don't know about the book, but if you want the learnings, they aren't in a book; they're out in the projects." Then he went on as if to rub it in. "You talk about approaches that work: there are no approaches that DON'T work in some situation!! If you want to know how to do rural development, the key is the people, not some formula."

So the IERD isn't over. It is simply in the arena of working with people and helping them to have the perspective of possibility, same as it's always been. And our job is not too different from its predecessor--creating the opportunities for changed lives to occur, creating an atmosphere of service and a context of commitment. Creating the consciousness of this world and the other and the signs of the new society that is coming into being.

What we now have is a new movement in a new world with a new staff. And it's a newness that is very familiar. The wild creativity in history is loose once again beckoning us to lead all people into a new promised land. But now we and the world are both clear that the milk and honey flowing in that land are brokenness and expenditure, and in that is authentic life.

- Epps!

Denver