



A congress that dared the unthinkable



Congress symbol : Design, Sempas Community



Photo by Richard Mack



Picasso

Introduction

This is a report on an extraordinary international event which took place in Florence (19-28 February 1978) under the name " New Age Congress ". The Congress was unusual in so many ways that any conventional report can only contribute to the pattern of reflections around the event rather than producing a neatly ordered overview. Consider the « confusion » surrounding the following points which are normally very clear for any conventional gathering :

Organizers : The « organizing committee » changed its nature, function and composition every week or so, from its origin in 1977 right up to and through the opening of the congress. It absorbed new individuals, who moved to Florence at various times prior to the event, in order to contribute in one way or another. This process, and the associated conflicts, was a traumatic experience for all concerned — but an experience recognized and accepted (with much difficulty) as necessary to the refinement of the vision of the nature of the congress. In most cases those attracted together in this way had neither met before nor been members of the same association — and yet they all shared aspects of a deeply felt sense of commitment to a common but undefined purpose. It was accepted that each such individual had something unique to contribute to the organizing process.

Theme/Purpose : The theme was only put into written form and distributed 7 weeks before the Congress and even then it was expressed in the most general terms :

" We are coming together in Florence in February to explore, experience and celebrate human transformation. In that beautiful setting where flourished the first renaissance of modern times, the opportunity is being presented to facilitate and confirm the birth of a New Renaissance.

You are invited to participate as a co-equal, co-creative delegate in the colloquia and workshops, to experience the many presentations and associated events of this World Congress, which should prove to be an historic and unifying event. The expansive work of all of the

participants will be to consider the dimensions of the New Age, of the New Renaissance and of alternative futures. Participants will daily question, learn, congress and celebrate using the general principles of growth found in the processes and structures of Nature.

Let us see with ever greater clarity that our planet is undergoing radical change out of which arises an impulse of creative synthesis. An all-inclusive unitive power floods the feelings, thoughts, and motivations of attuned people everywhere, igniting a common vision of renewed organic earth. A new consciousness and the energy of a new dispensation for humankind is now emergent. The signs are everywhere. The pace of transition depends directly upon us. Wherever we are, there is that thing which it is appropriate for us to do, to hasten a new and better day"

It is typical of the event and of the attitudes of those involved that the final text used in the printed programme consisted of paragraphs extracted from a circular letter mailed independently by a person who had briefly visited the organizing group in Florence after the above text had been distributed.

Finance : At no time did the Congress have a well-defined budget. In many instances the source of income as composed of gifts ranging from \$ 4,000 new sources emerged just before disaster could have struck. Typically the down-payment for the meeting hall could only be paid one week before the Congress opened. The printed program to \$ 58 from 17 individuals, and composed of gifts ranging from \$ 4,000 to \$ 58 from 17 individuals, and loans ranging from \$ 2,500 to \$ 500 from 8 individuals. An early budget estimate was \$ 400,000, and the Congress was finally held on a budget of \$ 40,000. The other main sources of income were registration fees (at \$ 40 per participant, plus gifts) and film rights. The Congress ended with \$ 24,000 debts which have to be cleared by the same process of individual commitment. Many of those most committed placed themselves personally in debt to make the Congress happen.

Publicity : As noted, above, circular mailings were first distributed only 2



Ponte Vecchio, Florence

months before the event. Publicity was severely restricted by shortage of funds for printing and postage, by lack of adequate mailing lists and by the well-known problems of the Italian postal system. Much was however accomplished by word-of-mouth and personal contact — despite the wider reverberations of the conflicts between those participating in the organizing process. Participants : At no period prior to the event itself was it at all clear how many people would be attracted to the Congress. Very early hopes were for 1500, although it was believed by some that the event would be worthwhile even if only 60 people participated. The actual number was 300, of which over half were present for the full 10-day period. Oddly enough, although the majority of participants spoke English, the nationalities of participants were never a matter of interest. About 40 % of the participants were of North American origin, although many were resident in Europe. Others were from most Western European countries and Yugoslavia with a significant number from the UK and Italy. The kinds of person participating are discussed below. Results : The organizing committee deliberately abstained from any attempt to define the results, if any, which would emerge from the congress process. Considerable effort was however put into the production of a documentary film (by professionals acting in a private capacity) based on the Congress and its environment — with the expectation of distributing it through TV networks around the world (1). It so happened that the finances precluded recording speeches (except occasionally as part of film-making). There was no desire to push for recommendations, declarations or resolutions. A book is being produced (2) containing contributions of some key resource people present but this does not attempt to reflect the heart of the congress process. No rapporteur was appointed or desired. A number of individuals present, including journalists, planned to report on the Congress in the light of their own experience and note-taking. This is one

such report. It is as partial and subjective as the other attempts to reflect what occurred.

Organization-Programme

A great deal of effort prior to the Congress was put into designing and organizing a tentative programme of lectures, plenary discussions, workshops and social events — to the extent that this was possible, since even a week before the Congress it was not certain which key resource people were coming. Those involved were very sensitive to the need to make the gathering as participative as possible, benefiting from key resource people giving lectures, but avoiding the tendency to turn the Congress into a vehicle for « super-stars », particularly those anxious for ego-nourishment. It was repeatedly stated that each participant was a resource person and the problem was how best to focus those resources for the benefit of the whole. Suggestions were made in the program concerning discussion group formation by any participants.

The first day was organized in a highly participative manner as planned. Already however there was considerable pressure from key resource people to know when they were « on ». The number of sign-up sheets for workshops (by « middle-class » resource people), displayed on a single wall, rose quickly from 10 to 60 as competition for the attention of participants increased. The planned events for the second day were thrown into disarray when one of the key « upper-class » resource people threatened to leave unless given a 3-hour plenary solo. This was done. And by the end of that day of excessive conventional structure, a core group of * those sensitive to the scheduling problem * met to review how the schedule was to be balanced in the light of (a) pressure from super-stars, particularly for long sessions, (b) commitments to super-stars (made by single individuals amongst the core group of organizers), (c) the participative emphasis of the congress and the desire not to over-organize.

At this meeting a compromise was reached to handle in parallel those participants having a preference for « structure » (namely well-ordered lectures and workshops) or for « process » (namely participative discussion and spontaneous workshops). This was implemented on the third day, during which the pressure on the scheduling office and the organizing group continued to increase — whether from unfulfilled super-stars or those wanting to give workshops in the limited space available. The difficulties were compounded by « hit-and-run super-stars » who could only be available for a plenary time-slot convenient to themselves before they had to leave. These difficulties were presented to a plenary meeting on the fourth day (together with the issue of whether the Congress should, could or would support the position of North American Indians before the international community). This was the first occasion on which it was made clear to the Congress as a whole that it had a responsibility for deciding on its own scheduling priorities for the forthcoming days. However, each group responded in the light of its own interests. For those who had expected a well-packaged series of events (which had never been the announced intent), the Congress was by now evaluated in such terms as : disorganized, discourteous to eminent speakers, too many leaders, lack of consensus, unfulfilled commitments, lack of adequate communication, etc. A number of participants and speakers had left as a result. Pressure on the - organizing group » had reached boiling point by the evening of the fourth day. (The organizing group continued to consist of a core of 8-15 people who felt strongly committed to the Congress as a whole. Because of the continuing dynamics amongst members of this diverse group, some were always absent from any particular meeting.)

The group was particularly concerned that it was concealing the reality of the Congress from the participants as a

(1) The degree to which the film could or would reflect the actual Congress was hotly debated with the consensus being that it would serve a useful purpose without completely conveying what really occurred or what was most meaningful to individual participants at the event. (The

film itself only came about because of a considerable personal financial commitment on the part of those directly involved) Diane Ciento
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whole, disguising its acute problems under a neat schedule of events to meet every taste, and taking authority in a manner which prevented participants from acting in a fully responsible manner rather than as simple consumers of available * products ». Necessary administrative and other tasks were instigated in a very organic manner as the need was perceived by whoever in the core group was most sensitive to it as it emerged. Essential tasks of food preparation, cleaning / chair arrangement, registration, etc. were performed by volunteers or by some participants in repayment for a waived registration fee. The situation was dramatically changed on the evening of the fourth day at a core group meeting — held as a « fish-bowl event » in the middle of the plenary room (but with only 5-20 observers). After considerable discussion it was unanimously agreed that the meaning of the event in all its ramifications could best emerge if the core group ceased to « organize and schedule » and just « stepped back » in order for the Congress to become aware of itself as a whole. Instead of scheduling events for the following day or thereafter, it was simply agreed that one person would < focalize > a general meeting, if sufficient participants gathered together in the plenary meeting room on the following morning. It was agreed that even the registration desk would be manned in an unscheduled manner by volunteers responding to the need. Such volunteers explained the change which had occurred in case participants did not wish to register. The workshop sign-up sheets were to be removed from the display wall. Once this decision was reached there was truly amazing expression of joy amongst those who had been responding frenetically to artificial pressures and needs which did not correspond to the values which had brought them together in search for new structures and processes. The « organizing group » dissolved itself with statements such as : « At last we have a Congress » (3). The results of this decision are described elsewhere (see pages 271-276).

Strange Happenings

The previous section reflects only one level on which the Congress could be perceived. From first to last however it was a focus of many strange happenings — perhaps the strangest being that it occurred despite the confusion from which it was born. The printed program carries the statement : « Newly arriving delegates all have stories of self-sacrifice, curiosity and faith in coming to Florence ». It was accepted by the original organizing group, which at

times barely had funds for its own food, that : « Because of the ad hoc nature of the group of people working on this Congress and because of the spirit of the event itself, we have discovered that we could only receive that which we truly needed at any time and no more. These contributions of energy and vision, and gifts and loans of money were given from one person to another with a sense of personal trust and a hope for the common good ». At times participants seemed to have come together mysteriously and magically « because they thought they ought to be there », despite (or even because of) the lack of precision as to the nature of the Congress. The variety of participants was quite astounding. There were : architects, physicians, healers, agriculturalists, artists, poets, dancers, biologists, disciples of a variety of sects and religions, psychologists, economists, educators, psychotherapists, historians, organic / whole food experts, intellectuals of a variety of persuasions (interested in sophisticated models of structures and processes), engineers, journalists, futurologists, philosophers, company executives, home-makers, members of communities of various kinds (e.g. Findhorn in Scotland), students, etc. However, despite this variety, participants were accepted and assessed on the spot as individuals, irrespective of their origins, occupations and roles which were seldom identified. To add to the strangeness, there was an actor who (as part of the film production) demonstrated the role of the fool or clown in such gatherings. There was a street « soul dancer » (with a Harvard degree) who functioned as « court jester » most admirably — clarifying brilliantly those points which occasionally needed emphasis, responding to moments of tension and representing in many ways the soul of the Congress. (Has this ever before been permitted and welcomed in an international plenary assembly ?) As might be expected there were also musicians, jugglers and magicians of various kinds. Needless to say the date of the event had been selected by astrologers, who were also present. The setting of the meeting also contributed to the atmosphere. It was opened in the Palazzo Vecchio, once the centre Of government of the Florentine Republic and now the city hall. The Congress was held in the Forte Belvedere — a huge construction with walls many feet thick in a star formation, built by the Medici at the beginning of the 17th century. This is located on a direct line between the Torre di Gallo (at Arcetri above Florence where Galileo carried out much of his work with the support

of the Medici) and the Duomo cathedral in the centre of the city. It is overlooked on the opposite side of the Arno valley by the town of Fiesole, a chief city of the Etruscan confederacy dating back to the 8th century B.C. — later superseded by Florence. The setting was used to point out the synthesis between the sciences and the arts which was a concern of the Congress. Many strange large-scale tubular « crystals » were created on the surface of the Fort to aid those interested in « initializing » their awareness (4). Collectively they bore a striking resemblance to the array of antennae at the Arcetri Astrophysical Observatory next to the Torre di Gallo.

In this atmosphere participants quickly established contacts based on mutual trust and affinity. The level of tolerance and mutual acceptance was necessarily high with such a variety of people and interests. In many cases this was reflected in casual gestures of affection between people who were virtual strangers by normal standards. This supportive environment made it possible, for those who wished, to speak of their emotions or with tears in their eyes (even in plenary sessions). This occurred on a number of dramatic occasions and was accepted as a valid form of expression.

It is characteristic of the Congress that many participants experienced pain or discomfort in one form or another whilst there. Some had considerable transportation-related problems in getting there. Others suffered from odd physical pains. Many suffered emotional mental pain and frustration from the clash between their expectations and the realities of the Congress process. Egos were « crushed » and it was accepted by the core group that to succeed they would individually have to « get out of the way » of what needed to be achieved. Anyone who clung desperately to a particular structure or approach suffered. It was generally recognized that such experiences were beneficial. This meant however that each had to justify his or her own continued presence and contribution, since the support of others seldom matched the discomfort experienced. The Congress was also experienced by many as a process of joyful personal transformation, whether accompanied by strange coincidences, symbolic dreams, visions, or personal re-assessments. Quite unemotional people openly declared that it had provided them with some of the most meaningful experiences they had encountered. The variety of elements ensured that the Congress was a « complete experience » normally inaccessible to most because of habitual behaviour patterns.

(3) The nature of the group's attitude to this decision at the critical moment it was taken is illustrated by the Zen tale told at that time : Three disciples of a Zen master were each asked to explain « nature of a beautiful ancient vase. The first and the second were each absent a year and returned with complex statements — which were rejected. The third smashed the vase with one blow — and thus achieved « satori ».

(4) D.G. Langham, Genesee; an attempt to develop a conceptual model to synthesize, synchronize, and vitalize man's interpretation of universal phenomena. Fallbrook, Aero Publishers, 1969.

(5) G. Lock Land, Grow or Die: the unifying principle of transformation. New York, Dell, 1973.



The fool : an enigmatic catalyst

- The fool, who was sitting beside the fire, heard these words, leapt to his feet, came before the King and skipped and danced for bliss, saying: "Lord King, so God save me, your adventures now begin."

The « Court » Jester and « Foolishness »

The court jester, the clown, the fool or the buffoon, is a mythic figure representing the inversion of the powers of the king (as the possessor of supreme power) - or as his alter ego. He is therefore often the victim chosen in folklore as the substitute of foil for the king in rites whereby the people respond frankly and unceremoniously to such powers.

Court jesters were first recorded in the courts of the Egyptian pharaohs and were in vogue up until the 18th century in European courts, salons and taverns (*). They were often physically mishapen, if not also psychically disturbed. Ideally they were a powerful reminder of the distortion of the human condition - more immediate than the photographs disseminated via the media of today. Additionally, due to the freedom from censure and responsibility for their actions which they were accorded, they were able to mirror, parody and mimic court situations in such a way as to bring out truths which would otherwise be collectively and carefully ignored. They were often masters of song and dance, and could be a dramatic foil to pomp, superficiality and falsehood of any kind. As an ambiguous and often androgynous figure, the jester could function as a powerful social catalyst - for good or for ill, depending upon the response of those by whom he was surrounded.

The fool is an enigmatic symbol of the point of crisis when the normal or conscious appears to become perverted or infirm, and in order to regain health and well-being is obliged to turn to the dangerous, the irrational, the unconscious and the abnormal. As such, the fool is to be found on the fringe of all orders and systems, outside all conventional categories, processes and social rules. He is the bridge between the conscious and the unconscious (and between the attributes of the right and left hemispheres of the brain) - a reminder that, after having failed in our effort to order and understand the universe in the light of our intellect and instinct, there nevertheless remains another way.

Eliminating to jester from the court is as risky as allowing him to play his role. For, if « foolishness » is not given a channel through which to express itself, it seeks its own channel anyway. Parliamentary and international assemblies, particularly those in which each is conscious of the high purpose and seriousness of his role, run a considerable risk of incorporating distortion into their proceedings and results because of an inability to accept what a jester would reveal. (Political cartoons offer a partial remedy, but they lack the significance of being accepted as part of the proceedings and the have little affect on them.)

It requires greater maturity on the part of all participants, especially the chairperson and principal speakers, to play their parts in the face of such instant feedback. In the absence of children at international assemblies, who can say whether our international emperors wear any clothes?

Joker : messenger from the unconscious



Congress storyteller... Brother Blue



Congress « soul dancer »



(*) John Doran. History of Court Fools. London. Richard Bentley. 1858 Barbara Swain. Fools and Folly during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. New York, Columbia University Press. 1932. Enid Welford. The Fool; his social and literary history. London. Faber and Faber, 1935.

However, it is viewed, the Congress contained many of the elements from which myths are made and in some ways engaged itself in a myth-making process — if only because of the many ways in which it can be described and the lack of any written record.

Harmonies of Dramatic Process

One contextual thread which was voiced on a number of occasions was that the Congress as a whole was a transformative process. In fact the stages of this process, derived from a synthesis presented there (5), were over-printed on the program distributed to participants. The succession of phases were labelled : accretive, replicative, mutualistic and transformative with each blending into the next over 2-3 day periods within the 10 days of the Congress. And indeed, even in the depths of crisis, it did appear as though the process was « on schedule ». (in the accretive phase there is an accumulation of elements with similar characteristics. In the replicative phase, there is growth by influencing other elements to take on the form of the initiator. In the mutual growth phase these is reciprocal interaction between the elements. The transformative phase establishes a new system of order from which the sequence can be repeated at a new level.)

But aside from the intellectual overview of the process, there was also an understanding among many that the moments of drama, of takeover attempts by different individuals and factions, of expressions of anger and mutual accusation, of leadership abdication, of ultimatums, etc. were all integral elements in a real and meaningful process. As the proceedings evolved, it was quite beautiful to observe how « incompatible » factions in the Congress played off against each other or united in strange and moving harmonies. This occurs to some extent in most meetings but the variety of modes of expression considered valid on this occasion was

Harmonies within complexity



Photo : Richard Mack

unique. A plenary session which can move fluidly between : verbal exchange (whether intellectual or emotive), affective display, physical expression (as dance, movement or mime), ceremony and meditation, at any appropriate moment, is rich in dramatic possibilities particularly with a « court jester » as catalyst.

It is only in terms of dramatic process and interplay that excessive enthusiasm or negativity could be appropriately handled and channelled by the Congress as a whole — for the structures which are conventionally expected to handle such energies were themselves called into question, constantly modified and subjected to criticism. The collective challenge was to refine and improve the drama from its crude initial forms to one which could blend together all the elements present into a new and meaningful whole. This should not be understood to imply that people and factions were playing artificial games with one another or that there was a lack of discipline of any kind. The dynamics were « for real » and reflected attitudes that were sincerely held or genuinely felt. Tears (but not hysteria), a sense of despair, frustration and exhaustion were all frequent phenomena — and some left when they could stand no more. It was however accepted by others that the Congress process should provide a « crucible » within which the variety of elements could be blended and moulded into a « chalice » as an expression of the whole.

Feding this collective awareness of a dramatic process were suggestions made by a number of people — towards the end of the Congress — that the process bore some resemblance to a breathing cycle (inspiration, expiration), to a succession of birth contractions, or to a nuptial ritual between - yin and « yang » forces. There was a widely shared belief that the Congress was a birth process although any focus on what was to be born was avoided — an attitude of expectancy was created. Another understanding, shared to some degree, was that the Congress process was a double reflection : (a) of processes between similar factions, forces

and viewpoints in the outside world, and (b) of processes and attitudes held in different ways within each individual present, especially including oneself. To observe the process was therefore to observe both oneself and society as a whole. Any struggle for a greater harmony in one was seen as reflected in the others and reforced by them. This made the Congress experience triply significant as one responded to the battle and balance between the old and new forms and contending forces. It was suggested that the transformation of the Congress could then also be seen as a transformative process for oneself and for society as a whole.

Here-and-now Focus

It was also very characteristic of many who made the Congress happen that there was a definite willingness to focus on the here-and-now. An extreme instance of this was the number of people who had made no personal or professional plans for the period immediately following the Congress. They had risked much to make something happen in the present. As the Congress evolved and conventional planning was abandoned, participants were obliged to focus on a moment-by-moment reality. New program elements were scheduled at very short notice in response to the needs of the moment. All the usual features of a congress were constantly called into a question, whether deliberately or through the lack of importance attached to them. Participants were encouraged to be self-reliant, to improvise and to take initiative if there was something they specially wished to achieve (e.g. give a workshop, show slides, etc.). In such a context it may well be asked what prevented the Congress from falling apart (or exploding !). The answer lies in the level of mutual trust, whether intuitive or affective, which by-passed individual differences and the lack of explicit consensus.

(For a detailed report on the consequences of the organizing group's decision to stand back, and on the process evolved by the plenary group, see pages 271-276).