A congress that dared the unthinkable

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 nearly ordered overview. Consider the confusion surrounding the following points which are normally very clear for any conventional gathering:

Organizers: The organizing committee changed its name, 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 2 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 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 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 even greater clarity that our planet is undergoing radical change out of which arises an impetus 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 was comprised 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 $58 from 17 individuals, and comprised 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
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 earlier revindication of the conflicts between those participating in the organizing process.

Participants: At no period prior to the event 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 this event would be worthwhile even if only 60 people participated. The actual number was 380, 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 persons 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 results, although with the aim of distributing it through TV networks around the world (1). It happened that the finance precluded recording speeches (except occasionally as part of film-making). There was no time to push for recommendations, declarations of new findings, etc. A number of people — including organizers, planners, and members of the organizing group — continued to consist of a core of people not to over-organize. This is one of the degrees to which the Congress could or would reflect the actual Congress was holly debated with the consensus being that it would serve a usefully most meaningful to individual participants at the event. (The experience and note-taking. This is one to push for recommendations, declarations of new findings, etc. A number of people — including organizers, planners, and members of the organizing group — continued to consist of a core of people 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, discouraging to eminent speakers, too many leaders, lack of consensus, unfilled commitments, lack of adequate communication, etc. A number of participants had left as a result. Pressure on the — organizing group — had reached boiling point by the evening of the fourth day. (2) The organizing group continued to consist of a core of 6-15 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.)

At this meeting a compromise was reached to handle in parallel those participants having a preference for « structure » (namely well-organized lectures and workshops) or for « process » (impromptu 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 unfilled super-stars or those wanting to give workshops in the limited space available. The difficulties were compounded by some « 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, discouraging to eminent speakers, too many leaders, lack of consensus, unfilled commitments, lack of adequate communication, etc. A number of participants 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 6-15 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.)

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(2) Contact: Gus Jaccaci. Box 299. Groton, MA 01450. USA.
whole, disguising its acute problems under a mask of schedule (1). The meeting was shuffled, and the programme was devised in a manner which prevented participants from acting in a fully responsible manner rather than as simple consumers of available "produc". Necessary administrative and other tasks were interleaved 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, clearing / chair arrangement, registration, etc. were performed by volunteers or by some participants in repayment for a weekend registration fee. The situation was dramatically changed on the evening of the fourth day as a core group meeting — held as a fish bowl — in the middle of the plenary room (but with only 5-20 observers) After constructive 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 thereaf- ter, it was simply agreed that one person would focus on 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 particip- ants did not wish to register. The working table was removed from the display wall. Once this decision was taken, the participants were not asked to return (even if in plenary sessions). This occu- rred in a very organic manner which had brought them together in search of meaning. The organization group dissolved itself and those who had left were invited to join us. We have a Congress (3). The results of this decision are described elsewhere (see pages 271-276).

Strange Happenings
This programme provides only one level on which the Congress could be perceived. From first to last it was a focus of many strange happenings which are perhaps the revelation that it occurred despite the confusion from which it was born. The profound programme text of the statement: "Are we Jerry? Are we Jerry?" was followed by a series of accidental events which had brought them together in search of meaning and which had been directed towards the creation of meaning 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 and emotional stress from the clash between their expectations and the reality of the Congress process. Everyone except very few of the core group would 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 con- tinued presence and contribution. The support of others seldom matched the discomfort experienced. The Congress was also experienced by many as a process of personal transformation, whether accompanied by strange coincidences, symbolic dreams, visions, or personal reassess- ments. Quite unemotional people openly declared that it had provided them with some of the most meaningful expe- riences they had encountered. The va- riety of elements ensured that the Con- gress was a complete experience, which is normally unachievable to most because of habitual behaviour patterns.

(3) The nature of the group's attitude to this decision at the critical mo- ment is well evinced in a letter written by a core group member at that time. The editor of a Zen master were each asked to explain on nature of a flower and her own personal interpretation. The first explained the idea with one line — and thus achieved "satori". The editor of Fallbrook, Aero Publishers, 1969.

(4) D.G. Langham, Genesa; an attempt to develop a conceptual model to describe, synchronise, and vitalize man's interpretation of universal phenomena, Fellesver, Aet Publisher, 1968.
The fool, who was sitting beside the fire, heard these words, leapt to his feet, came before the King and danced and sang, "Lord King, so shall mc rne, your adventures are begun."

The fool, an enigmatic catalyst

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 oftentimes physically deformed, if not also psychically disturbed. They were a paradoxical mixture of the innocence of the fool and the cleverness - more resembling the philosophies demonstrated in the works of Donkey. Additionally, due to their misuse of language and superficiality, if not also their occasional inspiration in decent acts of charity, they were often objects of laughter, and their words and actions were often considered to be an expression of the unconscious.

The « Court » Jester and « Foolishness »

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 - 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 the jester from the court is as risky as allowing him to play his role. For, it « foolishness » is not given a channel through which to express itself, it seeks its own channel anyway. Parliamentary and international assemblies, particularly those which work in conscious and unconscious, are in conflict and are aware of the fact that the nature of the law is a combination of conscious and unconscious (sex, proceedings and speech). The jester, however, cannot be included in these proceedings and the law, because he is a representative of the unconscious and the irrational. He will not see the jester as such. He will not accept the law as such. It is he who raises questions on the part of all participants, especially the observer and principal speakers, for the truth of each of his statements. He is the voice of the voiceless, the voter of that silent majority, in the absence of children at international assemblies, who can say whether our international emperors wear any clothes?

Congress storyteller, Brother Blue

Congress « soul dancer »


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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 overlays on the program distributed to participants. The succession of phases were labelled: accretive, replicative, mutational 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 mutational growth phase there is a 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 moment of drama, of crisis and battle, of leadership abdication, of ultimate success and defeat of opposing elements in a real and meaningful process. As the proceedings evolved, it was quite beautiful to observe how incommensurable factions in the Congress played against each other or united in beautiful to observe how « incommensurable » factions in the Congress played against each other or united in battle and balance between the old and new forms and contending forces.

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 in which the variety of elements could be blended and moulded into a « chalice » as an expression of the whole.

Feeding 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 birthing 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 relieved by them. This made the Congress experience (try as 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 raised 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 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). This answer lies in the level of mutual trust, whether intuitive or affective, 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 271-278.)