Emergence of integrative processes in a self-reflective assembly

Introduction
At a congress with rather unusual characteristics (see description, page 268) the organizing group decided to stand back and thus allow the participants in plenary to make the quantum leap in attitude from being there to be served passively by the organizing group to being, making and evolving the Congress themselves as a conscious whole. The consequences of this dramatic decision and the processes which were elaborated in plenary are described here.

Self-reflective plenary: Unity
This section reports on the consequences of the decision by the organizing group to «stand back» and allow the Congress to take care of itself. On the morning of the fifth day participants gathered in a plenary session for a discussion which lasted some nine hours. The early hours of the discussion were filled with exchanges and complaints, often bitter and emotional.

One major theme was whether the Congress should be tightly structured with a significant proportion of the time given to lectures by the key resource people, and with much of the remainder devoted to workshops by other resource people. A strong response to this was that it amounted to a «consumer» approach—denying the importance of participants as resource persons in their own right, and reinforcing conventional structures—which was the purpose of the Congress to call into question. The point was whether the participants had come for a safe, low risk, slightly protected («environmental») experience (1)—which was often available in the literature, in books or at other events—or whether they had come to be directly involved in new approaches, however painful the experience.

During this session, for the first time, people stepped holding back critical comments in public. Things that needed to be said were said and the responses, often very moving, resulted in integration of the group rather than fragmentation. There emerged a sense of shared reality—even if that reality was painful. It became less appropriate for the «we» to stress its or her personal wants and frustrations rather than those of the group as a whole, or some significant part thereof. The session itself was held under considerable pressure from those who believed that «talking» itself was a sterile activity and a waste of time. Frequent proposals were made to have lectures or workshops, to switch to an alternative mode of expression (e.g. dancing), or to counteract the analytical alienation by effective displays or meditation. One response to these was that they amounted to «coping» and an inability to face up to the collective reality and the tensions inherent in it. Another, in the case of workshops, was that they fragmented the group as a whole and prevented it from coming to any understanding of its raison d'être or how its action could be improved. Handling differences by dividing into smaller groups is a standard practice in society—-it results in mutual alienation and the inter-group conflict with which the Congress was concerned in attempting to reflect a greater whole.

Another response, in the case of alternative modes of expression, was that such modes alienated some of the participants without responding to the problems of the whole. The paradox that the «talking» mode was equally alienating to many was also recognized as part of the Congress reality. Another theme was that of responsibility, given that the organizing group had a «cosmos» providing a packaged experience to be consumed by participants. Every proposal that this or that should be done was met by the questions «why» and «how do we as a group propose to go about it?»

The Congress was increasingly forced to be aware of itself as a whole and to take responsibility for itself as a whole— including such matters as meaning the plenary sessions. The argument that the real business of the participants was to obtain or share insights in workshops or lectures was strongly countered by the point that the real challenge was in the nature and activity of the whole in the light of whatever participants had already learnt from such partial experiences on past occasions. Proposing such a collective awareness was viewed as avoiding the challenge. By this time it was remarked that the group as a whole had constituted a «we» far more than a bundle of «ifs».

The group was prepared to ask what «we» wanted and why «we» were there. It was recognized that the Congress was now on unknown territory since no diverse international gathering of such size had placed itself at risk in this way before (2). The group felt it had to feel its way forward, improvising at each stage, to see whether anything creative could emerge from the process. For some experienced congressgoers this was an excitingly unique experience.

The sense of immediacy and moment-to-moment reality provided a «collective central space»—an eye in the hurricane—from which the Congress processes could be seen. To the extent that the space was a vacuum of reaction there was great pressure to fill it with any kind of activity. The nine hour session terminated moment-to-moment however taking responsibility for the following day and without a sense of the possible evolution of the Congress. For some this continued refusal to confront the collective reality—despite what had been achieved—represented merely a further stage in the process.

(1) International congresses have always been recognized as intimately related to travel and tourism. The point has however never been made to which many of which to be related to the packaged tour industry both in reality and mentally.

(2) There is of course much experience of the behaviour of small groups in plenary, especially in plenary to make the quantum leap in attitude from being there to be served passively by the organizing group to being, making and evolving the Congress themselves as a conscious whole. The consequences of this dramatic decision and the processes which were elaborated in plenary are described here.

(3) Response to the above from the focal person of that group: «It was immediately obvious that we could not clear the air of expectations, resentment and frustration. We therefore decided to ask each person to tell us what they wanted and why they wanted it. This was done by a process of questioning and counter questioning, so we could get on to dealing with higher orders of substantive integration—which is what I feel has happened here.»
Reaction and Premature Synthesis

The tension of collective self-awareness and the “space” which it created could not be maintained. On the sixth day, as a reaction, the program was tightly and conventionally scheduled (by a small group which took this role upon itself without the general consent) — lectures in the morning and early afternoon, followed by workshops (3). The latter were however held in the same large room to avoid the sense of fragmentation, and then reported back together as a plenary assembly. The sessions were a relief to many who felt that meaningful synthesis was very positive. The workshops contributed to this sentiment until the workshop procedure highlighted how unenlightening the leaks which emerged — despite the assembled expertise — and how the problem of implementing them meaningfully and usefully remained to be confronted. It was then agreed that the experimental approach of the previous day should be continued in plenary.

Despite the consensus of the previous day, a small group again took the initiative to schedule (the Sunday) a morning plenary session of meditative celebration, poetry reading and Renaissance dance. After a short period this was abruptly broken up by a series of protests which re-opened the issues which had been raised on the fifth day. A very powerful debate ensued with many eloquent speeches. The first point made was that whatever its aesthetic, inspirational or celebratory appeal, the proposed program reinforced attitudes which had already been proved inadequate to the challenge of our times. As such it was in many respects a hindrance in that most of what could be learnt from such activities had already been learnt. A second point was that space collectively in respectfully absorbing further inspiration, or already been learnt. A second point was that time spent collectively in respect-ful of the experimental approach of the previous day.

From group consciousness to conscious groups

It is useful to distinguish between the awareness that individuals may have of the group of other individuals with whom they identify, namely a group consciousness, and (2) an awareness by a group as a whole of itself and its activities, namely a conscious group, in its total interaction with the environment. The consciousness of the group, which is the true content of a group. The second stage when the individuals are collectively and interdependently aware of the pattern of their interactions between the group members.

Litter is knowledge about conscious groups and what they could achieve. There are clues in the statements of members of a football team who are collectively aware of size another’s me-
time, to act collectively in more appropriate ways, any focus on how things could or should be done, or on why they should be done in the context of action appropriately performed, merely pre-

From group consciousness to conscious groups

The first is necessary to enable individuals to respond appropriately to each other within a group. The second arises when the individuals are collectively and simultaneously aware of the pattern of those interactions between the group members.

Participation in a conscious congress would be a dramatically uplifting experience. It is how we are to overcome the distance between the awareness individuals have of the group and of the group as such.

(Extract from a Congress document)
some of the affinity groups were not. This Round was successfully completed with identifying key terms (see box). These were laid out in a circle within the concentric circles of participant chairs. Participants were asked to determine with which groups they fell some special affinity. Those identifying with each group were then asked to stand up and a spokesperson for the affinity group was asked:
- What were the special qualities of that affinity group and what did it contribute to the larger group as a whole?
- What were the major challenge areas of the affinity group to improve its contribution to the larger group as a whole?
Other members of the affinity group could supplement the responses to these questions.

This process gave all concerned a better awareness of the distinct contributions made by each affinity group and encouraged each group to clarify the nature of its shortcomings. This Round was successfully completed by the plenary group. It was clear that some of the affinity groups were not especially aware of their shortcomings. Some of them also considered themselves as the “original organizing group.”

Round II: The exercise is repeated in a second round in which a spokesperson for each group identifies each other group of how they are perceived by the other group and the group’s identity. In other words the spokesperson answers the above two questions for each other affinity group, identifying the qualities and shortcomings of each. This process gives each affinity group a greater awareness of qualities which is appreciated within the larger group. It also exposes its gentleness, feedback on the matters on which it is insensitive (and to which it is never likely to be exposed under normal circumstances). It helps to clean many of the blockages to inter-group interaction within the larger group. And it does it by providing a supportive context for exchanges which in a larger group are conventionally at the primitive level of: “Our group is the best. Your group is very bad. (As had already been experienced)” “There was unfortunately no time to undertake this round within the plenary session although it would seemingly have provided the needed breakthrough to a new level of integration within the larger group — one which would be respectful of diversity (9).

Round III: Further rounds were envisaged in which affinity groups exchanged roles to enable them to obtain a greater understanding of the domain in which each other group operated. (In the case of individuals, one form of this technique is known as psycho-drama.)

Round IV: Some of the above affinity groups, which are most evident in the initial dynamics may, after several rounds, prove to be somewhat superficial. The exercises can then be repeated.

1. Original organizing group
2. Structure-oriented group (i.e. favoring adherence to a preestablished program, with emphasis on lectures and workshops by key resource people)
3. Process-oriented group (i.e. favoring flexibility with emphasis on all participants as resource people)
4. “Super-class” resource people (i.e. those who participated with the intention of giving a lecture)
5. “Hidden-clue” resource people (i.e. those who participated with the intention of giving a workshop)
6. Lecture attenders (i.e. those specifically in favor of lectures by key resource people)
7. Workshop attenders (i.e. those specifically in favor of workshops)
8. Detached observers (i.e. those uncommitted to the ends of the Congress)
9. Floater (i.e. those drawn to a variety of experiences)
10. Movie makers (i.e. the group producing the film on the Congress)
11. Visionary instigators (i.e. the group concerned to ensure that something new and significant emerged from the Congress)
12. Psychotherapists and the like (i.e. those concerned with personal and spiritual development through understanding of consciousness)
13. Meditator group (i.e. those oriented towards non-verbal expression and its personal significance for group integration)
14. Whole-earth, organic food/health group
15. Non-anglophone group (i.e. those who were handicapped by an inadequate knowledge of English)
16. American group (i.e. US participants as a group and located in a distant hotel)
17. North-American Indian group (i.e. those wanting the Congress to act in response to the native American crisis)
18. Kitchen voluntary worker group
19. Movement, dance and performer group (i.e. those oriented towards non-verbal expression and its personal significance for group integration)
20. Action-new group (i.e. those wanting to act immediately and to stop talking)
21. Here-and-now group (i.e. those impressed by the immediacy and “rightness” of the present and the lack of pressure to act)
22.“Here-and-now” group (i.e. those impressed by the immediacy and “rightness” of the present and the lack of pressure to act)
23. Educator group
24. Psychotherapist group
25. Original organizing group
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pealed with new affinity groups considered to be more fundamental or more relevant to the collective purpose of the whole as it emerges. At this stage the pattern of tensions between the affinity groups becomes a collective reality which can be worked with to stabilize disequilibria and unconfused exchanges within the larger whole. This procedure represents a compromise between small and plenary group processes and between verbal, analytical, and experiential processes. Experiential skills previously only applied to small groups are applied both within the affinity groups and within the larger whole — in this way feedback from specialized expertise normally restricted to small groups ideally the attempt could be made to apply a wide variety of small group skills to the larger whole with the object of progressively transforming the relationships between affinity groups within it. Answering the direct question of what any affinity group contributes to the plenary group ensures a collectively focused awareness of the varied nature of such contributions and their special relevance to the dynamics of the whole. This translates the intensity of intercon contribute normally characteristic of small group feedback to a plenary body usable and unifying to integrate such input in any meaningful manner. The plenary group in this way engages in a "self-healing" process (which, as it was expressed at the Congress, « helps to get the crap out »). It is well-recognized in psychotherapy that the ability to permit and to handle negative feedback is an essential indicator of the maturity of any individual and equality of any group. By permitting such feedback the process facilitates the maturation of the affinity groups (\(1\)) and of the larger whole. A great deal of creative energy emerges from an appropriate source in response to negative or, more precisely, in responding appropriately to responses indicative of negativity and essentially this is what is called a dynamic equilibrium between a variety of polar opposites — a balance of dualities which defines a central space or quality in which group members act creatively, with focused energy, as an integrated self-reflective whole.

Conceptual Synthesis

A deliberate effort was made by the initial organizing group to see the occasion of the Congress to bring into focus the interrelationships between a number of unique and little-known conceptual models. These « universal » models are characterized by the wide range of phenomena which they attempt to encompass and the manner in which they draw insights from a broad range of disciplines, often including natural and social sciences and even arts as well as sciences. Some of the origins of such models were presented at the Congress, two were directly represented, and others were collectively represented by people working on the interrelationships and isomorphisms between such models (a preoccupation which, unfortunately, the model-builders themselves usually do not share for obvious reasons). The last occasion on which such a synthesis was attempted was in 1969-1971 in association with some members of the Society for General Systems Research. The models were presented in lectures and workshops and their synthesis was partly documented in the Congress film (see footnote 1).

The significance of this initiative is that (a) the Congress provided a forum within which such syntheses could be presented, (b) it ensured a unique confrontation between such intellectual approaches and the affective, artistic, spiritual and experiential approaches which group members act creatively, with focused energy, as an integrated self-reflective whole. The Congress demonstrated that such modes can emerge with direct consequences for the smooth organization of its own processes.

1. The organization of the Congress was self-sufficient in response to itself in the issues raised by the need for new social structures. The Congress was self-organized, participant-run and staffed. Elton was severely restricted by the Congress processes without destroying the orderly process. Participants were prepared to place everything at risk in order to ensure the emergence of more appropriate modes of organization. The Congress demonstrated that such modes can emerge with direct consequences for the smooth organization of its own processes.

2. Resource people, and those anxious to structure people's awareness, were placed on the defensive. They were obliged to seek ways of making their contribution to the whole without distorting the collective process for the purposes of individual advancement. A new mode of congress behaviour was justified.

3. A core group of people, who had personally taken most, were taken by the process they initiated through a very rapid process of transformation as a group. Many other participants reported significant personal transformation. The value of the process, as a « complete experience », whatever personally or collectively, is itself adequate justification for holding the Congress.

4. What was achieved was done with a derisory amount of funding and a preponderance of quite ordinary people. Ironically, it could probably not have been achieved with generous funding or with « better qualified » or « more effective » individuals. It was the well-armoured «精英性 » participants who failed to handle the evolutionary crisis; not the mammoth scurrying between their feet).

5. A triple synthesis was effected (with joy) : (a) in physically gathering together and blending harmoniously a uniquely diverse group (point 1); (b) in engaging experimentally in a process it originated which brought into focus and balanced the dialectic forces within the group, thus opening the way to structured development of large group collective self-awareness; and (c) in interac-
As a contrast to its successes, the failures were easily associated with the time taken to benefit from the preliminary stages of the Congress process and with resistance to that process. Had less time been spent on the early difficulties, the Congress would have had more time to build on the point of balance it reached in its closing period. Fewer people would have been unnecessarily hurt. In addition, part of the synthesis achieved was implicit rather than explicit because of the time factor. The challenge raised by the Congress is how to build on its achievement — given that part of its success derived from the variety of opposing tendencies represented (as a result of the confusion surrounding it prior to the event). Could such an event be repeated, how, and by whom? — given that part of its success also derived from the ability of the organizers to terminate their responsibility.

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Although the organic, wholistic circle is beautifully blended architecturally into the rational square (e.g., the gothic arch), this is only achieved by the skillful use of compression between structural members. The structure as a whole is dependent on the overall coinciding tensional force of gravity (or authority) to prevent it from toppling apart. It is not structurally self-dependent and its elements lack the freedom of tensional interplay which would permit the structure to respond appropriately to forces (or shocks) from any direction. Such structures are 
• natural 
• only a limited degree because they fail to make use of constructional principles inherent in plants and animals, namely the appropriate balance between structural tension and compression — an animal can be rotated flexibly into any position without toppling apart, but not a cathedral, or social organizations built on the same hierarchical principles.

Also active at the Congress, however, were those working on isomorphic conceptual models and the synthesis they represent. At least two of these give rise to two-dimensional structures which were a focus for group activity. The question then is, are there new kinds of structure which can be used as a basis for new kinds of architecture, whether physical or social? To be superior to conventional architecture, they need to:

— require fewer materials
— be easier to construct
— be more stable under a wider range of forces
— be more isomorphic with corresponding conceptual structures of philosophical and social significance
— correspond more closely to the harmonies and economies of natural structure.

One set of structures presented, which fulfils these conditions, is known under the name “tensegrity structures”. They are best known through their architectural application in geodesic domes, although as usually seen they disguise the important principles underlying their design which are relevant to this argument and to the elaboration of corresponding social structures.

Returning to the Congress, aside from the limitations of the prismatic perception already mentioned, the problem is that the interplay between the factorial tendencies is obviously much more complex than can be adequately represented in a two-dimensional display. Such complexity can only be *captured* **in** a structure of matching complexity which does justice to the variety of interaction patterns. Tensegrity structures lend themselves admirably to this. Briefly, their advantages include:

• an elegant relationship between tension and compression elements; a more elegant solution to the relationship between the spherical and the linear, omnidirectional stability, and multiple axes and planes of symmetry.

Translating these advantages into psycho-social terms, the interacting tendencies in a large group (for example) are balanced much more elegantly. The transformative space defined between the dualities is now focussed at the center of a sphere (rather than between rows of vertical pillars), whose shape is maintained by the dualities and by the network of forces which hold them in symmetrical relationship to one another, however they are oriented. Order is inherent and structural integrity is achieved (and transcended in structure which lend themselves to rational analysis which exemplifies the symbiotic duality by progressions through a complete scale of such structures. Symbols of appropriate psycho-social significance can be associated with them and as such they can be understood as precisely designed arrays tapping into archetypal energies. The key question is whether these classes can be used in practice to design new kinds of psycho-social structures which are more adequate to the needs of the times. A tensegrity structure could, for example, have been used to clarify the harmony within the plenary’s diversity and to facilitate understanding of how energy could be moved, focused and used within the Congress in response to different initiatives.

As to the cathedral, the Congress did not build one for they have largely served their function and a new type of structure is urgently required. The Congress did however create a central transformative space analogous to that in cathedrals and it did bring into focus the nature and significance of some new structures — perhaps best illustrated by a micro-organism of the order radiolarians (above), or by the concept of nested tensegrity structures. This establishes a basis from which the reality of the corresponding psycho-social structures can be explored.

*) “Class One of all history’s domes is comprised of the hundreds of millennia of old upside-down baskets which include the later evolution of bad upside-down baskets and the re- upside-down once more of boats to form the roots of community meeting places and in later derive the cathedral.” R. Buckminster Fuller, Ideas and Integrities, Prentice Hall, 1963.

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(10A) First step towards exploring this possibility is described in an article in this issue, pages 246.