# A CONFERENCE TOWARDS SPIRITUAL CONCORD

# AS A

# METAPHOR OF SPIRITUAL CONCORD

**Clues and Insights** 

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## PREMISES FOR AN INTER-CULTURAL GATHERING

- 1. **Meaning of "the way forward":** There is a need to articulate understanding of what could be meant by "the way forward" in an inter-cultural context.
- 2. **Seeing things whole:** There is a need to explore new ways of seeing things as a whole -- without losing sight of the parts for which each culture is responsible.
- 3. Inter-cultural maps: There is a need to come to an understanding of where each cultural concern is located on a map of the functions essential to sustainability -- functions which, when pursued to excess, result in unsustainability.
- 4. Overall pattern: The complex of issues under discussion should preferably be viewed as forming some meaningful overall pattern. Individual issues can usefully be seen as pieces of a systemic "jig-saw puzzle" that we do not as yet fully understand how to put together -- or what the completed "picture" might look like.
- 5. **Beyond isolated bargains:** There is a need to move beyond isolated bargains -- often only achieved at the price of unsustainable compromise in other areas. In this sense "local" (namely cultur-specific) agreements tend to be achieved at the price of "global" disagreement.
- 6. **Function of differences:** There is a need to acknowledge the function of differences between cultures. This contrasts with the hope that the differences can be rendered insignificant within a global consensus -- thus making any such consensus a competitive exercise in tokenism.
- 7. New patterns of communication: There is a need to struggle with the challenge of understanding and articulating new patterns of inter-cultural activity, namely new patterns of communication to sustain sustainability -- conceptual "ley lines". These need to enhance understanding of the whole rather then focusing exclusively on links between selected and privileged parts.
- 8. **Necessary cultural constraints:** Unless each culture recognizes the conditions under which its action should be constrained, a culture of cultural self-righteousness prevails. This imperils the emergence of any sustainable global pattern of new significance.
- 9. **Challenge to comprehension:** Unless a culture can recognize how it is part of the problem, it must necessarily be unable to understand the nature of the sustainable solution required.
- 10. **Collective learning:** The inter-cultural challenge may be seen as a challenge of designing a collective learning process.

Think functionally, act strategically Configure globally, challenge locally

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# CLUES TO THE NATURE OF THE GATHERING

- A Strategy Discussion. One major common thread is the concern with "what next?", given the apparent urgency of social transformation, the inadequacy of existing approaches, and the weaknesses of existing meetings in giving birth to more adequate initiatives -- especially where there is any question of "paradigm shifts" and "non-linear thinking".
- A Dialogue. The gathering might be considered a dialogue or a conversation, in the best sense of these terms -- such as when an event is described as "magical". But this interpretation would evoke a certain impatience if there was any sense of dialogue for dialogue's sake, or with conversation as a collective indulgence.
- An Experiment. In a real sense the event is an experiment in meeting organization. As such it may also be thought of as a laboratory. But the experiment is one that is continuously redesigned by the participants as it progresses. And the outcome is of far more than purely theoretical interest. A concern may be to discover the potential of more highly integrated groups.
- An Exercise. The process might be seen as a spontaneous exercise in self-organization in which participants rehearse various ways of articulating and working with an emerging pattern of agreements and disagreements, especially where all are wary of simplistic consensus. However the exercise is more concerned with comprehending and sustaining global patterning than with developing particular technical skills.
- A Game. To the extent that this term implies the many unsatisfactory dimensions of "game-playing", this would not be an appropriate perception. However, the meeting could usefully be understood as an exploration of some of the dimensions evoked by Hesse's Glass Bead Game. There is a concern with bringing profoundly felt differences into play.
- A Construction Project. The gathering could be viewed as an exercise in constructing a whole, a pattern, a piece of psycho-social architecture, or a cognitive device. There is a certain concern for design and fitting elements together to make something of relevance to psych-social transformation -- if only for the duration of the event. Metaphors such as a dynamo or a fusion reactor may be used.
- A Journey. As with many such events, it may be considered as an expedition, an exploration, or a simple journeying together. However much of the interest in this case comes from articulating the dimensions of collective purpose amongst participants with very different contributions and commitments to the crisis of the times.
- A Collective Brainstorm. In the spirit of creativity groups, the gathering might be considered a brainstorming exercise. However there is a very strong resistance to the trap of a purely intellectual, "head" exercise. The concern is then more with creatively combining different kinds of insight, whatever their source. How should people "psych each other up" to a higher order of collective interplay -- integrating the "insight storm" into a fruitful "weather pattern"?
- A Collective Therapy Group. The group is definitely not a therapy group, although many participants will be familiar with that mode if it becomes appropriate to use it for a while. However the event might be considered an exercise in healing a group as a whole or at least understanding what that could imply.
- A Collective Dreaming. There may be aspects of the event which reflect the best sense of dreaming, especially of giving appropriate form to the future or "dreaming the future into being".
- A Collective Meditation. The process may be considered as a collective meditation, and periods of silence may be appropriate (as in Quaker "gathered" meetings). But the overt emphasis is on verbal articulation of insights, from whatever awareness they emerge.

#### **CLUES TO WORKING INSIGHTS**

- Creating a space. Cultivation of the space from which doing emerges -- or from which the point and focus of doing become evident. Here the challenge is to avoid premature filling of that space with know-able and do-able things. The point of the gathering, if that is the appropriate geometrical metaphor, is whatever we can collectively allow it to be.
- **Urgent illusion.** Here the challenge is to respond to the paradox of "the perfection of what is" versus "the agonizing urgency of social transformation".
- **Making music.** Whether each person is seen as a musical note, chord, melody or instrument, how are the principles of harmony to be understood? Here the challenge is to discover what kinds of music the group can play.
- **Gathering of the handicapped.** Where each person is seen as differently handicapped, how can collective work be envisaged? Here the challenge is to accept the handicaps and find ways to work around them.
- **Images of perfection.** With a Japanese vase, its aesthetic perfection lies in the harmony of its imperfections. Here the challenge is to balance imperfections, bringing out unforeseen harmonies.
- Healing insights and poisonous skills. Each mature person's preferred mode in a fruitfully diverse gathering can only be experienced as constructive by some and destructive by others. Here the challenge is finding the perspective that makes this appropriate -- and the balance required.
- **Making weather.** Some act like the wind, some like water, some like fire and some like earth. In so doing, each can enhance or undermine the other's contribution to the whole -- or can counter-act the other's imbalancing of the whole. Here the challenge is to understand what is appropriate.
- Art of refraining. Skills and insights need to be used at the appropriate time. They are seldom as relevant as the possessor would like to believe. Withholding may also be "with-holding".
- Honourable enemies. As in aikido, those holding apparently opposing positions in a gathering can be usefully considered as honourable enemies. Here the challenge is to cultivate the dance of energies that conserves and enhances the energy of the whole -- the real risks point to truths.
- **Nuclear plasma.** As in a fusion reactor, the art is to prevent the (ch'i) energy of the gathering from being "quenched" by association with any one of the complementary particularities needed to contain and sustain it.
- Being part of the problem. If one does not understand how one is part of the problem, one cannot understand the nature of the solution required.
- **Engaging difference.** Rather than consider ourselves "equal" as "humans", it may be more fruitful to imagine each other as representing quite different species (even from different parts of the galaxy!). What then is the challenge of communication.?
- Limitations of language. No single language or form of articulation is adequate to comprehension of the situation and the appropriate response. Here the challenge is to develop an adequate set of complementary languages and to understand how (and when) to move between them.
- **Psycho-social laboratory.** If we cannot achieve any useful collective transformation processes in a gathering of the committed, any effort to use its insights outside that environment is suspect.
- We the metaphor. For better or for worse, the gathering is a metaphor of the opportunities it purports to address and of the difficulties in doing so.

#### **DILEMMAS OF INTER-CULTURAL DIALOGUE PROCESSES**

- 1. **Common denominators:** Inter-cultural meetings readily focus on the lowest common denominator, rather than seeking ways of benefitting from the variety of perspectives represented. This is often the price of a certain form of consensus.
- 2. Repetition: Everything that is easy to say about development-environment issues has already been said and written many times. It is questionable whether the time of an inter-cultural dialogue should be used to make these points again amongst people who have made (and heard) them before.
- 3. Statement fatigue: Many are tired of each others position statements, whether of their insights or of their distortions. There is a need to move beyond the phase of "flag waving", testimony meetings, and intellectual and personal positioning.
- 4. Communication styles: Each culture tends to be impatient regarding insights formulated in the "language" of another culture. Differences in communication style are important, especially in a multi-cultural setting.
- 5. **Elaboration:** Those presenting insights tend to fail to present them in a sufficiently succinct language. This tendency exploits the limited time resources of the meeting -- and is essentially unsustainable.
- 6. **Illegitimacy:** Cultures tend to have difficulty accepting the legitimacy of other cultures, even if obliged to create the impression of doing so.
- 7. **Self-righteousness:** There is a need to move beyond the easy posture of self-righteous blaming of particular cultures -- and the old pattern of scapegoating another to emphasize the innocence of one's own culture.
- 8. Over-selling: Cultures tend to "over-sell" the merits of their concerns, skills and special perspective. Excessive enthusiasm can strain credibility.
- 9. Over-confidence: Cultures tend to fail to recognize the limitations of their own perspective with respect to domains of importance to others.
- 10. Obvious **solutions**: Some continue to believe in obvious or magical solutions and perceive as unconstructive (or "negative") any attempts to note the limitations of such solutions.
- 11. Authorities: The traditional approach of using respected authority figures to impose order on a "disorderly" dialogue is increasingly questioned. But the challenge of "self-organization" has not yet been fully accepted.
- 12. **Facilitation:** Efforts to use non-authoritarian, "neutral" facilitators or processes to mediate interactions are considered suspect. Facilitators necessarily have particular cultural, linguistic, ideological or disciplinary biases.

## STRATEGICALLY RELEVANT EVOCATIVE QUESTIONS?

- How can one use one's limited personal energy to optimal effect, when the effects of so many strategies are so easily nullified? And when each such strategy is part of the problem?
- Why do the "good guys" have such difficulty in getting their act together -- and why are they so suspicious of one another? What is the discipline by which they fail to constrain themselves?
- How is it that the "bad guys" are so creatively innovative in their use of legal, accounting, strategic and organizational opportunities?
- What useful strategic or organizational principles have emerged from the much-acclaimed holographic, non-linear or related ground-breaking forms of thinking?
- Why is there no detectable use of the acclaimed insights of the spiritual disciplines in elaborating new approaches to organization -- especially the organization of meetings?
- Why have the "explainers", whether from the sciences or the religions, been unable to recommend more appropriate forms of strategy or organization -- even for themselves?
- What needs to be explored to ground the principles of the emerging "new order"?
- What is valuable in what is condemned and rejected in the light of the "highest" currently acclaimed values? What is dangerous in what is pursued in the light of the "highest" currently acclaimed values? What are the necessary functions of both the "peaceful" and the "wrathful" deities?
- Is planetary society dangerously vulnerable to the subtle appeal of a "New Age Hitler" -- and by what reliable criteria could such be distinguished from a "New Age Redeemer"?
- Would it be more effective for the "good guys" to reinforce the destructive strategies of the "bad guys" -- to provoke the passive majority into fruitful counter-action?
- How is appropriateness to be comprehended? How is the set of insights or energies relevant to a sustainable future to be recognized in a world of mutually suspicious schools of thought and belief -- where each claims an effective monopoly on part of the picture?
- How are the insights from the "cultural rainforests" to be integrated before the process of "cultural deforestation" is complete?
- How are the needed insights to be effectively captured (and interrelated) in meetings?
- Do the dramatic planetary consequences of "go forth and multiply" derive from a traditionally simplistic understanding of the range of mathematical relationships? Are subtracting and dividing "evil"?
- Are the excesses of each, as a meeting participant, to be understood as a metaphor of the reproductive challenges of over-population?
- How can the art of not-doing be used to interweave and balance the many forms of doing?
- Why are "peace", "democracy" and "consensus" so boring? Does harmony without melody result in monotony? But what of unthinking repetition of melody, without creative constrast and variety?
- Why cultivate the belief in a single, magical "answer" to the dilemmas of the times -- "my answer"?
- What are the key questions that we need to rediscover? Could key principles be replaced by key questions as a basis for appropriate strategy in a "new order"?

### AXES OF BIAS IN INTER-CULTURAL DIALOGUE

#### 1. ORDER versus DISORDER

- **1a. Preference for order:** Dialogue should be orderly, based on an ordered array of cultural statements and arguments. Favoured by those defining the environment and development in an orderly manner.
- **1b. Preference for disorder:** Inter-cultural dialogue must necessarily be chaotic and disorderly in order to be fruitful. Favoured by those cultures recognizing that they are subject to more forces than can be rationally presented.

#### 2. STATIC versus DYNAMIC

- 2a. Preference for static: Inter-cultural dialogue can be viewed as forming a static, semipermanent configuration of cultural positions. Favoured by agencies mandated to respond to particular problems over an extended period of time.
- **2b.** Preference for dynamic: Dialogue can only be understood as a dynamic, shifting relationship between cultures. Favoured by those preoccupied by short-term considerations.

#### 3. DISCRETE versus CONTINUOUS

- **3a. Preference for discrete:** Cultures and issues are both viewed during dialogue as distingished by clear boundaries. Favoured by those who need to distinguish and allocate responsibilities.
- **3b. Preference for continuous:** Cultures and issues are both viewed as forming a continuous, possibly "seamless", field of tensions during dialogue. Possibly favoured by those recognizing pervasive fields of tensions, conspiracy theories, and negative forces.

# 4. EXTERNAL versus IDENTIFICATION

- **4a. Preference for external relationship to phenomena:** Cultures and issues viewed as externalities, namely objects of experience to be experienced from without during the dialogue process. Basic to the strategic assumptions of many international programmes.
- **4b. Preference for identification with phenomena:** Cultural issues can only be genuinely comprehensible through an intitive identification with the experience they constitute, especially during the dialogue process. Favoured by those whose views have been strongly influenced by personal experience of suffering.

# 5. SHARPLY versus IMPLICITLY DEFINED

- **5a.** Preference for sharply defined phenomena: Cultural issues viewed as directly experiencable. Favoured by those responding to problems seen as concrete realities as opposed to unreal abstractions.
- **5b.** Preference for implictly defined phenomena: Cultural preoccupations viewed as implying levels of significance greater than are immediately obvious. Favoured by those who detect more fundamental problems in issues which may not otherwise appear problematic.

# 6. COMPREHENSIBLE versus INCOMPREHENSIBLE

- **6a. Preference for inherently comprehensible phenomena:** Cultural preoccupations viewed as comprehensible in terms of existing paradigms. Favoured by pragmatists working in the light of long experience.
- **6b. Preference for inherently incomprehensible phenomena:** Cultural preoccupations calling for explanations in terms of other frames of reference. Favoured, notably, from certain religious perspectives.

#### 7. DUE versus SPONTANEOUS PROCESS

- **7a. Preference for due process:** Inter-cultural dialogue should be governed by pre-defined processes. Favoured by those cultures relying on well-developed procedures.
- **7b. Preference for spontaneous process:** Inter-cultural dialogue viewed as most fruitful when spontaneous processes emerge. Favoured by those who see chance and accident to be significant.

  (Text adapted from W T Jones)

## DIALOGUE STATEMENTS OR FORMS OF INTERVENTION

It may be usefully asked to what extent further repetition of statements of a particular type will shift the discussion to a higher level of discourse. Many interventions simply reinforce existing positions without offering a way forward -- especially when they fail to respond to the context created by opposing positions. The typology may also be used in analyzing declarations with a view to clarifying how statements of different types can be more productively combined.

#### A. CONTEXT-SETTING

Statement of world-views
Affirmations of belief, principles, support or solidarity
Invocations: clauses, principles, deity
Acknowledgement (recognition) of context
Recognition of historical situation (recalling)
Temporal constraints (urgency)

# B. PERCEIVED TRUTHS

Statements (perceptions, confirmations, denials, assertions) of facts or conditions Explanations, answers Illustrations, parallels

#### C. JUDGEMENTS

Evaluations, assessments, judgements
Expressions of approval / disapproval
Protestation, rejection, disagreement, contest
Expressions of blame or accusation
Self-evaluation, self-criticism
Recognition of limitations, constraints
Self-justification, excuses
Expressions of regret, apologies

#### D. APPEALS TO OTHERS

Calls: for solidarity, subscribe to, believe in, support Calls: for action, research, intervention, sanctions Appeals for resources Injunctions upon others (should's or should not's)

### E. ACTION

Decisions, action resolutions

# F. UNCERTAINTY

Acknowledgement of lack of knowledge or information Questions

#### G. INTEGRATIVE INSIGHT

Articulation of challenge or opportunity Wisdom Humour

## STRUCTURE OF DECLARATIONS: CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL PATTERNS

Many perspectives need to interact to clarify the content of global declarations and render them appropriate. But there is also a need for expertise in new forms of order to clarify the dimensions which could influence the conceptual framework within which that content is presented. Such formal properties are a challenge to ways of thinking that have proved inadequate. They might include:

- Consensus / Contention: Here the challenge is to move beyond superficial expressions of consensus and solidarity. These obscure the real differences that reflect complementary functional preoccupations vital to the survival of any complex global system. The "conflict" between such preoccupations needs to be articulated in the form of shared tension ("contention") or strain ("constraint"). This then limits the destabilizing excesses of each of them.
- Continuity / Discontinuity: Here the challenge is to ensure the coherence and continuity of the form of the document whilst providing for the presence of perspectives which are inherently incompatible with one another. The art is to use the mutual rejection by particular perspectives as a structuring device that creates the shared tension which expresses and energizes the sense of continuity. The challenge may be framed in terms of embodying discontinuity.
- Simplicity / Complexity: Here the challenge is to ensure a form that is comprehensible as a whole whilst embodying a degree of complexity that honours the diversity of preoccupations. The art is to ensure the presence of comprehensible symmetry effects at various levels to avoid the need to focus on lower levels of detail unless required. It is the simplicity that anchors the sense of coherence from which the various levels of detail may be explored.
- Completeness / Incompleteness: Here the challenge is to ensure that the form of the document recognizes the limitations of the insights from which it arose. Some degree of completeness is naturally essential as the basis for any consensus. But the implication of "completeness" evokes legitimate objections, both from those whose views were inadequately reflected at the time, and in the light of insights that emerge after its completion. A sense of "incompleteness" is required to open the door to unforeseen reinterpretations, rather than inhibiting such initiatives by creating a sense that appropriate future action can be completely defined.
- Enfolding / Unfolding: Here the challenge is to ensure that the form of the document is such that it may be "unpacked" to various levels of detail according to the needs of users at the time. Similarly, it should be possible to conceal such confusing levels of detail by "packing" them away so as to present a relatively simple document. In this way, the full complexities are always present implicitly, whatever the degree to which they are explicated in any one version.
- Comprehension / Incomprehension: Here the challenge is to recognize the problems of comprehending a document of global scope. This applies both to the well-informed, sensitive only to particular preoccupations, as well as to those who find much of its detail incomprehensible, whatever their background. The form of the document should be designed with redundant and mnemonic features to guard as much as possible against its "dismemberment" through selective incomprehension. On the other hand, the form should draw attention to the possibility of comprehending the conceptual challenges and paradoxes of globality in new ways -- whether through personal insight or future discoveries.
- Constraints / Freedoms: Here the challenge is to interweave into the form of the document an appropriate balance of constraints and freedoms. Some may be seen as global constraints opening up local freedoms. Others may be seen as local constraints that provide the guarantee of global freedoms. However such a design needs to go beyond a mechanistic approach. To be appropriate it needs to provide for a transformative or evolutionary dimension that reflects changing understanding of the nature of constraint and freedom.
- Symbol / Sign: Here the challenge is to ensure that the document can fulfil its function as a symbol of an appropriate new order. However at the same time, for it to be of operational significance, it must also serve as an indicator of a pattern of actions through which that order can be given form.

### TRAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF DIALOGUE

- 1. Single framework of agreement: Believing that everyone can and should agree on a single set of principles and guidelines, whether in the form of a charters, declarations or pledges (and including this note).
- 2. Labelling inappropriateness: Believing that it is useful to label some perspectives as wrong or inappropriate, especially in the absence of any sense of a global functional context.
- **3. Assumption of simplicity:** Believing that the way forward is simple and that any perceived complexity is the product of inappropriate understanding.
- 4. Avoidance of issues: Believing that unpleasant issues can be postponed or treated as irrelevant.
- **5. Tokenism:** Believing that it is only a media exercise and that people are not increasingly impatient with expensive exercises in collective impotence.
- **6. Avoidance of interaction:** Believing that symbolic processes are a substitute for effective interaction.
- 7. Incorporation of disagreement: Believing that the diversity of positions does not call for designing in healthy disagreement to maintain a pool of alternative perspectives.
- **8. Marginalization:** Believing that it is appropriate to marginalize bodies and cultures representing alternative perspectives (whether by use of geographical distance, procedural or linguistic devices).
- **9. Collective learning:** Believing that collective learning, even at the highest policy levels, is not vital to the emergence of more appropriate structures and processes.
- **10. Wishful thinking:** Believing that it is sufficient to wish to be "on the other bank of a river" and that the technical challenge of "bridge construction" can be ignored.
- 11. Single-factor responses: Believing in the adequacy of the "one answer", whether problem-specific, technocratic, spiritual, ethical, or based on common sense, or on particular values.
- **12. Despair:** Believing that no major breakthrough is possible, despite the prevalence of short-termism, tokenism, opportunism, cynicism, and out-dated modes of thinking.

## ARTICULATING "THE WAY FORWARD"

- Beyond reiteration: We should move away from mere reiterations of our sectional concerns and interests.
- 2. Knowing ourselves: We should aim to deepen our understanding of the perspectives, the objectives, and the implications of our own sectional interests and positions. This itself would be achieved by willingness to subject those interests and positions to candid and rigourous examination in a collegial climate.
- 3. Knowing others: We should aim to deepen our appreciation of the perspectives, the objectives, and the implications of the sectional interests and positions of others. This is inevitable in a process where all ideas contend and all voices are heard in an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance.
- **4. Points of convergence:** We should seek to recognise the points of convergence: the concerns which are shared, the issues which unite, and the universal interests which energise us all. This would be a natural result of deepening understanding of one's own as well as others' positions.
- 5. Points of divergence: We should attempt to go beyond recognizing merely the least common denominators and seek also to isolate the points of divergence: the concerns and interests which separate us and which therefore do not lend themselves to unified or collective actions and approaches. It is understandable that there will be an irreducible set of concerns and interests around which there is and can be no consensus. This is inevitable given our different cultures, background, motivation, and life situation. It may even be desirable that this be so, as a way of preserving individuality, diversity, and group identity. All the more reason that the points of divergence be analysed, isolated, understood and respected in our continuing dialogue.
- **6. Milestones of progress:** We should seek to identify the milestones of progress relating to the concerns and interests which are shared, as well as the various routes by which we might get there.
- 7. Agreement on action: We should aim to agree about the prospects for and the specifics of action which should be undertaken, whether individually or collectively, in order to reach those milestones.

#### POSSIBILE TRAPS TOWARDS SPIRITUAL CONCORD

It is important to recognize that this is an old and important archetype. A further manifestation is therefore much to be welcomed in these strange times. The challenge is to attempt to recognize some lessons from past manifestations (notably the gatherings of "spiritual and parliamentary leaders") and to reflect on means for avoiding a number of conventional traps. More positively, the challenge is to find ways to move forward, whatever "moving forward" can be understood to mean.

Each of the following represents a commonly used path at gatherings endeavouring to respond to similar inspirations. Each may be considered quite adequate to a certain image of what needs to be achieved. Each accomplishes certain things, but also blocks the accomplishment of others which may be of greater import. A proportion of any group of participants may be well content with one or more of them and may see them as the fulfilment of strategic objectives. It is important however to keep asking questions about the limited nature of such achievements in the light of what needs to be accomplished.

(a) Speechifying: It is characteristic of gatherings of those of spiritual inspiration for the key participants to slip into the mode they tend to use when speaking to their constituencies. Speakers have a tendency to want to speak for 15 to 30 minutes (or preferably more). An assumption is made that the longer a person speaks, the more important that person is, or the more vital the insight that he or she has to communicate. It is almost impossible to cut short a spiritual authority who is speaking his or her truth -- however inappropriate the intervention may appear to others.

It is difficult for anyone to criticize a gathering in which each speaks in this way. Many leave contented that they have said their piece or heard valuable insights. It may however be argued that the subsequent import of such events is relatively minor. It demonstrates that people of different inspirations can be together. It seldom demonstrates that they can rise above their differences. In fact it is quite common for they key participants to have only the most formal interaction on the occasion of such gatherings.

- (b) Exchange: Stress may be placed upon the ability of the participants to "exchange views" and insights. Facilities may be offered for the key participants to have many informal discussions unconstrained by protocol. This may extend to panel discussions, even responding to views expressed from the floor. The challenge in this case is that of "insight capture". If the purpose is to offer new perspectives to the participants through the interaction, then they will of course learn from the processes in which they participate. If the challenge is a more collective one, aiming to affect wider society, then it may be difficult to capture insights in such a way that they can be communicated beyond the conference setting. There is also a way in which participants can slip into what amounts to a "chatting mode". Relatively trivial exchanges are then given greater import than they merit and few of those involved are empowered to question their value. This is especially evident to those subsequently exposed to the proceedings who are not swayed by exotic contexts and charismatic personalities.
- (c) Friendship and bonding: There is of course much to be said for the establishments of bonds between those of different spiritual orientations. These may well transcend all formal differences and be the basis for future work together. Such bonds establish trust. Here the challenge is what might be termed the "indulgence" of mutual discovery where this does not have significant effects on the wider conditions of society. So powerful or significant can such bonds become between two people that the success or failure of the gathering as a whole becomes of relatively little significance. The insights from such bonding tend not to be applied to improve the quality of the gathering. They may even be used to reinforce factionalism.
- (d) Honouring: At a gathering of those dedicated to the spiritual journey, it may be considered appropriate to honour the spiritual role played by each. This is especially the case where those eminent in religious hierarchies are present, or in the case of those charismatic spiritual leaders who are habitually surrounded by disciples. Honouring may be considered a vital process for some

participants, especially where this is seen as a cyclic energy relationship with those of greater insight. Here the trap is to prevent this process from taking precedence over other processes which can move forward the gathering as a whole. Honouring can reinforce existing patterns. It is not clear how it can open up new patterns that are not polarized around those who are so honoured.

- (e) Celebration: Such a gathering may be seen as a celebration of concord. The fact of participants having gathered together may then call for celebration. Concord is affirmed through celebration. Celebration may be of a spiritual nature, through collective participation in a common practice (possibly prayer or mediation), or a succession of services inspired by different traditions. Such spiritual celebration, with all that it can imply, may be seen as the real "work" of the gathering. Celebration may also be of a more secular nature -- using cultural events to express the joy of being together. The trap in both cases is that this process usually fails to address the issues of what so effectively keeps the participants apart in wider society. Whatever higher union is acknowledged, the process tends to "paper over the cracks" and fails to move collective understanding to new levels. And any attempt to draw attention to such issues is seen as a descent into negativity.
- (f) Symbolism: Holding the event may be seen as an important symbol in its own right. It is then seen as an embodiment of togetherness and a reference point in a society challenged by chaos. The image of the event may then become very important, especially in the way it is presented and developed by the media. But focus on cultivation of the symbolic dimension may well prevent people from actually working on the issues that otherwise divide them. The symbol presented then becomes yet another exercise in tokenism by which people in wider society are increasingly disabused.
- (g) Declaration or appeal: There is a much favoured tendency to formulate a declaration as a concrete outcome of such a gathering. Much effort goes into producing the right wording, and subsequent effort may go into disseminating the document. The trap here is that it diverts effort away from the work the gathering may do into statements of principle and intent -- which it has often proved impossible to embody in the processes of the gathering itself. Unfortunately there are many such declarations from past meetings and it is worth noting that little attention is paid to them, especially on the occasion of the next gathering of that nature.

In addition to the above challenges, there is also the delicate challenge of the protocol relationships with the organizers and hosts. There is often a traditional protocol, even a "protocol department" in the case of governmental hosts, which imposes rules and obligations that it is difficult to circumvent without causing deep offense. This may govern the physical arrangements of the podium, the order of speakers, and the length of time it is considered appropriate for them to speak in welcoming participants and in opening the event. It may extend to the rules governing interventions from the floor. All these factors can, under certain circumstances, have an exceptionally deadening effect.

The problem of languages and the need for interpretation can easily destroy any possibility of moving out of the most formal of settings.

There are no elegant solutions currently available to the challenges identified above -- especially since many of the "traps" can be seen as quite satisfactory conference processes. It is perhaps more appropriate to see each such process as vital to the health of the conference. The challenge is to ensure that no single process becomes the dominant feature of the event. It is then a question of developing and maintaining a dynamic, creative balance between a number of somewhat incompatible processes. But again, the art of achieving this is not readily accessible.

