



TAKING TO A COMMON HUMAN STAGE

ZEGG, Zentrum für Experimentelle Gesellschafts-Gestaltung (Centre for Experimental Culture Design) was featured in *PM39*. It is a pioneering ecovillage in Germany, full of new cultural paradigms and ecological innovation. Long-term members, Dolores Richter and Achim Ecker, describe one social process that has successfully relieved the community of much potential conflict – Forum.

There are two distinct but complementary fields of behaviour in every community that must be sharply separated before people can trust each other. The community must make a clear differentiation between problem solving and decision making on the one hand, and processes designed to make ideas and intentions transparent on the other.

In both arenas questions of power, love and sex may intrude. If these issues are not transparent, paranoias, distrust, feelings of alienation and cliques arise that will invariably undermine the

community's problem solving ability. In Forum, we can reveal our patterns of power and rank and lay bare what is happening in our love lives, bring to awareness our real intentions, and give both the light and dark their due.

For the decision making issues, ZEGG has the plenary which is meant to be the place where objective issues can be discussed and developed. Forum, by contrast, is an artistic way of personal sharing, a stage for whatever is happening inside ourselves. Here our true motivations, our deep feelings, longings, ideas and emotions become

'public'. This focus on transparency, sharing and clarifying unsolved situations of daily life makes it an invaluable catalyst for one's own growth.

Because we believe that each of our personal issues are exemplars of a general human issue, Forum elevates these personal issues, by putting them onto a common human stage. A meaningful Forum needs a mental-spiritual basis among the group utilizing it. This is part of ZEGG's research into finding mental, spiritual and social conditions where humans are able to live together in truth, solidarity and freedom.

We ask ourselves, "What is the source of violence – and how can we create conditions for a non-violent world?" This forms the basis of Forum which therefore becomes like a school of life, a classroom devoted to the exploration of Life and Truth.

Sometimes we are surprised by what we say when we step fully into the role of the presenter in the centre of the Forum and the process begins to flow. From what we see in ourselves and from what we see in others, we are surprised to discover the complexity of the human phenomenon. We may see

its beauty, its potential, its paradoxes and its violence in a kaleidoscopic way. We experience the echoes of human history reflected through the experience of individuals – all these discoveries pave the way to change and development.

Forum is designed to work with people who are living together, sharing a common vision and who are committed to certain values such as trust, truth, love, solidarity and responsibility. A central and essential value for Forum is trust. The goal of Forum is not directly to resolve conflicts. It is to make transparent the background – the emotions, experience and thinking that let a person act in a certain way. Once it is visible to the presenter and the surrounding circle, the basis is created on which conflicts can be resolved as trust is built.

HOW IT WORKS

The individuals making up a Forum sit in a circle. One person goes into the middle as though going onto a stage and the others form the audience. The presenter gets the full attention of the group, with the power and the space to speak and act without being interrupted by the others who initially play the role of observing spectators. Each Forum, usually lasting about 90 minutes is guided by a facilitator and a co-facilitator. The facilitators alone may intervene in the presenter's process.

The qualities of a facilitator include a high awareness of one's own emotional character, motives, thought forms and feelings. You can accurately characterize the facilitator as a channel focusing the energies, issues and processes. Still, the facilitator remains merely a member of the group who has taken on the temporary role of directing the Forum process. There is a group of people who feel drawn to choose the facilitator's role and



who have prepared themselves by training. They have also been practising Forum a lot themselves. It makes sense that the same facilitators guide the group through several Forum sessions in a row and ask for feedback from within the group as well as other facilitators.

In the beginning it is important that everyone in the circle, containing the potential presenters for the session, delegates to the facilitator full trust to direct the process.

Facilitating is far from a neutral activity because the values underlying Forum imply a partisan position. Forum supports what is authentic, alive and true. It supports what comes into the light beyond politeness and the daily games of hiding and disguise. The ideal of Forum is to bring out the beauty of the person revealing their highest potential.

To explain this a little more: if a person is stuck with a problem, the facili-

tator listens to the facts but also helps the person to detach from the problem. So, for instance, we often don't ask too much about why a situation is the way it is, or how it is related to other problems in the past. We ask more about the motivation to change the situation, where the presenter's contribution is to solve it, and how he/she can look at it from a higher perspective and learn from it. For example, if a person envies a quality of another she may express that playfully. To bring out that person's potential, the facilitator can ask for the qualities she loves within herself and let her embrace and strengthen them by acting them out.

When the presenter has finished, the others can step into the middle to give feedback and express what they perceived. Now the presenter can learn what others think about him or her and what they have to say to supplement, broaden and sharpen the personal issue he or she brought forward. The discovery of what others think and value about us and what perhaps keeps them from loving us provides the essential social feedback.



HUMORING THE DARK SIDE

What comes to the surface when we begin working in Forum is not always nice. In the beginning, the suppressed and the hidden emerge into the light of awareness. An effective and skilful Forum, however, will bring out the dark side with humor, or in some other theatrical way so that it can be perceived without judgement. Forum wants to lift the energy level and trigger the life force and its expression. When the energy is successfully raised a change of perspective on both the body and soul level happens.

Sometimes this energy shift can be very simple, as when the facilitator invites the presenter to move faster, or to exaggerate gestures, or to put a sound to the feeling. Trying out different ways of behaviour and theatrically acting out emotional processes is an important step toward disidentification, 'I come to see that I am not this anger, I am not this fear, I am not this jealousy'. To lose identification with these passing states is to have found an inner position of witnessing what is going on and of standing back from it. It is to have




found your unchanging centre. At the same time, forum is no substitute for each individual's ongoing personal inner work.

If, for example, lovers are in conflict, it eases their conflict to open it up and speak about it in a bigger circle where they can start listening to each other. If I hear my lover speak about what she loves about another man from the depth of her heart and if this other man is my friend, then it is easier

not to react with fear but with compassion.

In past years there has been interest from other communities to use forum as a 'technique or method' for building interpersonal structures strong enough to withstand the conflicts that arise out of living and working together. To assist their work we began to offer Forum courses and seminars. The formulated rules and forms cannot be used in a rigid and fixed way, however.

Through actual experience a group grows in competence and unity and eventually it leaves the rules behind in the way a child learning to ride a bicycle eventually leaves the training wheels behind. Once understood well and internalized, the forms become a kind of ceremony that raises the energy and magic of the moment 

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Achim Ecker is responsible for Ecology and Permaculture at ZEGG and has written a booklet, 'Sustainability and Ecology at ZEGG'. He is a photographer and artist as well as construction worker and seminar leader for personal and social growth. He is interested in new social movements like the Zapatistas in Mexico and the non-violent approach of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) in Palestine. He has been living a communal lifestyle for more than 20 years.

Dolores Richter has been involved in the community for 17 years. She is the head of education and the guest programme at ZEGG. She is passionate about finding and building up structures and functional ideas for personal, spiritual and political development of both the individual and the community as a whole. She is mother of a seven year old son.

GEN-GA at ZEGG

The General Assembly of the Global Ecovillage Network (Europe) will be held at ZEGG in 2004 (6-13 July). ZEGG currently hosts one half of the GEN Office.

