Open Space principles for political action

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One of the first and most intense encounters I have had with Open Space Technology was at the yearly 7Generations Symposiums[i] in St.Pölten in Lower Austria organised by Markus Distelberger. As a participant in 2006 and a co-facilitator from 2007 to 2009 I experienced one real-world version of this general approach, and found an awful lot of inspiration in it, both for my political work and for my life in general. Much of my understanding of Open Space as I describe it below stems from that experience.

The term Open Space Technology was coined by Harrison Owen in the 1980s, originally for a new way of setting up conferences, even though by now, the approach has been adapted to a large variety of settings, including small working groups and permanent organisational structures, community peace projects and technological development within companies. [ii]

I have two main reasons for including Open Space Technology in a text examining new avenues for political work:

Firstly, conferences, meetings and symposiums are important forums for political activity. Therefore, any substantial change in how we go about conferences and symposiums is already a change in our political work.

Secondly, I wish to look at potential analogies between Open Space principles and political work more generally. Can some of the ideas of that approach be transferred from symposiums to other areas of activity, or be guiding principles for our approach to political work as such?

1. Open Space as conference tool

1.1. Asking the right questions – collective intelligence

One of the most important decisions for any conference is: how to frame the question? What aspects to pick and to focus on, what angle to take, which issues to single out for closer examination? What ideas and approaches to present and which ones to leave out?

Answers given are always primarily determined by what question is being asked. Therefore asking the right questions is of utmost importance.

Often it is not so easy to see what the right question may be. The task of identifying the right question and the aspects to be addressed may be assumed by preparatory committees for conferences, or steering groups for organisational development processes, or sometimes even be delegated to individual people.

The Open Space Technique makes it possible to move this crucial but extremely difficult task much more into the sphere of collective intelligence. Simultaneously, it gives it much more time, and allows for constant adaptations, for new insights to emerge in the process and to be integrated in the ongoing conference.

How does that work?

For Open Space conferences, no detailed list of presentations to be given or the questions to be addressed in workshops is determined beforehand.

Just the general theme or intention for the conference is provided, and the framework in which the conference can unfold.

This includes is a general schedule, determining at when in the course of the day there will be plenary sessions, when parallel workshops and when breaks. The day usually starts with a plenary session. In that plenary session, all participants are invited to announce workshops they would like to offer or organise. They write the title of the workshop on a card, read it out to the plenary, and explain in a few sentences what it is meant to be. Then they stick it on a pinboard, indicating the time and the room where the workshop is meant to take place (see illustration). "Workshops" can take a number of different forms, depending on the nature of the conference. They can be lectures, or discussion groups, or even meditation or dance groups, or physical construction teams. The person announcing a workshop in the plenary can be the one who wishes, for example, to give a lecture, but it could also be someone who wishes to listen to a lecture and is looking for someone who could give it.

After all proposed workshops have been briefly presented in the plenary in this way, the pinboard holds the preliminary conference programme for the day. There is a brief period for readjustments, where workshop organisers can decide to swap rooms, or merge workshops, or make other changes that seem appropriate. Then the programme for the day is ready, and visible on the pinboard. Participants can then decide where they wish to go.

Pre-set Timetable:

Saturday							
		great hall	room 1	room 2	room 3	cafeteria	garden
9.00-10.30	plenary announcements for the day	plenary	-	-	-	-	-
10.45-12.45	parallel workshops						
15.00-17.00	parallel workshops						
19.00-20.00	plenary harverst of the day	plenary	-	-	-	-	-
20.00 - ?	workshops/ party						

Timetable filled by participants-presenters:

Saturday							
		great hall	room 1	room 2	room 3	cafeteria	garden
9.00-10.30	plenary announcements for the day	plenary	-	-	-	-	-
10.45-12.45	parallel workshops	constellation work (Igor)	talk on orga-nisational history (Lu)			brainstormingbest practice (Mayumi)	
15.00-17.00	parallel workshops	constellation work (Igor)		CPF as example? (Carlos)	new planning cycle (Fatima)		
19.00-20.00	plenary harverst of the day	plenary	-	-	-	-	-
20.00 - ?	workshops/ party	Music (Parvati & Ron)		Mission statement: Video (Clara)	Meditation (Kofi)		24.00: surprise event (Cho)

Does this work in practice?
Do people indeed get up to offer workshops, and does that result in a good conference programme?

My experience with the 7Generations Sympomsiums in St.Pölten was that it did work very well. Participants at these symposiums numbered between 60 and 120. A number of the participants were already familiar with the approach (and with each other) because they had already participated the previous year. Also, a relatively high proportion of participants was used to giving workshops and talks, in a professional capacity or otherwise. Perhaps such a composition of participants makes it easier for an Open Space setting to function. However, Open Space settings by now have been tried by a large variety of people in a large variety of circumstances, and it seems to work surprising well.[iii]

There are also variations which may be helpful for people (organisers and/or participants) trying out Open Space settings for the first time and wishing for a kind of safety net. The 7Generations Symposiums also at one point had invited several people who had agreed beforehand that they would offer workshops on particular subjects. This is in some way analogous to invited speakers at a more conventional conference. In the Open Space conference, these people will be sure get up in the plenary session and announce their workshops or talks. That way, it is ensured that there is as much programme as a conference with invited speakers would usually have. However, in addition the floor is open to everyone else, and additional inputs can be offered, but they don't have to. This may be a soft and easy way in for newcomers, minimizing the risk or pressure of expectation on the participants, but leaving the options open.

So this is a first important avenue which Open Space conferences give to the participants to contribute to the definition of the topic, the precise questions to be asked, the methods to be chosen: they all have the possibility to offer talks and workshops.

This is one mechanism by which the delicate task of framing the question is moved from a small circle (like a steering group) to the collective intelligence of the whole group of conference participants.

There is more, however.

1.2. The Law of Two Feet – Do As You Wish

Open Space Technology suggests four principles and one law. The law is the Law of Two Feet: always let your two feet carry you to the place that feels right to you at the moment. If you feel that you are no longer learning or contributing in a particular workshop, get up and go to another one. People may move between workshops, thus bringing ideas from one discussion into the next, or following impulses that have arisen in them halfway through an exchange.

The assumption behind this is that by following their own inner impulses, people will allow the best structure for the overall conference to emerge; that this way issues can emerge and be noticed that really are of relevance at the moment; that this way the most pertinent ideas can be pursued. Participants freely go to whatever attracts them most. Thus it may happen that one or several workshops have no participants at all, while others have so many that they begin to split into sub-groups, or continue after the break. By making decisions as to where to place their own body, time and energy, all participants contribute to the decision of which workshop or aspect gains a lot of attention, and which one very little. This is an ongoing process of prioritization, organised in a highly decentralised manner. Thus in an Open Space conference it is not considered impolite to leave or to join in the middle of an ongoing workshop. To the contrary, it would be impolite, or rather, it would be a pity for you and for the group, if you stayed in a place where you are neither benefiting nor contributing. Following you impulses will lead you to the place where you can both benefit and contribute, which is pleasant for you and beneficial for the whole.

I personally like to draw an analogy between the Open Space Law of Two Feet and the inscription on Auryn, the magical amulet Bastian Balthasar Bux receives in Michael Ende's Neverending Story. "Do As You Wish", is written in the golden oval of that medallion, and Bastian Balthasar Bux spends the largest part of the story following the path his wishes create for him. His first wishes are fairly superficial. They arise in him, and are fulfilled immediately. However, it turns out that that was not yet quite it: another wish emerges, and prompts him on. That wish is fulfilled, and he finds himself in a new situation, and there, another wish emerges. An while many of his wishes are unwise, or lead him into dangerous or harmful waters, it is by always following the wish he has at the moment that he is able to discover his next step. At one point in the story he starts moving in circles: that was when he decided that his current wish was wrong, and he should not follow it. He did not follow it, but did not get anywhere else either. Only when he accepted his impulse of the moment, and acted on it, things got going again.

Bastian starts with the most obvious, most immediate needs and wishes. But slowly, gradually, one step at a time, his wishes allow him to move deeper, to discover what his truest yearning actually is, and to find the path that he really wishes to walk.

This – personal – reading of the Neverending Story seems to me a good analogy for what may happen at an Open Space Conference.

I believe that often it is not possible for us to state right away at the beginning what the right question – in analogy to the deepest wish – is. We need to allow for a process that can lead us towards it. I see that process in Open Space conferences in the way each participant follows his or her inner promptings, and through it, allows the most appropriate, the most relevant, the most helpful structure for the overall conference to emerge. And unlike Bastian in the Neverending Story, we are fortunate enough to be able to engage in this exercise not just individually, but also collective as a group of conference participants.

This approach has another wonderful side-effect: it calls upon all participants to listen to their promptings all the time. This includes the intellectual level, but also the physical, the emotional or the social. Often we may not readily know what it happening within us. I may feel a wish to go outdoors and to move about. If I do it, I may find out why. Is it simply the soft animal of my body reminding me that it likes fresh air and movement? Or has something about the situation confused me? Is the personal dynamic awry, or is the intellectual discussion missing the point? Has something inspired me that I can not quite name yet?

Especially issues of a larger, more general nature may often make themselves felt rather than heard. Detailed arguments to the point under discussion may occur much more easily in the middle of a heated intellectual discussion, in the form of words and verbal arguments. Points that are to do with the general framework, the setting, the dynamic, the paradigm, may first arise in a non-verbal form, and feel vague and cloudy. When we notice them, it may not be in the form of a conscious recognition of a question. It may be in the form of a physical need: I'm tired, I need fresh air, I need to drum my fingers or perhaps to sing and shout. It may also be in the form of an emotion, anger for example, or exhileration. If we allow ourselves to give room to our promptings, to stay with them and find a way to explore them further, we may be able to discover what they were actually about, and thus hit upon what really is the relevant question at the moment.

Of course what I will hit on is what is relevant to me at the moment. That may not have relevance for everyone else in the group. It may just be something to do with my personal situation; in which case it is probably good for me to have noticed, and good for the group if I am clearer about that and do not try to solve things in the group setting which do not really belong there. However, it is also possible that the thing which occurred to me, and perhaps even looks like a very personal thing, does indeed have relevance for other people in the group, and perhaps for the process as a whole. Bringing my promptings into the workshop is welcome, or leaving it and finding a more appropriate place for them is also welcome.

That leads us to another of the Open Space principles: those who are here are the right ones.

1.3. Those who are here are the right ones

Open Space conferences work on the assumption that whoever turns up at a workshop are exactly the right people to attend that particular workshop at that time. As a workshop organiser, I need not worry about how to attract the largest number of people possible, or how to stop them coming so the group does not get too big. Every size has its own quality. Two or three people talking together may reach a level of intensity, depth and confidence that would never have developed in a larger group. Likewise, a large number of people

focused on the same topic may also develop a strength that would not have been there in a small group. Every group size has its own positive qualities; there are many ways in which good outcomes can come about.

This implies another move away from determining desirables beforehand - and then working hard to make them happen - towards trusting the process, and collective intelligence. What the exact questions to ask are, and who are the people to ask them of whom, I, as a conference organiser, do not know; but fortunately I do not need to know, either. We will find out together once we are there.

This leads us directly to the next Open Space principles.

1.4. Whatever happens is what can happen here and now

The other Open Space principles are:
It begins when it begins, and it ends when it ends. And whatever happens is what can happen here and now.

Perhaps a workshop will not come up with any brilliant ideas. That does sometimes happen. Perhaps participants even feel that they did not get ahead on the issue at all, and nothing much developed. That, too, does happen. It may be that at that particular point in time, we were not yet ready to deal with the question proposed. Perhaps other steps are needed first.

Open Space principles invite us to accept what is there. We have tried, we have given what was in us, and then whatever the result is, it is the best that we could do, and in that sense it is always all right, even if on other counts we'd find it disappointing. That there may be limits to our potency and ability is perhaps a message that is not welcome; it may nevertheless be the case. A most relevant point, I find, which I will come back to when considering implications for political work in general.

2. Open Space principles in political practice

2.1. Conferences as a tool of political work

One of the reasons I have chosen to include Open Space principles in a text on new approaches to political work is that conferences and symposiums are frequent tools of political work, and that any significant changes in the way we set them up are already changes in a political tool we use, and therefore changes in our political work as such.

Conferences will address particular topics as conference themes, democracy for instance, or sustainability. These conference themes will be the focus of much of the verbal communication at the conference. At the same time, all conferences have a lot of non-verbal communication inherent in the way they are set up: in who is present and who isn't; in the size and furniture of the room, in the nature of the food available or unavailable during breaks. In that sense, conferences on democracy send and embody a lot of messages on environmental sustainability, simply by the way the conference setting deals with energy use and natural resources. Likewise, all conferences say something about democracy, hierarchy, and participation.

These messages may be less conscious, and often even go unnoticed on the level of mental or verbalised thought. Nevertheless, they may be even more powerful than verbal messages. It may also be that the language we hear tends to shape the language we use, while the behaviour we see and participate in shapes our behaviour of the future.

A lecture on the idea that everyone has something valuable to contribute may be less powerful in shaping our attitudes and our behaviour than the experience of a circle in which indeed everyone does contribute; even if the subject treated in that circle is a completely different one.

Similar ideas have been formulated in view to pedagogy or to mechanisms of learning.

> If I preach to my children how to be good
> they will learn how to preach.

> Tell me and I will forget
> show me and I will remember
> Involve me and I will understand[iv]

Sayings such as these neatly encapsulate in a few words what I am trying to suggest here about the power of conference set-ups.

"The means are the message" is another slogan pointing in that direction, this time coming from a context that is more commonly labelled political.

The way I see it, we always embody values and assumptions in the ways we move and act. Through our physical being we communicate, not only to others but also to ourselves, who and how we are, what we believe to be possible, expected, normal, desirable. My body language speaks to others and to myself.

The room we create is not just an expression of values and assumption, it is also an embodiment and an experience of these values and assumptions.
If we can create a room that expresses the assumptions and values we wish to subscribe to, it allows not only for an expression of these values and assumptions, but also an experience. And, through that experience, we may get to know our values better, understand them more deeply and gain ease in applying them. They may begin to feel more natural to us, and we may get used to them not just as an idea but as a practice.

Open Space conferences to my mind embody certain values and principles that I find important for my political work.

Among them are

- a diminishing of hierarchies
- participatory approaches
- process orientation
- use of collective intelligence
- diversity
- complexity
- self-organisation

Compared to most conference settings, Open Space conferences include a relatively low level of hierarchy. There is no formal distinction between "speakers" and "audience" in the invitation, and thus also less of an institutionalised assumption as to who has important contributions to make and who hasn't. Everyone is simply a participant, and all present have the possibility to declare themselves speakers at some times, audience at others. This approach not only reduces hierarchical distinctions among participants, but also between participants and organisers. The organisers no longer decide for everyone else what the important contributions are; that decision is moved back into the whole group.

That move from a certain type of hierarchy towards more egalitarian structures, towards stronger participation and use of collective intelligence can be found at a number of stages in the Open Space process.

This includes the various levels at which participants can contribute to the difficult task of finding the right questions to ask (and possibly even answers to give), which I would briefly like to recall here.

1) offering workshops
All participants may announce workshops, suggesting the precise contents and method that seems appropriate to them.

2) choosing where to attend, and for how long
All participants can choose which workshop to go to, thus giving some approaches more attention than others, and also switching between workshops as seems appropriate in the process.

3) shaping the workshop through contributions
All participants contribute to the way each of the workshops develops, by listening and by making contributions. The exact nature of the question thus is examined and defined together, possible ideas are developed jointly. They can be explored in depth immediately, or in another workshop announced at the next plenary session.

So, participants can suggest workshops at the beginning, give weight to workshops and topics through their choice of attendance, and shape the exact form of the debate and the topic through their input in a workshop.

This cycle - of suggesting workshops, choosing between them, shaping ideas within them, giving feedback to the plenary and possibly announcing new workshops - is usually repeated several times during a two or three day symposium.

An important factor in allowing collective intelligence to unfold is perhaps flexibility: making sure everyone can always move about and new topics can always emerge and be fed into the process.

An analogy that helps me to picture this is an ecosystem. Conceptualisations of ecosystems probably vary a lot; the image I have in mind here is one where diversity and constant change loom large. Complete knowledge or understanding are not possible for any one actor due to the complexity and dynamic nature of the whole. Attempts to control, plan or centrally manage the system are doomed to fail, or worse, to stifle what is essential. The only thing that will work, in this image, is self-organisation. The participation of all the component parts is required to allow the whole to emerge and to live.

Likewise, Open Space may be seen as a framework conducive to self-organisation, a structure that allows the diverse bits of knowledge, interest and inspiration scattered among the participants to be expressed and then to form, not a unified single thing, but the dynamic multiple system that is most alive and most helpful for the issue at hand.

Diversity is seen as an asset in Open Space settings. An underlying assumption is that in drawing on a wide variety of opinions, experiences, knowledges and viewpoints the best ways forward may be identified. That type of attitude may be seen as generally conducive to peace, even in settings outside the conference. Likewise, Open Space settings seem to me to embody a strong tendency to trust, and to relax into the flow of life; an aspect that I wish to explore more deeply with respect to other political contexts, too.

So while changing the ways in which we run our conferences may already be good step - what else might be gained from Open Space principles to inspire and perhaps change our practice of political work? How might one act on them outside conference settings?

2.2. Law of Two Feet in political practice

A central point to my mind is the general idea that I might follow my inner promptings, and that that may be good both for myself and for the efficacy of my work.

The idea is that I should allow myself to go to those places, people, issues and ways of working that feel good to me. That even if I do not yet know why, I may trust this – perhaps only intuitive – prompting, and stop forcing myself to perform strenuous, unpleasant tasks out of a sense of duty. For me personally, the latter approach has been quite an important component of my political work, and the idea of giving it up felt a bit like heresy at first. What, no more duty? Or even worse: what, no more going through with strenuous, unpleasant tasks? But will we ever get anywhere if people start running away as soon as the slightest difficulty arises? Isn't it important to stick to your commitments, and to see them through?

Perhaps it is. Perhaps it isn't, or at least not to the degree that I have always thought. Perhaps there is another way, a way that is at least as effective and a lot more pleasant.

The analogy, in the conference setting, would perhaps be the question of whether I am going to sit through a boring presentation, workshop or meeting until its very end. There is politeness to be considered, of course, but also the possibility that something very interesting and relevant may still come later, or that you only have the legitimacy to comment, or complain, or be part of a later process if you've been there the whole time.

Open Space does away with the requirements of politeness. It is made clear form the very beginning that it is all right to leave in the middle of a session, and also to join in the middle of a session, and that that is not to be understood as a comment on the quality of the presentation or the group's work. You are not understood to be leaving the process either by walking out of the room. To the contrary, by following your own impulses, you are trying to move deeper into the process, to find its very heart, and to participate there. Wherever that is; it may be in this workshop, or in another, or in the kitchen in a conversation with one other person, or in bed where the most important connections in your brain may be made while you're half asleep.

The analogy for political activity at large may be to allow ourselves to move to those organisations, issues and approaches that feel right to us at the moment.

It may involve giving up what for a conference is the pre-determined agenda, the invited speakers, the scheduled presentations. Just as the conference team has spent considerable time trying to decide what topics need to be presented at the conference and by whom, I and/or my political group may have made an enormous investment in figuring out what the political issues are, how they need to be handled, and what it takes for that to happen. In my experience, it is not just the time and energy I have put into figuring this out that makes me very attached to my pre-determined agenda. Even more than that, I feel, it is the deep-seated belief that I ought to have that sort of well-considered agenda. That I, or at least we as a group, ought to know which way the world is turning and what needs to be done and how. I have that expectation of myself, or of "us" as a group. That expectation may be common in political work generally. How many interviews with politicians convey the assumption that they (and/or the political parties they belong to) could and should be expected to have understood the world's problems? How often do they present themselves that way? How much applause and agreement would they get for appearing thoughtful, doubtful, and desirous of consulting with other people?

Even while, as a member of a political group or NGO, I was trying to figure out what our political work should focus on and what the best strategy would be I may have had the nagging feeling that I may not have understood it all. But I've been trying trying to. Are we still, in our political work, making an implicit assumption that we should have understood it all? That we ought to be really certain that what we are proposing is the right thing?

Perhaps we do not need this kind of assumption any more. The conference conveners may relax, and give up the struggle for the perfect agenda, and move back to make space for the group and its collective intelligence. Likewise, as a political activist, I may switch perspective. In the past, I suspect I have often seen myself in a role somewhat akin to that of the old-style conference conveners. I felt I ought to know, and to make happen. I may now model my role on open space facilitators, or perhaps better still on that of an open space participant. I am part of a larger whole, of a group. Many things are happening simultaneously: in the world, but also in terms of political groups. These are numerous, and do many different things in many different ways, like the parallel workshops in a conference. The best thing I can do for my own good and for that of the world is to follow my inner promptings, and to join that group or organisation that feels right to me at the moment, and to appreciate that all the others are there simultaneously.

Some of that feeling may be there in the NGO community: the appreciation of different organisations with their own issues and approaches working side by side. Also, the possibility for me as an individual to join where it feels right for me.

An interesting question for this analogy is, of course, who I see as the group (of participants) whose collective intelligence I wish to trust in. Is it only the NGO community? Likeminded people? Or is it humanity? Perhaps even life on earth? If it is humanity, that will of course also include my "political opponent", and move me to the assumption that they, too, have something important to contribute. Again, such an approach, if pursued more thoroughly, may change the whole set-up of the political arena.

There are some more aspects that are new to me in the Open Space analogy, at least in their intensity. The idea of being able to leave in the middle of a workshop, and thereby doing

a favour to myself and to the whole, would have been very helpful for me and for organisations I have worked with in times of internal struggle. I believe I have often felt I had to fight it through to the end. I was trying to make particular things happen in the workshop / organisation I happened to be in. It may have been easier on everyone if I had just left, and continued to work elsewhere. Of course there is something to be said for going through difficult times together as well. However, in my case, I feel I've stuck in there for much too long, and togetherness was perhaps less a characteristic of the time than factionalism. Most importantly, perhaps, I was not listening to my inner impulses. This was not the way I had framed the question. Had I worked on the assumption that my own well-being was important as well as that of the organisation or the project I would have acted differently. Had I seen my organisation as one of a thousand possible ways to contribute to the world, I may not fought the way I did. However, on my personal horizon my own organisation probably often loomed much larger than life.

On my first visit to Findhorn community in Scotland, during a Transformation Game a card was drawn that represented a blessing. It said "disidentification" and the person who drew it donated it to the people in her organisation. That was entirely surprising to me. I had always assumed that to identify with your (political) work and with your organisation was a good thing. That there could perhaps be too much of a good thing, and that disidentification in that situation is a blessing, had not occurred to me. However, it began to make an awful lot of sense to me later on, and in fact that little blessing card has been adopted by a number of people in my own office as I told them about it.

Perhaps the Open Space analogy for political work can also help us to move in that direction, at least for those of us who, like myself, need to move in that direction to achieve a proper balance. Seeing myself like a participant in an Open Space, and making it my task to be aware of my inner impulses, and to let myself be guided by my two feet and my wishes may open up new areas of both well-being and productivity.

2.3. Those who are here are the right ones

Apart from the Law of Two Feet, there are the other Open Space principles; for instance "Those who are here are the right ones".

How many times during my political or even academic work have I organised an event (a conference, workshop, talk, press conference, demonstration…) and tried to get the right number and the right kind of people there? I have formed a rather detailed opinion beforehand, and perhaps had numerous discussions with my colleagues, trying to guess what the dynamics in the group would be like if composed this way or that way. Once the most desirable number and composition had been decided upon, we would make every effort to interest the people we had decided should be there, to make them understand they should be there and to want that, too. Often, that would prove rather hard work. After all the hard work of figuring out how things should be, and then trying to make people do as we had decided they should, the event may or may not have taken place the way we had desired. And in either case, the effect of that event may or may not have been what we desired.

Perhaps there is an easier way of going about things?

I am not trying to make a general argument against planning here. I do believe it is sensible to think about things beforehand. To develop an idea of what we would like to achieve, what might be needed for that, and what action we can take to make it happen is not unreasonable. There is nothing wrong with the principle, I believe. It may just be that we are

overdoing it. Or that I have been overdoing it, anyway. That I may wish to remind myself in future that while this principle is fine, there are other principles as well, and if they are allowed to temperate and complement each other, things might be easier, less stressful, more enjoyable and probably even more effective. These other principles are more to do with trust, openness, flexibility, going with the flow and allowing things to emerge.

That way I can save a lot of the energy I would dispense trying to make one particular predetermined thing happen, both as a conference organiser and as a political activist in general.

This is fuelled by trust. Trust in the process, the group, the universe, other people. In fate, if you prefer, or in life. Trust in myself, as well, and in my place in life. Trust that I can be in that group, and whatever happens in that group will be all right, whatever it turns out to be.

At this point, another Open Space principle seems of utmost importance to me: "Whatever happens is what could happen here and now".

2.4. Whatever happens is what could happen here and now

These Open Space principles for me represent both trust, relaxation and openness. They may also entail a farewell to certain aspects of perfectionism. Things don't have to be perfect to be all right. I may expect that what is going to happen is not perfect in some abstract sense, but only the best thing possible at the moment. And to be reconciled with that prospect. To accept that life is a process, too, and so is the development of a society. Perhaps we do not need to jump into completed utopia by next year, or by the end of this workshop. Perhaps we can live with the idea of moving forward step by step, humanity approaching its potential just as Bastian Balthasar Bux approaches his deepest longing by allowing one wish to lead to the next.

If I take a longer time horizon, I may find it easier to accept that we are making detours. That's all right. Or, in any case, it happens, so I might just as reconcile myself to that circumstance. At the same time, many things that may appear a detour to me at first may, by hindsight, turn out to have been one of the thousand ways that lead ahead; I just had not expected or foreseen that possibility at the time.

So, I suppose it is a mixture of trusting that what looks like a detour may in fact be very productive, and accepting the idea that perhaps sometimes we are just not very productive. We move those little steps we can at that time; and that is all right.

This, again, is a suggestion for an attitude to political work.
The outer action, in terms of organising events, writing newsletters, meeting politicians or assembling in public places may stay pretty much the same. But something about the spirit in which it happens may be significantly different. It is here were trust comes in, and becomes visible in an openness to the many possible avenues life presents us with, and the many different people that join in with their unexpected bits. It is here were relaxation may make me more flexible, but also simply happier.

i   www.7generationen.at
ii see e.g. www.openspaceworld.org
iii see e.g. www.openspaceworld.org for examples
iv I consider both these sayings to be folk wisdom, even though the latter quote is also often attributed to Benjamin Franklin or to Confucius.