

"Germany and the World at the Dawn of 2008"



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

The evening was launched with a training supervisor's heartfelt report of how she had indignantly and resolutely repulsed a client's demand that she organise her training sessions in a restrictive pattern out of tune with professional standards. Finally the discrepancy made her laugh.

Subsequently throughout the entire session the group swung back and forth like a pendulum between two poles. One focus was to be found in infuriation with the system and the need to 'step off the treadmill', the search for independent values and targets, and efforts to create personal space in order to fend off increasing control and conformity. The other pole consisted of the feeling of futility, fear of no success, despondency, and the feeling of being crushed by goals and inexpedient methods imposed by outer instances. Because of the media, the sheer mass of data and inquiries, and the threat arising from them that any and every activity will be judged merely from the perspective of numerical validity, comparability and competitiveness the members viewed themselves as victims of powers that steer and rule over them rather than being 'in charge'. They spoke of the overrated importance and size of 'portfolios' which involve time-consuming paperwork that infringes on valuable time desperately needed in the sphere of social work or, for example, rating lists as indicators of who is best in the field of academia (the so-called stag factor).

Towards the end of the evening an aha-revelation occurred for many participants. Media, computers, data-banks: these are all arraigned and rejected, yet how far are we genuine captives and victims? One of the younger members emphasised that data are per se value-free in the sense that there are various ways of handling them. In the field of medicine copious data may push the relationship between patient and medical doctor into the background. Conversely, one-sided selection of a certain type of data may stigmatise persons such as violent adolescents as a group. It is imperative to consider data from a distanced stance, in order to circumvent the trap of doomsday atmosphere. In the group various possibilities of liberation were mentioned: puppet plays with children, rituals, taking breaks. It is then possible to retain one's sense of humour, and laughter is clearly infectious. Younger members tend to have learnt to accept and use new technologies as intrinsic in their everyday life.

One younger member remained persistent and stressed the importance of the topic of value neutrality of data. The group's eyes were finally opened. It was deemed imperative to keep any usurpation schemes and resultant social coldness under close observation, to comprehend them and to draw public attention to them, to admit and live with one's helplessness, in order to handle the situation in a creative way. An illustration: Dare to break the ice; analogous to the North German New Year ritual of putting your foot through the ice in order to touch the water beneath and be touched.

The mood towards the end was energetic, dynamic and humorous, yet not euphoric as it became apparent that the group process with its pendulum swing between polarities could embrace a new perspective *vis-à-vis* restrictive phenomena as well as an active, productive relationship to power.

Our hypothesis: We experience how important a group is for widening one's horizon, e.g. we need not necessarily be mere victims of media, flood of information and digital procedures that increasingly appear to shape our lives. It might possibly be easier to continue moaning, but we have to admit that personal spaces can be proactively shaped and constructive uses developed. The targets we aim for are not attainable without including our own values, convictions and emotions and they profit from cooperation across generations.

It was conspicuous that no need had been felt to discuss topics such as terrorism and climate change. They were briefly mentioned, but not taken up again.

P.S. Germany as a demographically aging society: the climate change in the group was in part no doubt connected with Germany's demographic situation (growing percentage of the population over 50).

Convener: Judy Ritter