

RETREAT

**"Connecting personal values and work life, connecting universal values and work policies"
July 2004**



The first Wisdom at Work retreat reaffirmed for us in the Association that indeed there are people in the international community open and ready to coalesce around positive change, that values such as justice and peace and harmony still resonate in and around the UN system, and that in honestly connecting to ourselves and to others we can find the resources and strength to take our convictions forward.



In the green valley of Bogève in Haute Savoie, with the sounds of cow and church bells to punctuate our programme of activities, the 16 participants engaged in:

- Morning meditation sessions
- Group play aimed at encouraging self-inquiry, exploration of needs and roles, supportiveness, positive envisioning for the future and commitment to active participation in change
- Brunches with inspiring speakers sharing their practical experiences in implementing values in their work lives –fuller coverage of discussions below
- Walks in the nearby Arjon mountain range, badminton and dedicated lounging
- “Open mike” sharing of readings, singing and poetry
- Hatha yoga sessions of breathing, exercise and relaxation



24 July Brunch : “Connecting personal values and work life”

Speaker Pierre Chometon, business man in the computer technology industry, expressed his belief that living in accordance with one’s values was a source of happiness. He said that in his experience actively and openly promoting values attracted like-minded people while repelling others, and served to motivate others, making for a sense of unity with others at a higher level than the material level. He asserted that the world was now at the point where people needed to choose their beliefs and express them openly. This practice also allowed for others to challenge you on your beliefs so that you could learn and grow. He also proposed that it was possible to gain financial success while promoting values because values-based efforts fulfill a deep need in clients and others, while efforts seeking primarily financial gain only provide superficial satisfaction of needs.

Stephane Rubin, businessman and lecturer on business ethics, emphasized that in the private sector the need was not to reclaim values as in the UN but to introduce them. He noted that experiencing the discrepancy between personal values and professional life could be the cause of significant suffering and it is natural to seek to reduce suffering. He suggested that in adopting a spiritual approach and identifying more with one’s spiritual nature it was possible to detach from a negative professional environment. Additionally, in his experience, in negative environments people with integrity stand out even more and attract positive people and experiences, such as clients approaching him on donating freight space to charities.

Discussion highlights:

- It was proposed that the chances for success of values-based efforts depended on a number of factors, including in particular the general level of awareness of people in society, and the ability or willingness of individuals and leaders in society to “walk the talk”
- The UN does not operate on the same criteria of success as private business and in principle should not be driven by material considerations, however it was becoming increasingly donor driven
- It was stressed that while “living from the inside out” was important for spiritual growth, the value of human agency should also be underscored in order to bring about change in the world



25 July Brunch: “Connecting universal values and work policies”

Hans von Sponeck, former UN Assistant Secretary-General stated that the UN was his life but that he has been critical of it, asserting that leaders needed to understand that the public could not indefinitely tolerate an organization that was not alert to its basic mandate. He stated that he derived wisdom and values from the UN Charter and UN Declaration of Human Rights, and drew particular attention to Articles 100 and 101 which underlined the importance of efficiency, competence, integrity and independence of secretariat staff. The first two of these qualities were however contextual and difficult to apply since the western approach still predominated in the UN. Geographical distribution was also an important issue, and may warrant “affirmative action” in some instances. The UN should also be seen as a vocation and not just a “9 to 5” occupation.

Mr. von Sponeck proposed that the key values of an international civil servant were tolerance, freedom, justice, including socio-economic justice, and peaceful co-existence within and between nations. The most desirable personal characteristics were curiosity, honesty, compassion, flexibility, self-confidence, courage, mindfulness, tactfulness, humility, discipline, tolerance, optimism, sense of humour.

Discussion highlights:

- Compassion in professional life should not be confused with emotionalism, which could adversely impact on work efficiency
- The current prevalence of short-term contracts in the UN system did not make for an environment conducive to staff commitment or support of idealism. The issue was essentially political as some Member States did not wish to see a strong independent UN. The situation was exploitative of young staff members and did not make for long-term viability of the organization.
- In demonstrating courage, there are avenues to be explored before feeling compelled to leave, and the key trigger may lie in political elements of the situation.
- Values-based training should be developed, notably through the UN Staff College
- The larger question of UN independence hinged on the issue of reform, in particular of the Security Council. Reform could also be seen more broadly, to include participation by NGOs and the establishment of an advisory body of experts

- Mr. von Sponeck advocated strongly that young staff should organize themselves into an inter-agency group and bring their concerns to the senior staff, including the ACC and the Secretary-General.



We hope that everyone found the experience as fulfilling and inspiring as it was for us and we look forward to connecting into the future with our widening circle of WaW friends.