



«Towards a modern humanism».

International top thinkers and decision makers meet to change our vision of the world

Geneva, August 17th, 2006 – The World Knowledge Dialogue brings together renowned researchers and policy makers from natural sciences and social/human sciences from September 14th – 16th, 2006, in Crans-Montana (Switzerland) to find new ways of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Towards A New Humanism

In 2003, the World Knowledge Dialogue was just one man's audacious pipe dream. How to develop a modern humanism that encompassed and engaged researchers from both the technical-natural sciences and the humanities? It was born of his desire to reverse an enduring trend that has led to the natural-technical sciences and humanities- social sciences being regarded by many as distinct disciplines, separated by insurmountable boundaries.

Andre Hurst (President), Francis Waldvogel (Director of the Executive Council) and the board of the newly constituted World Knowledge Dialogue Foundation, have transformed that dream into reality. Under the auspices of the Swiss Government and with unanimous support from the Rectors and Presidents of the Swiss Universities and Polytechnic Schools, they have succeeded in mounting an institutional response to a major obstacle in our global and comprehensive understanding of the world.

The primary goals of the WKD foundation are clear and simple;

- To break down the operational boundaries between the "two cultures" by simply getting them to talk and listen to each other.
- To illustrate to researchers and policy makers alike, the synergistic benefits in understanding that can be reaped by examining phenomena from different disciplinary perspectives.
- To reinforce the value of an academic climate where researchers are willing to take the risk of asking elementary questions without feeling defensive or vulnerable.
- To encourage researchers to actively seek out and apply novel synergies of approach beyond their own discipline-and even culture.

A Unique Mechanism

The Foundation's mechanism for achievement of its objectives is unique in its long term approach to the problem. That is to say, while the Symposium will have the public eye focused on it during three days of intensive debate, its final format is the culmination of behind-the-scenes activity of the Foundation over a long period.

The first WKD Symposium has succeeded in bringing together an august group of internationally renowned experts from diverse fields. These eminent laureates share a common trait. Each one has made the leap across a transdisciplinary boundary, some more than once. Their previous discoveries are resounding testament to the idea that the

boundaries between disciplines are not only surmountable, but are the place where the frontiers of knowledge can truly be pushed back. The Symposium's speakers have not been invited to merely share their own perception of their contributions' impact, but to debate the issues of the day. The reflections and exchanges between them have been ongoing for many months. Under the expert guidance of the Foundation's "Scientist in Residence", Dame Julia Higgins, as Moderator, the debates will follow a clear roadmap that is based upon the previous work of reflection. However, in the true spirit of debate the audience participation will also influence the directions it takes.

The debaters have been given a specific brief:

- To elaborate on the points of convergence and divergence between the natural sciences and the humanities regarding their own discoveries;
- To each describe for the other culture what they see as the frontiers of their own domain;
- To identify areas which they feel could benefit from collaboration with colleagues from different backgrounds;
- To analyse issues of misunderstanding that have emerged during the process of dialogue;
- To discuss ideas for new areas of synergy that have arisen from the process of dialogue.

The work of the Foundation does not stop with the moderator's closing summary and the general all-comers session. The setting up of a post-Symposium working group, will then herald a new round of reflection and exchange that builds upon the issues raised in Crans-Montana. The group's first task will be to select the themes and contributors for the 2008 event. As E.O. Wilson, one of the 2006 Symposium's contributors, says, "DIALOGUE is not the final aim, just the means to achieving a harder objective".

The best ingredients for the best results

So what does the Foundation hope to achieve beyond dialogue and how can the success of its venture be measured? The Foundation is all about making sure that in a few years from now the frontiers of knowledge will lie vastly beyond where they are at present. At this early point in the experiment, its long term future objectives can perhaps best be grasped by considering examples from the past and the present:

- Gerald Edelman's work on the structure of antibodies earned him a Nobel Prize. He developed an interest in developmental neurobiology at a time when it had occurred to no one else to look for an analogy between neural plasticity and antibody diversity. Yet in pursuing the question of whether the mechanistic basis of these complex phenomena were similar, he ultimately revolutionised the field of neurobiology;
- During the years that Geoffrey West, recently designated one of the worlds top 16 thinkers by Time magazine, pursued a highly successful career in particle physics, his natural spirit of inquiry and his observation of the world around him also drew him to reflect on many biological phenomena. He couldn't know then where the

journey would lead him. Today, the mathematical relationships he derived for biological phenomena in living organisms are being applied to help understand complexities that occur on the scale of social organisations such as cities and companies. The hope is that his theory's predictive value will help us to address major problems such as sustainability, and political conflicts.

The outcome of frontier research is by definition unpredictable, but in the words of Francis Waldvogel, "if you put in the best ingredients, keep the recipe simple and let it cook for the right amount of time, how can you fail to produce something wonderful?"

A changing climate

One might be forgiven for asking if we really need such an initiative when many researchers work in academic institutions that already have technical and social sciences faculties in close physical proximity. The answer is an emphatic yes, we do. For every researcher whose response on learning about the WKD initiative is an enthusiastic welcome, there is another who still prefers to keep his or her head down the academic coal mine, or who thinks that taking an interest in the larger overview is a luxury he or she cannot afford. The culture gap between the natural- technical and the social sciences and humanities is well and truly with us, but a climate of change is in the air. Among the very best, some at least are receptive to the notion that major leaps in understanding come from working at its boundaries. The more we can demonstrate the generality of that premise, the more likely it is that others will dare to follow suit.

About the World Knowledge Dialogue

The World Knowledge Dialogue (WKD) has been founded by the Swiss scientific and academic institutions in June 2006. Its president is Prof. André Hurst, current rector of the University of Geneva, who created the concept of the World Knowledge Dialogue. The rectors of the Universities of Lausanne and Zurich are members of the WKD Board, and the program is endorsed by all Swiss Universities.

The objective of the WKD is to create an international scientific interface to bridge the gap between the natural sciences and the humanities, amongst others via the biannually organized symposia.

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