

Co-operation in the New Millennium

The ELSA Youth Meeting 2000. Mullsjö Sweden

Kevin Finnigan:

I was sat in the office one cold blustery night in Leeds scouring through the Internet...surely I could find something to interest me. Every time that I seemed to find something of interest, it always ended up with me screaming "Aaargh...not that kind of fun!" Eventually I had a look through the 'fantastic' BSA web-site, and it was here that I found information about a 'Youth Meeting in Sweden' for people who stutter. "Heh!"...I thought, "I'm young, and I stutter...great!" The Youth meeting was for people of 25 years or younger. The main purpose of the meeting was for young European people to forge relationships with each other for their own development and for the future benefit of others. The European League of Stuttering Associations and the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe funded the meeting, and they helped us a great deal towards the cost of the travelling and accommodation. It sounded like a really interesting trip, and I longed to attend...but I noticed that the closing date was already past...by a few months! Disaster! "Oh well " I thought... I'll send an email to them anyway, after all ...the worst thing they could do was to say 'sorry no'. Lord behold, a few hours later I received an email from Edwin Farr who was in fact the 'ELSA Chair' no less, stating that there had been a few last minutes cancellations and I could attend. I was off to Sweden...blimey!

Since my participation in this meeting was sooo last minute I had to find the cheapest flight that I could. Arriving at Leeds Airport my fears had subsided as I viewed a nice large new shiny plane waiting to take me to...France...erm...wait a minute that's not right.... 'oh no, it can't be that other one...there must be some kind of mistake'!?. I boarded the 'tiny rusting box with wings' and headed off. On arrival in Gothenburg, I was told that my luggage was currently having a great time with its 'new found' other luggage friends over in Amsterdam. I was so annoyed with the Airport staff that I didn't even stutter once throughout my rage!! I had thankfully taken a copy of my travel arrangements in my wallet, so with only a wallet and a book to my name, I headed off into Sweden...with a mixture of nervousness and excitement spinning around in my belly.

I arrived via train into a small town called Mullsjo. It was like a ghost town from the movies. There was nobody at the station, or on the streets, and it was beginning to get late. How would I find my way to the hotel? I terrified some lovely Swedish girls by approaching them in a crazed wide-eyed manner 'stuttering in a foreign language'. I was of course simply trying to ask for directions to the hotel...honest. Once I had given up trying to catch them, I finally found a video store and the assistant thankfully allowed me to use his phone. The contact name was Anita Blom, and she was the ELSA Vice Chair and Board member of the Swedish Stuttering Association. Anita was kind enough to pick me up at the station; at last I had made it.

On arriving at the Conference Hotel I was immediately awe-struck by the natural beauty of the location. Now believe me, this was absolutely picturesque. The hotel was sandwiched between a crystal clear lake and acres of forestland, and was a perfect setting for a 'safe and relaxed' atmosphere...that we as stutterers need once in a while. The people who were there were already laughing and joking together and I could sense that this would indeed be a very nice week. The mixture of people there was absolutely fantastic...we had people from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Holland, Iceland, Germany, Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia, Estonia, Turkey, Scotland, England and even Australia!! I was so impressed by everyone's grasp of English, I found myself as a Scotsman a little embarrassed at times by my lack of proper pronunciation.

I thought that I should go and settle into my room, were I met my roommate Marko from Estonia... who was to become a good friend of mine. The rooms were very comfortable and everything in the hotel felt very luxurious. The food was exceptional with a wide range for meat eaters and vegetarians alike. I really do love to experiment with different foods from different cultures and countries...and this was indeed a treat for me. The hotel also had a swimming pool, sauna, Jacuzzi,

and canoes to go out onto the lake in. Everything seemed just perfect in the hotel. I had come to Sweden with my speech and the conference at the forefront of my mind...now I was thinking that it would also be a great chance for a nice relaxing holiday as well!

We all gathered together for the first time as a group and introduced ourselves...which was quite an intimidating experience for us all I think. Everyone was very patient with each others speech...and from that moment on I felt an overwhelming feeling of confidence and relaxation that I could stutter freely in this group without feeling ashamed or embarrassed. It was okay to stutter! I was in Heaven.!

The theme of the week was 'Co-operating in the new Millennium'. The exercises that we had planned for the week were very enjoyable and very diverse...to say the least. These ranged from doing a business plan for a 'new Country's Stammering Association' to painting the emotional river of our lives. The plan worked quite well I feel. We had the mixture of serious business work... coupled with eccentric displays of emotional and psychological art forms. A quick run down of the exercises would read...

1) Art. This was the first exercise that we did and was great fun, along with being a great icebreaker in terms of meeting the other participants. We were challenged with describing emotional events in our lives through our paintings. We would show our greatest fears, triumphs and general feelings on paper, and then the group would openly discuss each person painting. Everyone was very open about their feelings (good + bad), and in this respect, the exercise was a great success.

2) Business plan. This was a more serious exercise, but just as interesting. We firstly had a lecture on the workings of a National Stuttering Association (Germany) from Konrad Schaefer which I found very interesting and impressive. We then had a lecture on writing a business plan from Edwin Farr. (ELSA Chair). The participants were separated off into groups, and each group had to devise and present their proposed business plan for a new Stuttering Association for a new theoretical country with a population of 5 million. I was the leader of my group and I must admit that I really enjoyed the power and excitement of writing up the business plan. Yes there were times when we didn't want to carry on, we'd rather swim in the pool...but I kept on urging our team to "have one more push". In the end I was proud of the work that our team had achieved, and although we did not win the prize for the best business plan...I was very happy with our joint effort!

3) Drama and Psychology exercises. This was the most fun of all the exercises. We had to communicate feelings and emotions through the art of dance. We went off into groups as before and performed short plays to the rest of the groups, some of which were very amusing and really thought provoking. A great laugh was had by all.

We had a very impressive presentation from the lovely Gina Waggott of our very own BSA, telling us about her special relationship with the international pop star Scatman John. It was quite a sombre feeling at the beginning, as you may know he has passed away quite recently...but by the end of the meeting all of our spirits were raised ten-fold by this tale of courage and determination from a truly extraordinary human being.

The main thing for me was the people at the meeting. When all the exercises were done for the day and we could all sit together in-groups having a quiet drink ...that was when the real emotion came out. I learned of many different experiences of people who stammer throughout the world...some were quite harrowing, some were truly inspirational.... and we never once let our heads drop down. The camp was full of life and friendship for each other...and I know that I for one have made many friends for life. The different cultures and feelings for each other made the whole event very interesting as well. You can have an emotional constructive experience with a person in a very organised exercise for sure, but sometimes it was nice just to have a conversation by the side of the swimming pool over a nice cold beer. One of the nicest exercises that we had was on the last day. Each person would write his or her name on a large sheet of paper, and everyone was asked to write something nice about that particular person. At first I didn't think that it would be very effective...

but I have to say that I almost shed a tear at the end of the evening when I went back to my sheet of paper. There was just so much love and affection at this conference, that I find it quite hard to be back here in England...trying to get back to my 'normal life'.

When I had boarded the plane to Sweden I must admit that I set myself a goal to aim for. I would try to speak as slowly as I could and use a collection of 'Speech-rules' that I have been trying to adhere to for a number of years now...unsuccessfully at times. For me personally I found it such a 'safe environment' to use my new speech, and I can safely say that I have never talked so well, or so much, in my entire lifetime. I felt an overwhelming sense of confidence and power here; I could do or say anything that I wanted in an extremely calm and controlled manner. Some of the people there at the conference actually commented on my slow calm speech, and at that point I knew that I had achieved my goal. It was the most amazing week of fluency that I have had in my life. I had shown my true self to the rest of the world for the first time in years. I was on top of the world!

It was finally the last day. No more exotic interesting meals to savour...no more skinny dipping in the ice-cold lake at 3am after a sauna...no more salsa dancing...no more lovely moments between us all. The goodbyes were (as to be expected) very sad and emotional. This was to emphasise the feelings that we had forged between us all.

After a quick and painless travel back home. I came back into the office with a feeling of loss, and a constant urge to be taken back to that place of safety and friendship. I switch on my computer to start another tiresome day at the office...and what do I find!? All my new email messages were from my good friends at the conference...hurrah!! So we will all stay in touch after all, and we have planned to meet each other at the world conference next year in Belgium. I for one can hardly wait.

Thanks to Edwin Farr + Anita Blom, the BSA and ELSA for allowing me to take part in this years Youth Meeting, and I urge any members who haven't been already to attend the next one.

Cheers

Kevin Finnigan.