

SPEECH TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF YMCA EUROPE

MAY 13, 2010, LITOMYSL,

THEME: NOW!

Dear friends, to understand NOW, we need to understand where we are coming from. To be ready to go into the future, we need to know our past.

Once I quoted from the wisdom of children, aged seven to nine:

Jesus died on Good Friday. Then he came back from death three days after. He was dirty and full of mud, but in excellent mood.

It is so refreshing to understand theology through the minds and imagination of seven years old boys and girls. If you are buried, of course you get dirty and full of mud. And there is no doubt, that if you are called back from the grave, you will come back in excellent mood!

I have been buried in old papers and documents and speeches the last days, looking for our past as YMCA Europe. I have come back dirty and full of dust, but in excellent mood!

Now I want to fly high and develop new visions together with you. That can be rather confusing business! Again a word from child wisdom:

Jesus flew up to heaven and there he met Jesus. Now he is sitting on the right side of himself. That is completely impossible to understand and nothing to worry about.

Fantastic, isn't it? It is the holy trinity, expressed by a child. He obviously does not understand it, but still believes it. That is a very healthy approach to mystery. Sometimes even to visions. Sometimes our courage understands more than our intellects.

So we may be dirty, but in good mood, Confused, but still believers.
And what brings it together and makes sense of it?

The third theological statement from the children:

The best thing with God is that he likes children who are not nice. He is the only one who likes children who are not nice.

1. LEARNING FROM OUR HISTORY

One thing about diving in the past is to look for learning. In one of the resolutions I found in our archives, it says:

As a Christian youth movement, YMCA Europe believes that failure to acknowledge the injustices of the past contributes to their repetition in the future.

The famous journalist John Berger, in his book "Pig Earth" from 1979 gives us a different perspective on history:

"In the mountains the past is never behind, it is always besides you. You come down from the forest at dusk and a dog barks somewhere near. A century ago, in the same place, on the same time of day, a dog barked when it heard a man coming down from the forest, and the time between the two incidents is nothing but an interval in the barking." (John Berger, "Pig Earth" 1979.)

History is always besides us! The dog will bark again.

To find a better future, sometimes we have to fight with our own darkness:

A U2 song:
"Nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight; Got to kick darkness until it bleeds daylight..."

2. COLD WAR

I choose December 13, 1981. It is bitterly cold in Neuruppin, DDR, East Germany. A captain in the Soviet Air force is in full battle uniform sitting in the cockpit of his SU 17 bomber fighter. The alarm is still ringing in his ears. According to special

orders he is switching on the engines of his aircraft. He sits there with the engines running for thirty minutes. Still no details about the late night mission, but he expects that the reason for the alarm a few minutes ago is related to the counter-revolution in Poland. He expects the final order to be to fly over Poland and maybe to bomb Polish cities.

In Warsaw that night Solidarity activists are trying to hide from the Secret Police, at the same time as they are fighting against the Communist Party.

In Estonia the evening of 13th of December 1981, a Saturday, the weather is equally cold, and snow is falling on the Soviet troops in their camp outside the city Tallinn. The young Soviet officer in command is waiting for orders to march.

The same evening I was sitting in a military camp in Norway, a lieutenant in the NATO forces. I was watching the news, the cold war was heating up. Europe was at the brink of war that night.

While the bomber planes in Neuruppin were still running their engines and the young officer in Tallinn tried to look through the falling snow, a young man enters his train in Warsaw.

Not far away from the main railway station, and at exactly the same time as the young guy enters his train, General Jaruzelski with his typical black glasses introduced Martial Law in Poland. All of a sudden there were tanks in the streets, the phone-lines were cut, no television, no newspapers. The prisons started to fill up, Solidarity- activists disappeared from the streets.

The news of the Martial Law is spreading all over the world. The tension is over.

Sasha Artushenko in DDR stops his engines; he never received any orders that night.

Misha Guskov in Tallinn leaves his battle against frozen windows and Michal Szymanczak falls asleep in his Polish train. His wife is in the mountains, expecting their first baby.

In the military camp in Kongsberg, Norway, I turn off my television set and go to bed. My wife and I also expect a baby in January.

22nd of January Szymanczak's daughter is born. Five days later our daughter is born. Two babies, on each side of a deeply divided Europe. And still many years before they eventually got to know one another.

Sasha Artushenko, Misha Guskov, Michal Szymanczak and myself.

We were a kind of symbols of a divided Europe, soldiers of different armies, preparing to go to war against one another.

8 years after that December night in 1981, the Berlin Wall came down. In 1991, 10 years after, I started to work for the EAY and now the four soldiers from ten years back, who almost went to fight one another, we are friends, colleagues, and together we are leaders of YMCA. Somehow a symbol of the new Europe, with potential to overcome the gaps of the past. Potential to recreate the unity.

As YMCA in Europe we found our great vision and meaning in life after 1989. A new identity. A God given challenge in the light of history changing events. We experienced a big NOW! So much of what we have been doing over the last 20 years has been about unity and building a new future in Europe, our continent. Training the Trainers, Field Groups, development of 21 new national YMCA movements, Programme Groups and training of leaders, Catch the Vision, Roots for Reconciliation and other events to search for language for a new future together, not divided. Development of a Training Centre, two huge Youth Festivals to manifest the new integration in Europe. The GOP (Global Operating Plan for Movement Strengthening) was established and then YMCA Europe Resource Teams (YERT) to work with the three pillars of the GOP in all countries. All these initiatives and projects to create a new future, so that the dog should not bark again through the evils of the Cold War.

The fall of the Berlin wall was a big NOW! We had to react – and we did. Far from perfect, but I think we can be proud that the YMCAs of Europe took the challenge and started to act together.

How did we do it, how do we do it today? Join me in another dive into our history:

3. BEGLEITUNG – LOVE YOUR BROTHER AND SISTER

It was three o'clock in the afternoon. The bus was scheduled for Kaloz, not far from the Balaton-sea. I entered the bus in Budapest, and knew that the bus-ride was supposed to last for exactly two hours. The local YMCA-leader, who was a minister in the local church, should meet me at the final stop. The bus did not go any further than to Kaloz. One hour and forty minutes later most people left the bus, I could not see my friend there and there were still twenty minutes more to go and since three ladies were still in the bus, I relaxed and continued to listen to my walk-man.

The road became more and more narrow and bumpy, and the bus went up and down in rather surprising movements. Around five o'clock there was no more road to be seen. A small farm at the end of the road in the middle of nowhere. We had landed on the bus-driver's farm, and it turned out that the three ladies were the bus-driver's mother, mother-in-law and wife. I was stranded with no Hungarian language.

How do you describe YMCA with only body-language? It took me exactly 30 seconds to give it up.

I concentrated on my friend's church-position. After all he was the local priest.

I created a one man liturgical procession all by myself. It did not work. I tried the bells. Ding- dong! The bus-driver laughed. I preached with arms and legs. Now also the mother-in-law laughed. I built a church-tower. The mother joined in laughing.

We did not communicate very well.

I played my last card. I knelt and bowed my head in prayer. In fact I was about to resign. I could not communicate. My head was down. That worked. They stopped laughing and said: Pop. Priest! Church.

It was an amazing experience. I, who almost totally depend upon verbal communication, found myself communicating with my knees. Kneeling communication, I call it.

It may feel humiliating, this way of communicating, but it works.

Half an hour later the bus-driver delivered me outside the local church. He waved good-bye and shouted: Ding-Dong!

This travel experience from Hungary was for me a piece of Blue Music. It changed my ideas of development work. I had played all my cards, used my skills and knowledge and strength, and it did not work. Then I communicated through my weakness. It was definitely not planned, because I do not like to be weak, But it happened.

THIS IS A STORY ABOUT BEGLEITUNG – ABOUT HELPING ONE ANOTHER, RESPECTING ONE ANOTHER, SHARING A PIECE OF THE ROAD TOGETHER, WALKING HAND IN HAND.

We should be proud of this method. It is an attitude and an approach to people that is of universal value to us as YMCA. It is not only a very effective method for Movement Strengthening, it is also a universal approach to people and challenges. It is the way of Jesus Christ. The way of the Lord, He, who loves children, who are not nice!

Having dived into our history, this is the main thing I have learnt: Never do we fly higher and more visionary and with more energy than when we are driven by the basic understanding of life and love and friendship, as demonstrated by Jesus when he said: You have to become like children to enter the Kingdom of heaven!

4. ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW

When you are exploring new ideas for the strategy, I would like to give you my favorite piece on every day theology:

"All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sand pile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:

Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Live a balanced life – learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.

Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that. Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup – they all die. So do we. And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned – the biggest of all – Look.

Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living. Take any one of those items and extrapolate it into sophisticated adult terms and apply it to your family life or youth work or your government or your world and it holds true and clear and firm. Think what a better world it would be if we all – the whole world – had cookies and milk about three o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess.

And it is still true, no matter how old you are – when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together."

(Robert Fulghum "All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten")

5. A NEW CHALLENGE

There is a time for everything, says the good book. NOW!

Now is the time for me to leave. Now is the time for a new person to lead. It has been life fulfilling to spend almost twenty good years in YMCA Europe. I have been privileged and I am grateful to God and to all of you for this time together.

Now is the time to find a new YMCA Europe Role and Strategy 2011-16. I shall leave that to you.

But two things still remain to be said. The first is one last challenge to you.

I have read our strategic plans. Back in 2001 we talked about Integration. In 2006 we talked about the three pillars of the GOP. Today we talk about one pillar; the Resource Mobilization. You see how it is becoming more and more concrete and sharp in profile? So where do we go from here?

We need to see our Now, as we did back in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell. Today, when so many governments are building new walls, like the one in Berlin, and we see again Fortress Europe trying to push the strangers away. After Holocaust and genocides, after colonizing the world and having started two world wars, we are still in the business of pushing away the strangers from our doors.

The youth of the world is travelling, in the back of lorries and trucks, in the cold corridors of trains, walking and hiding and sleeping under bushes and in the back alleys of our big cities. The youth of the world is fleeing from wars and hunger and hopelessness and they are coming to our lands in hundreds of thousands. This is our Now. This is our challenge.

When I look back at our history, I see that the best things we did, we did together. This is a challenge that we need to meet hand in hand. It is huge. But here is where the Resource Mobilization Project finds its focus. We can mobilize resources, energy, power and love, not around ourselves, but around the youth of the World. We can offer them Begleitung and a hand reached out to brothers and sisters and welcoming them in. We can live our values and fight for the weakest of the weak, so that the dog shall not bark again!

We need to start somewhere. We need a Programme Secretary to start coordinating this huge project for young migrants. We need deep commitment and dedication from the National Movements to do it as well as we did after Berlin in 1989. That challenge back in 1989 was a blessing in disguise for YMCA Europe. It changed us upside down and made us rich. This new challenge has the potential to do the same.

This is Blue Music for the future and will give life and meaning and direction to YMCA Europe for years to come!

The second thing I want to share with you is the Manifesto from the Prague Festival in 2003. This is what I believe.

6. YMCA EUROPE 2003 MANIFESTO

We believe that YMCA is our organization to change the world in a better direction.

In the YMCA we believe that God has created the world for all of us to live in freedom and peace. We believe that we shall continue this creation and help the world to survive for coming generations.

In the YMCA we believe that Jesus Christ is our friend and God. He is our brother and He is our Savior. In the same way we shall be a friend to our friends and sisters and brothers to one another. We are inspired to serve our sisters and brothers.

We believe that The Holy Spirit is the Blue Music, spreading joy and wisdom, strength and inspiration and making it possible for all of us to smile and laugh every day, no matter how hard life is.

We are the YMCA, we are the future and we are dedicated to renew the YMCA so that the YMCA can continue to be a tool for new creation, for love and peace and stay as an organization to help people smile and laugh and enjoy life in its fullness, no matter how hard life may be.

We are the YMCA; therefore we are a part of the eternal hope, a hope, which tells us that there will be a new Earth and a new Heaven, where justice will prevail.

We are the YMCA, we believe in God Almighty. Therefore we do not need to be almighty ourselves.

We are inspired to serve, to serve the love of Jesus Christ to all mankind.

We are the crowd following the man who said - I am the Light of the world.

Let our light shine!

May 13, 2010, Johan Vilhelm Eltvik