

## THE ENCOUNTER SPACE

The encounter group will be an open space where all participants are welcome to attend for as little or much as they wish. The purpose of the encounter space is for participants to *aim* to meet each other personally and as openly as possible sharing experiences and (all kinds of) emotions in the moment. The focus is on how we are together in the encounter group.

An encounter group doesn't have a planned program or structure. We don't know what we will do or how we will be; that is for us all to construct together. No particular people will take the role of facilitator. All members of the group can be facilitative at any point. No particular people will be formally given more power or responsibility than others. During the pre-conference and conference, the encounter group preparation committee have a role to open and close each meeting and welcome everyone. During the encounter space, we contribute as participants along with everyone there.

To encounter is to meet another who is different from oneself and express oneself as openly, honestly and clearly as possible whilst being open to experience another and attempt to meet the other with unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding for their uniqueness, and interest and care in their responses. To encounter is to be willing to meet across differences rather than to present just those aspects of oneself that don't confront another. It is to risk expressing any emotions in relation to another and what is happening in the group, and often mixtures of several emotions at once. It is to be open and to attempt to understand any responses from others. It is to meet with the people who are here, aiming to be present, being as congruent as possible and express what arises in that meeting, *being* ourselves rather than talking *about* ourselves or others. It is an opportunity to practise really being focused on oneself and one's reactions to others at the same time as trying to empathically understand and value the others who are present.

Encounter groups are therefore unpredictable and may be exciting, risky and powerful experiences. All participants will probably be here with different hopes, fears, ideas, expectations. We also acknowledge the dynamics of power arising from inequalities of identities, including differences arising from language. What we want is to welcome everyone, and to go ahead together in this unique experience of oneself, of the relationship, and of all that will come out of our human diversity. To be able to be together with all our differences is crucial for our community and is what we can bring to each other and to the whole of society.

The Encounter Group Preparation Committee

*Jeannette Krog, Martin Lange, Sheila Haugh, Jean-Marc Randin, Gillian Proctor, Aglaja Przyborski, Eva Bundgaard*