

# **Unconditional Spaces in Dialogue Processes**

A Case Study on Interethnic Dialogue

at the Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue in Norway

Paper written by

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# TABLE OF CONTENT

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1. ABSTRACT .....	3
2. INTRODUCTION TO UNCONDITIONAL SPACES AND DIALOGUE PROCESSES.....	4
2.1. The background story .....	4
2.2. Catching up with the concept of Unconditional Spaces.....	5
2.3. Research question and hypothesis .....	8
2.4. Methodology .....	8
3. THE FRAMEWORK OF NCPD DIALOGUE FACILITATION.....	9
3.1. An unconditional welcome to Lillehammer .....	9
3.2. The key components of the seminar of NCPD.....	11
3.3. Concrete dialogue sessions and complementary activities .....	12
4. FOUR UNCONDITIONAL ELEMENTS OF THE NANSEN SEMINAR.....	14
4.1. Impressive local spaces – Jumping into the process .....	14
4.2. Open schools and open minds.....	16
4.3. Human relations and hospitality .....	18
4.4. Room for joy and emotions.....	20
5. LESSONS LEARNT .....	23
6. CONCLUSION .....	26
7. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	29

# 1. ABSTRACT

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Within this paper, I deepen the understanding of Unconditional Spaces in the context of interethnic dialogue processes. The case study at the Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue in Lillehammer, Norway, hence provides inspiring insights into the process design of reconciliation efforts on the Western Balkan. While taking part in a one-week dialogue seminar with a group of teachers from Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, I discovered elements of unconditionality in diverse process settings. I identified four main Unconditional Spaces within the seminar structure and perceived the whole dialogue process in Lillehammer as a comprehensive unconditional experience. Throughout this paper, I therefore describe the core qualities, benefits and limitations of these phenomena in peace building.

In order to convey a clear picture of Unconditional Spaces in dialogue processes, I call the four categories “ice breaker”, referring to the Olympic ski jump, “new horizon”, talking about an open school, “uniting bond”, pointing at a family dinner, and “laughing smile”, comprising experiences at a fun park. These four seminar components, among others, compliment the core dialogue sessions and support the facilitation effort of creating a protected group spaces. They provide simultaneous experiences of a “safe shelter” and “spirit of freedom” and promote relaxation, emotional openness and visibility. The latter are crucial for sustainable dialogue and reconciliation work, as they constitute the foundation for the ability to relate to oneself and others.

Through participatory observation and personal interviews, I consequently convey diverse perspectives onto the process and from within the seminar group. I highlight the strengths of the Nansen approach and open up the room for further discussions on Unconditional Spaces in peace building initiatives. As unconditionality embraces a variety of forms, I whole-heartedly invite the audience to adapt Unconditional Spaces according to their respective needs.

## 2. INTRODUCTION TO UNCONDITIONAL SPACES AND DIALOGUE PROCESSES

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### 2.1. The background story

Talking about “Unconditional Spaces” (UcSp), which I conceptualized in my Master thesis at the World Peace Academy in Basel,<sup>1</sup> and which I developed further for my presentation at the Conflict Research Society in Essex,<sup>2</sup> most of the times evokes vivid associations among the audience. In some cases, the concept and term itself raise curiosity and start a process of self-reflection, in other cases, they knock on closed doors because they transgress the ground of pure rationality. All reactions are welcome. The concept of Unconditional Spaces is meant to inspire innovative approaches in peace building and to walk the line of a new paradigm, called transrational peaces and elicitive conflict transformation (Dietrich 2011 and 2012), which I explain in the following chapter.

In my work as a consultant, trainer and mediator and in conversations with people from diverse cultural backgrounds,<sup>3</sup> I gathered the impression that the term Unconditional Spaces manages to touch upon a common ground of human notions (Jung 1991 and Lederach 2005, 29). Although it is still a hidden and tender ground, I got the feeling that people resonated with these

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<sup>1</sup> Allerstorfer, Birgit. 2013. Unconditional Spaces – A Healing Phenomenon in Peacebuilding. Master thesis, World Peace Academy, University of Basel.

<sup>2</sup> Allerstorfer, Birgit. 2013. Unconditional Spaces – From Soft Skills to Hard Competences. Paper presented at the 60th Anniversary Conference of the Conflict Research Society, Essex: [http://www.crsconference.net/papers/allerstorfer\\_unconditional\\_spaces\\_from\\_soft\\_skills\\_to\\_hard\\_competences.pdf](http://www.crsconference.net/papers/allerstorfer_unconditional_spaces_from_soft_skills_to_hard_competences.pdf). Accessed 23 October 2014.

<sup>3</sup> During my Master studies in Switzerland, I lived in a student community of about thirty five nationalities (Nepal, South Korea, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Liberia, Nigeria, Syria, Colombia, Bolivia, Equador, Brasil u.a.). As a trainer, I also work for the Austrian army, and in Norway I led personal interviews and conversations around the topic of UcSp.

spaces. In the most pleasant cases, a notion or even desire to learn more about this rather unknown territory evolved.<sup>4</sup>

Driven by this encouraging interest in my research topic, and aware of the fact that the theoretical concept of Unconditional Spaces needs more time and effort to be explained to an academic as well as non-academic audience, I was looking for an appropriate case study to fill the theoretical background with real life experiences.<sup>5</sup>

At the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference of the Conflict Research Society,<sup>6</sup> where I presented my paper on *Unconditional Spaces, From Soft Skills to Hard Competences*, I met Steinar Bryn, senior advisor of the Nansen Center of Peace and Dialogue (NCPD) in Norway.<sup>7</sup> A fruitful discussion on Unconditional Spaces and their possible benefits in dialogue work expanded. It then took about a year and a research grant from the Upper Austrian government, until I got off the train in Lillehammer in order to accompany an interethnic dialogue process of the Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue with Croatian and Bosnian teachers from Mostar.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.2. Catching up with the concept of Unconditional Spaces

Before stepping deeper into the exploration of Unconditional Spaces and dialogue processes, let me briefly summarize the original concept of UcSp.

Unconditional Spaces are theoretically rooted in humanistic psychology, systems theory and transrational peace philosophy. In the field of humanistic psychology I argue that UcSp constitute an *open Gestalt* (Perls 1969, 15) that strives for completion on the personal and collective

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<sup>4</sup> Here I especially want to refer to the personal interviews in Lillehammer with two Croatian and two Bosnian female and male teachers from Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

<sup>5</sup> Within my paper on „Unconditional Spaces – From Soft Skills to Hard Competences“ I describe a case study on Mozambique and the facilitation work of Sant Egidio. Unfortunately I was not able to gain personal local experiences apart from literature research and expert discussions.

<sup>6</sup> Conflict Research Society: <http://www.conflictresearchsociety.org/>. Accessed 23 October 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Nansen Fredssenter: <http://peace.no/en/>. Accessed 23 October 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Nansen Dialogue Network: <http://www.nansen-dialogue.net/index.php/en/>. Accessed 23 October 2014.

level. If we accept, that our relationships and societies function according to specific belief systems, norms and conditions, that we partially internalize,<sup>9</sup> Unconditional Spaces could serve as a metaphor for a missing quality. They are meant to represent the need for unconditionality in our lives.<sup>10</sup> In order to strengthen that argument, I construct a concrete Gestalt of UcSp and I declare its openness and urge for closure.

After the introduction of an unconditional Gestalt, I refer to the inherent dynamics of a system. As discovered in natural sciences and systems theory, *homeostasis* constitutes a basic life pattern. It describes the phenomenon that all interconnected systems strive for an internally balanced state (Von Bertalanffy 1950, 160; Emerson 1954, 73; Fischer 2007, 187, Dietrich 2011, 65). Following my concept of Unconditional Spaces as an open Gestalt, I therefore detect a self-sustaining drive to include elements of unconditionality into our personal and social efforts of conflict transformation.

*Transrational peace philosophy* - and elicitive conflict transformation as its method (Dietrich 2011, 13) - finally build the holistic framework of my research. This new paradigm in peace studies embraces the prevailing intellectual strategies of conflict work and adds a comprehensive understanding of the human being, which also comprises psychological and spiritual elements. The worldview of transrational peace thereby reunites seeming dualities of mind and soul, science and spirituality, and lifts them onto a transcended meta-level.

In order to make this abstract meta-level more concrete and bring it down to earth, I describe several expressions of Unconditional Spaces. These examples range from creative approaches, such as art based facilitation, music and dance, to more structured methods, such as (guided) meditation, traditional practices (yoga, zen, tea ceremony) or training and therapy methods

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<sup>9</sup> Related to Gestalt therapy see the short resumé in Dietrich, Wolfgang. 2011. Variationen über die vielen Frieden. Band 2: Elicitive Konflikttransformation und die Transrationale Wende der Friedenspolitik. Schriften des UNESCO Chair for Peace Studies der Universität Innsbruck. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 67.

<sup>10</sup> Pointing into this direction Maslow, Abraham H., Henry Geiger and Bertha G. Maslow. 1971. The Farther Reaches of Human Nature. New York: Viking Press.

of humanistic psychology (Allerstorfer 2013, 10). In my point of view, all of these practices build upon (inter alia) the releasing and healing power of Unconditional Spaces and foster an internal state of personal centeredness, open- and connectedness.

The core quality of Unconditional Spaces therefore lies in the simultaneous creation of a “safe shelter” and a “spirit of freedom”. Through their existence, they convey access to the self-sustaining and healing energies that unfold in the pure presence of the moment (Bonanomi 2012). Ideally, they interrupt the re-creation of realities out of wounds and trauma and promote new and peaceful beginnings.<sup>11</sup>

I want to sum up this briefing on Unconditional Spaces with a slightly modified definition, as my personal understanding as well evolved and expanded throughout my presentations, discussions and further research into the topic:

Unconditional Spaces are a concept that builds upon unconditional patterns within the psyche and the consequently constructed reality. It proclaims the resonance of the internal and the external world and the inherent strive of a system for balance and closure. Unconditional Spaces therefore transgress the private sphere and can be included in process design in conflict transformation. They convey a state of personal centeredness, presence and openness towards oneself and others. By touching upon a common ground of humanity, they foster relief, reconciliation and healing.

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<sup>11</sup> According to the aspect of healing, I state my personal understanding in my Master thesis as: „(...) healing therefore refers to (re)connecting to the original source of life, essence and state of wholeness – be it on the individual human or collective planetary level. I consider health as a centered, balanced, connected and aware state of being. On the individual level, the person lives according to his or her soulful plan of life. On the collective level, communities, societies and regions develop their specific sustainable, peaceful ways of living. For a resonating approach see among others Danesh, H.B. 2011. Creating a culture of healing in multi-ethnic communities. An integrative approach to prevention and amelioration of violence-induced conditions. In *Education for Peace Reader. Education for Peace Integrative Curriculum Series. Volume 4*. Canada: EFP Press, 165.

### 2.3. Research question and hypothesis

The hypothesis, which I stated due to my discussions with Steinar Bryn and my research into the work and methods of the Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue, therefore assumed that *The Nansen Dialogue Method*, applied during the reconciliation seminars in Lillehammer, included Unconditional Spaces in its seminar structure. I was very eager to learn more about the process design and facilitation method of the NCPD and formulated the research question as follows: “*How do Unconditional Spaces support dialogue processes?*” As this question embraces a very general research interest, it opens up the room for even more questions concerning Unconditional Spaces and thereby helps to develop an increasingly concrete picture of the key elements, benefits and limitations of UcSp in conflict work.

### 2.4. Methodology

Positioning myself in transrational peace research, the choice of the appropriate methodology raised some challenges (Dietrich 2011, 32-38). As Unconditional Spaces themselves embrace both intellectual and experience-based components and somehow “overstep the limits of reason” (Dietrich 2012, 211), a mixture of research lenses was needed to capture the crucial elements of unconditional experiences. I therefore decided to combine participatory observation with qualitative interviews of participants and experts.<sup>12</sup> A multidimensional approach that required an amount of self-awareness and distinction of personal and group experiences. It also corresponded with the soft-hard dialectic<sup>13</sup> of Unconditional Spaces themselves and kept the tension of unconditional involvement and observational distance. A tension that could be eased by time

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<sup>12</sup> For the principles of qualitative research and its five postulates – subject orientation, description, interpretation, every day life and no generalizations – see Mayring, Philipp. 2002. Einführung in die qualitative Sozialforschung. Weinheim: Beltz Studium, 19 and in general for research designs see Flick, Uwe. 2009. Qualitative Sozialforschung. Eine Einführung. 2. Auflage. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt.

<sup>13</sup> This term is taken from fruitful discussions on my conference paper with Richard Friedli, Prof.em and Academic director em. at the World Peace Academy, spring 2013.

passed by, appropriate debriefing, the unconditional (as possible) personal integration and digestion of experiences and the careful sorting out of individual projections.

### 3. THE FRAMEWORK OF NCPD DIALOGUE FACILITATION

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#### 3.1. An unconditional welcome to Lillehammer

*“Somehow, I regard it as a cave. As a safe shelter for personal experiences and encounters. And the cave grows stronger with each group coming to Lillehammer and participating in a Nansen seminar.” (Bryn 2014)<sup>14</sup>*

These reflections of Steinar Bryn about his hometown Lillehammer marked the introduction to my visit in this Norwegian town. We were both standing on top of the hill of the impressive Olympic ski jump. The sun went down behind the hills of the opposite side of lake Mjøsa and the corn fields of the late summer reflected the golden light of the day. After a long time travelling, I was welcomed by an unforgettable moment of beauty, warmth and peace and I fully enjoyed this spark of Unconditional Spaces on this afternoon in late August.

Lillehammer itself is situated hundred and eighty kilometers north of the capital Oslo, on the northern shores of the lake Mjøsa in the mountain valley of Gudbrandsdal. It became famous for the hosting of the winter Olympics in 1994 and will again host the youth winter Olympics in 2016.<sup>15</sup> It was exactly the event of the winter Olympics, the global focus upon Lillehammer, the heredity of the winter Olympics in Sarajevo 1984 and the simultaneously ravaging war in the former Yugoslavia in 1994, that strongly connected the Norwegian

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<sup>14</sup> For the concept of a “robust container” in facilitation and peace work, see for example Pranis, Key. 2005. The Little Book of Circle Processes. A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking. USA: Good Books, Intercourse, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Pagenstecher, Ursula. 2003. Norwegen, ADAC Verlag GmbH: München, 80-86 and the official web site of Lillehammer: <http://www.lillehammer.com/en>. Accessed 24 October 2014.

Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue with the Balkan region and initiated the intense engagement in that conflict area.<sup>16</sup> Inge Eidsvåg, director of the Nansen Academy in 1994, puts these moving experiences in the following words:

In July 1994 I visited Sarajevo to see the rehabilitation of the paraplegic Center at the Koševo Hospital, financed by Lillehammer Olympic Aid. This was before the Dayton agreement, and Sarajevo was under siege. After five days I left the city with strong impressions.

On my return to Norway I immediately contacted Norwegian Red Cross and the Norwegian Church Aid to explore whether they were interested in cooperating on a dialogue project for people from former Yugoslavia. The reply was very positive. A few weeks later we had worked out a tentative programme and applied for financial support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Later on the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo was invited into the steering committee. In September 1995 we welcomed the first group of 14 students from former Yugoslavia.

In one year we had transformed idea into reality.<sup>17</sup>

The Nansen Fredssenter<sup>18</sup> itself is located close to the center of Lillehammer and is now specialized on reconciliation initiatives on the Western Balkans. It established a network of dialogue centers in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. Between 1995 and 2010, it invited more than thousand and five hundred people from the Western Balkans to dialogue seminars in Norway, conducted more than thousand workshops with more than twenty five thousand participants in post-conflict areas and trained more than hundred and fifty local dialogue workers.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bryn, Steinar. Inter-ethnic dialogue between Serbs and Albanians in Serbia/Kosovo 1996-2008, 3. <http://peace.no/images/stories/pdf/interethnic-dialogue.pdf>. Accessed 24 October 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Words of Inge Eidsvåg, director of the Nansen Academy in 1994, in Bryn, Steinar. Inter-ethnic dialogue between Serbs and Albanians in Serbia/Kosovo 1996-2008, 3. <http://peace.no/images/stories/pdf/interethnic-dialogue.pdf>. Accessed 24 October 2014.

<sup>18</sup> The original Norwegian name of the Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue that is engaged in Eastern Europe and the Balkan region.

<sup>19</sup> For more information about the Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue see <http://www.nansen-dialogue.net/images/ndn.pdf>. Accessed on 9 October, 2014. Etter Lemkin also describes the Nansen dialogue work in Lemkin, Etter. Notes and reflections of a dialogue worker (unpublished, article known to the author). Additional insights are given by Ann Kelleher and Kelly Ryan in Kelleher, Ann and Kelly Ryan. Peacebuilding

### 3.2. The key components of the seminar of NCPD

The day before the first group from Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, arrived, I was introduced to the team of the Nansen Center of Peace and Dialogue and welcomed by Ingunn Skurdal, the executive manager of the center. We made last agreements on the framework of my research project and fixed the schedule. I had enough time to specify and adjust my key elements of observation and guidelines for interviews. The more I got involved in the seminar, the more I developed a feeling of curious openness towards the opportunity and the will to, somehow, dive into the experience and group process with as little expectations as possible. I intended to display Unconditional Spaces in form and content. My research methodology and personal attitude towards the process should reflect this endeavor (Dietrich 2011, 27-31).

The Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue itself works with people of diverse backgrounds, age and gender, and involves all ethnicities, cultures and religions. Steinar Bryn and his team invite representatives who are influential in their societies and/or potential leaders for building a more plural and balanced social system, such as community leaders and local politicians, civil society leaders and activists, opinion leaders, diaspora groups, educational authorities, teachers, parents and students.<sup>20</sup>

The current group consisted of Croatian and Bosnian teachers from Mostar, who were invited to deepen their interethnic dialogue on issues of education and school affairs.<sup>21</sup> In Mostar, the local society still experiences a deep ethnical divide in everyday life. The pedagogues work in two separate shifts in a public traffic school. They teach subjects ranging from literature, sports, to mathematics and physics. Among the twelve participants were five

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through Sustained Dialogue: Case Study of the Nansen Integrated Bilingual School in Jegunovce Macedonia (unpublished, first version of the article known to the author).

<sup>20</sup> For the practical framework of the Nansen dialogue seminars see <http://www.nansen-dialogue.net/images/ndn.pdf> p.5. Accessed 9 September 2014.

<sup>21</sup> For reasons of protection of personal data and confidentiality, I renounce more concrete information of the participants of the seminar.

women. Seven teachers came from a Croatian and five teachers from a Bosnian background. A principal from the Croatian school also participated in the seminar. Three coordinators, who worked at the Nansen Dialogue Center in Mostar, accompanied the group and translated the conversations and lectures throughout the whole seminar.

### 3.3. Concrete dialogue sessions and complementary activities

The concrete dialogue sessions formed part of a much larger program of activities. These surrounding events comprised lectures, visits of museums and sights, socializing, sports, and other initiatives, which I will explain more in detail in the forthcoming chapters. The core dialogue time however mainly built upon the powerful tool of *asking questions* (Bryn 2014 and Eidsvåg, *What is Dialogue & 13 Tips for Good Dialogue*, 10). As the group had already participated in a workshop with Steinar Bryn in Bosnia and Herzegovina before, they were well prepared for the seminar. Continued ethnical separation during the seminar was not intended and actually did not take place throughout the day, meals and leisure time. For the sake of the dialogue exercise, however, the participants were asked to split into their separate shifts. Deeply reflected and elaborated questions, asked from one ethnic group to the other, should finally serve as vehicles of communication. Each group received enough time to draft a flip chart of answers and present their findings in front of the plenary.<sup>22</sup> My overall impression of these exchanges was very positive. The questions mainly focused on the present situation or future improvements. They tackled concrete issues of renovating parts of the school building and improving the heating system in specific classrooms. Where ever possible, participants and the principal offered suggestions of implementation or support. However, a general mistrust towards the school authorities and political leaders in Mostar was perceptible.

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<sup>22</sup> The dialogue sessions took place on 14, 16 and 18 August 2014 and lasted for about three hours. The days between the dialogue sessions were filled with a unique program that thoughtfully contained Unconditional Spaces.

The group pronounced a feeling of powerlessness and doubted whether their suggestions could be implemented successfully back home.

I describe these core dialogue sessions very briefly because my main focus lies on the surrounding activities that embraced the whole program and also influenced the dialogue classes. These additional elements very much built upon the natural beauty of Lillehammer, the given sights and attractive places of this pretty town. The warm caring and professional support of Steinar Bryn's family, especially his daughter Vilde Langemyr, also contributed essentially to the success of the seminar. Some participants from Mostar came to Norway with expectations of long hours of lectures and lots of information about the need for reconciliation. But their experiences were actually totally different. They were deeply surprised by the different approach towards interethnic dialogue and facilitation methods of the Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue, as they voiced out in the closing ceremony and during my personal interviews.<sup>23</sup> The following impressions of a teacher sum up crucial points:

I was very excited because when they created that, they had to think about everything. Nothing was forced to me. It was so harmonic, natural, and I was, you know, not violated by any of these spaces. I cannot select one of these things. Everything was somehow extraordinary. What I really love, are the people. Everything is so peaceful, no stress. Nobody is screaming at each other. Some serious things and some childish things, just like yesterday, everything is in order.<sup>24</sup>

According to my understanding, these positive surprises were due to the free and appreciating spaces, which Steinar Bryn and Ingunn Skurdal conveyed to the participants and allowed the group to relax, adjust to each other and discover their neighbors in different circumstances,

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<sup>23</sup> The closing ceremony took place on 18 August 2014. The Nansen Center asked each participant to give a short speech on her or his impressions of the seminar and the activities and sights which they liked most throughout the week. Additionally I led my personal interviews with four participants of the seminar also on 18 August 2014. The ethical and gender representation was equally distributed throughout the interviews.

<sup>24</sup> Interview 2, 18 August 2014.

attitudes and personal encounters. As “it is about making visible, not melting into a pot” (Bryn 2014), the focus of the seminar was not solely on the concrete dialogue sessions but many more encounters, perspectives and experiences that the whole group shared during the week and that carved the process into a somehow piece of art (Dietrich 2011, 20).

As it is not my intention to deliver a narrative of the whole seminar and the different events that took place in a chronological order, I now change my way of telling the story. I shift my perspective onto the main elements that, according to my understanding, make up the *stable cave* (Bryn 2014) of the Nansen seminars and try to understand the dynamics, benefits and limitations of unconditional activities.

## 4. FOUR UNCONDITIONAL ELEMENTS OF THE NANSEN SEMINAR

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### 4.1. Impressive local spaces – Jumping into the process

The Olympic ski jump might be the most outstanding sight of Lillehammer. It was not randomly chosen, that I witnessed the sunset on top of the jump on my first day. The jump is an awesome building that presides the town and attracts a huge amount of tourists and local sports men and women throughout the year. It offers an amazing mixture of elements that makes it an ideal spot to start a research project or a dialogue seminar.

First of all, it offers an amazing view into the countryside, upon Lillehammer and lake Mjøsa. This outlook is impressive, it widens the horizon, lifts up the heart and conveys a kind of lightness that creates hope, trust and peace. These attributes might be normal for the top of a

mountain or a view point,<sup>25</sup> but for a ski jump it conveys a kind of surprise factor. Additionally, the top of the jump is easily accessible by car, there are no guards or barriers to keep people from enjoying the building and even a lift is ready to carry visitors up and down easily. People are welcomed to make their personal use of the jump.

The chosen task for the group of Mostar was *walking down* the jump. What seemed a kind of surprising undertaking at the beginning, turned out to be an individual challenge and fascinating group experience. An emotional cocktail accompanied the participants while they were quickly walking down the 970 steps: They were challenged by the concentration on the next step, while interrupted by the gorgeous view into the countryside. When a colleague wanted to overtake another one on the steep stairs, there was a bit of scare, a bit of shaken security and a bit of caution because of the height and the shaky staircases. Some people experienced a physical effort, for others it was a kind of playful undertaking. There was no agenda. No assignments had to be tackled. Simply walking down, that was the endeavor

All these components created a kind of unconditional experience that helped literally *landing* in Lillehammer. Due to the mixture of feelings, challenges and physical necessities, the participants were forced to be totally in the present moment.<sup>26</sup> Of course, there was also an urge to take pictures, which somehow hindered the immediate impressions, but nowadays it seems difficult to banish smartphones. I could immediately feel some bricks of the ice melting and participants coming closer to each other. Personally, it was the first time that a teacher addressed me in English. It was the moment, where he wanted to pass by on the steps and suddenly asked: “A bit dangerous, isn’t

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<sup>25</sup> In this respect, I want to point at the similarities with „peak experiences“, especially based on Ken Wilber as “(...) a (temporary altered state), a person can briefly experience, while awake, any of the natural stages of psychic, subtle, causal, or nondual awareness, and these often result in direct spiritual experiences (...). Peak experiences can occur to individuals at almost any stage of development” (Wilber 2000, 14). I conceptualize them as Unconditional Spaces in my Master theses and paper on Unconditional Spaces (Allerstorfer 2013, 7-9 and 6).

<sup>26</sup> „Being in the present moment,“ constitutes a key quality of training and therapy in humanistic psychology. E.g. Carl Rogers calls it the unconditional positive regard (Dietrich 2011, 77-79), Virginia Satir identifies it as one of her „five freedoms“ (Dietrich 2011, 89) and Mashall B. Rosenberg refers to empathy and a non-judgmental attitude (Rosenberg 2012 and 2013).

it?” This seemed a minor event. But I fully appreciated it, regarding the fact, that there had only been translation before and a kind of distance towards my research project. Arrived at the bottom of the jump, some members of the group asked me for a picture also for the first time.

I therefore come to the notion that the shared experience created a common ground among us, cut off some seeming walls and strengthened confidence, self-esteem and courage to “be oneself”, show one’s personality and express one’s wishes.<sup>27</sup> The group grew together and even if the “group speed” was a bit too high for my intimate appreciation of nature, there was a lot of humor around, when we walked back to the center, collected blue berries on the way and helped each other to cross a small river on slippery rocks.

## 4.2. Open schools and open minds

Concerning the parallels of form and content, the visit of an *open school* – the Søre Al primary school in Lillehammer - was a highlight for the teachers from Mostar. The school built upon utmost openness. There were no classrooms or walls in the main building, apart from a library that formed the core of the rather round house. The school routine started with a common ceremony every morning, where pupils designed the morning welcome session, performed a short play or showed other skills. All children therefore took off their shoes and sat in front of a stage. Sometimes their parents accompanied them for the morning presentations, as they were very proud of their daughters and sons. Apart from the open architecture, the pedagogues from Mostar were very impressed by the teaching style and curriculum of this public primary school and asked the principal a lot of questions concerning discipline and authority. Somehow this open concept seemed to undermine the superiority of the teachers. But interesting enough, issues of discipline were minor

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<sup>27</sup> As an inspiration we could also take Mohandas K. Gandhi, as “Gandhi’s actualism, then, first of all consisted in his knowledge of, and his ability to gain strength from, the fact that nothing is more powerful in the world than conscious nothingness if it pairs with the gift of giving and accepting actuality” (Erikson 1969, 397). The expression of wishes also constitutes the last step (after observation, feelings and needs) in Marshall B. Rosenberg’s non-violent communication (Rosenberg 2012 and 2013).

at the school. Pupils were used to taking responsibility, caring for their rooms, facilities, materials and books. So the whole group was impressed by the kind of self-sustaining dynamics of the school life and the very positive climate among the faculty and school community.<sup>28</sup>

My connection towards Unconditional Spaces springs from the concept of openness of this primary school. There exists a strong concept, which teachers and the principal unanimously support and embody. This strong shell enables the internal openness and individualization of education. The fact that discipline and learning successes are not reduced – rather the opposite is the case – encourages this concept. Even the noise of the pupils constitutes no problem. As it is obvious that there are no walls and no classrooms to separate the pupils from each other, every child tends to be more quiet and responsible than in ordinary classroom settings.<sup>29</sup>

I chose this example as an element of innovation, surprise and expansion of horizons within the seminar experience. The open school was a great anchor for school related discussions afterwards. Arguments that explained, why things “could not be done”, were often challenged with the example of the open school and the surprising success of the concept. When I asked a participant about innovative ideas about the program, he replied:

We wrote some ideas. But they are not innovative. They are “need” problems. We need heating. We need the gymnastics hall. But the most innovative (approach) might be in the teaching process. We have to talk to each other and change our way of thinking. Not to behave in such manner as we behave right now.<sup>30</sup>

Although there was no goal or need for direct implementation of the learnt concept, the pure and unconditional existence of the concept opened up new spheres of thoughts.

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<sup>28</sup> Mrs. Bodil Alver, former principal of the primary school presented the school concept, showed the group around the school building and invited the guests to have coffee together. She answered the questions of the visitors in a very inspiring and encouraging way.

<sup>29</sup> The details about school life and success stem from the explanations of Mrs. Bodil Alver.

<sup>30</sup> Interview 1, 18 August 2014.

### 4.3. Human relations and hospitality

The reason why I chose this characteristic of the Nansen Dialogue as an outstanding experience, lies in the fact that during Steinar Bryn's dinner invitation to his home, very important statements were made, that – I guess - would not have been possible in other situations or circumstances. We spent a warm and cozy evening together with his family on the beautiful veranda, overlooking the lake Mjøsa, and a kind of philosophical atmosphere expanded that made people come closer, exchange reflections, thoughts and feelings.

At the beginning of the invitation, the group members sat separated on two different tables according to their ethnic background. But throughout the evening, including a wonderful spontaneous saxophone concert of a neighbor, people started to move around. "Staying on the veranda, on the balcony, having a nice time, just feeling safe,"<sup>31</sup> catches the atmosphere appropriately. Some took care of the barbecue, others helped in the kitchen, talked to family members or served the drinks. A natural flow developed and allowed thoughts and feelings to pervade. The later the evening, the more self-critical and honest people became. We talked a lot about the lack of responsibility to change things to the better, and the overall blaming of politics that hinders the proceeding of the country. People were quite aware of their own pitfalls. We all together were also quite aware of the challenge to implement changes back home in their local communities and with friends and colleagues that had not experienced this uniting *Nansen spirit*.<sup>32</sup>

I was very impressed and touched by this charming experience of a Nansen family. At the same time, I was also touched by some very personal confessions of deep mistrust in the positive development on the Balkans. "Birgit, you know, you never know. Everything can happen again."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Interview 4, 18 August 2014.

<sup>32</sup> The challenge of implementing changes in their home communities was mentioned in each of the personal interviews. In most cases, the political conditions were identified as root causes, but some participants also described themselves as „rather passive, able to suffer a lot and not that active in social life“ (Interview 1, 18 August 2014). The following quote catches this attitude: „We also have these spaces (sights, note by the author). But we do not use them. They are Unused Spaces“ (Interview 1, 18 August 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Participant of the Nansen seminar, 16 August 2014.

This statement, almost whispered in my ears, really shook my best expectations and recalibrated my very positive impressions of that reconciliation process. It was mostly on this evening that also fears and trauma were mentioned, feelings of guilt, for not having saved a neighbor, and the hard times as refugees in foreign countries. It was during the shelter of the dark night and protected in a family surrounding, that people articulated their wishes to go on in life. They wanted to forget and simply enjoy their future. At the same time, they shared their silent awareness that there were shadows waiting in the depth of their psyche, they might not be able to control. At a certain point, I felt somehow helpless because all those huge personal efforts of reconciliation – the NCPD and participants alike - only seemed to scratch the visible part of an enormous hidden iceberg. But exactly at these moments of seeming weakness, my fellow friends from Mostar took up their strength and self-confidence again and strongly confirmed their willingness to settle things themselves.<sup>34</sup> The whole evening seemed like a narrative discourse or journey on that protected and warm ground of Steinar’s veranda, where all needs for good food and drinks, shelter and emotions were covered. A participant articulated it like this: “I talked to Steinar’s wife and she gave me a lot of life information about Norway. I cannot say that everything is clear to me but I got a totally different perspective.”<sup>35</sup>

A statement by Elise Boulding also resonates in my mind, which somehow grabs the phenomenon of Unconditional Spaces in family settings: “Whenever we can open ourselves to loving, a little bit of despair melts away, and a new space opens up” (Boulding 2002, 304). Following this thought, another aspect comes to my mind. It is the deeply inherent and often unconscious memory of the unconditional love of a mother for her child. Of course, the relationship of a mother to her child can be disturbed or complicated. But in the ideal case, this unconditional motherly love is often regarded as the prototype of unconditionality.<sup>36</sup> At this point, I do not want to discuss the

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<sup>34</sup> This narrative derives from my personal conversations during the walk to the dinner invitation, as well as from conversations throughout the evening.

<sup>35</sup> Interview 2, 18 August 2014.

<sup>36</sup> The discussion was further raised during a seminar with Piero Ferrucci himself at the World Peace Academy, 27-28 September 2012, where he mentioned the unconditionality of a mother’s love for her child. See also:

underlying concepts, whether a mother is loving “by nature” or “due to socialization” (Allerstorfer 2008, 16-20) but I want to point at the maybe collective and unconscious memory of unconditional acceptance and love that might be touched in a family surrounding. The following statement of a participant also points at the importance of family relations: “You should always go out and see the world. You should have freedom and free your mind. (...) But when you are too far away from your family, you start to disintegrate. You are starting to lose your mind. You are losing your concentration and everything.”<sup>37</sup>

The evening dinner on Steinar Bryn’s veranda therefore came close to a “safe shelter” for transformation, a platform or social web (Lederach 2005, 103) that also conveyed the necessary freedom to exchange thoughts, attitudes and feelings without the pressure to do so. As there were no official agenda and expectations to be met, the participants – or rather guests – were very relaxed and experienced a growing social space between divided groups (Lederach 2002, 91-101).

#### 4.4. Room for joy and emotions – The family park

The last example of unconditional elements throughout the Nansen seminar structure constitutes the visit to the family park Hunderfossen.<sup>38</sup> I guess that it was also not by chance that this activity took place on Sunday, exactly after the cozy dinner at Steinar Bryn’s home. The group had become familiar to each other and it was due to the relaxing spirit of a Sunday morning, the heavy rain falling and the expectation of the week coming to an end, that all participants quite neutrally awaited the family park. They did not devalue the experience as childish or dull.

The good spirit continued during the explorations of the park, and we visited the attraction of the “troll fall”. Walking up a small hill, there were street signs saying “Watch out trolls!” and a

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Ferrucci, Piero and Sascha Dönges. 1986. *Werde was du bist: Selbstverwirklichung durch Psychosynthese: rororo transformation.*

<sup>37</sup> Interview 1, 18 August 2014.

<sup>38</sup> For details see: <http://www.hunderfossen.no/english/>. Accessed on 3 November 2014.

kind of curious and a little bit scary atmosphere arose. As I learnt from the Norwegian facilitators, there were no really good and nice trolls. Trolls were regarded as dangerous and the enemies of humankind. The best thing to happen was to meet a not too bad troll. We finally entered a dark castle and a sinister guard closed the heavy wooden doors behind us. We got onto a slide in almost total darkness and waited for the next thing to happen. A fairy tale was told, the slide moved upwards and wow...! The slide fell down in a second. Troll fall. We were all screaming.

As it was an attraction for children, the shock was not too bad. But we discovered the funniest thing only when leaving the building. Right at the moment of the troll fall, they had taken a picture of each passenger falling down. The screaming faces were fantastic. We all looked awfully funny. The whole group relaxed even more because of the shared comical experience.

The family park also comprised a wonderful 3D media show about the natural beauty of Norway and a lovely 4D musical about the “little prince”. I especially liked the fairy tale of the little prince and the message of friendship, trust and responsibility. I got the impression that many participants thought of their own children at home. They wished to share this cute experience with them and wanted to take as many impressions home as possible. This notion also substantiated throughout my personal interviews, where a teacher confessed that his mere goal was to grant his children the same opportunities, he was given, and which he deeply appreciated.<sup>39</sup> The troll park somehow closed the circle to their families back home. It created a desire for being there with one’s family. It also facilitated positive feelings towards the other ethnic group because it was quite clear that they all shared similar emotions and longings.

The last attraction I want to mention, before we had a tasty meal within the troll castle restaurant, is the roller coaster ride and the “Viking ship”. Both attractions were very speedy and shaking experiences. They took us up to extreme heights on the roller coaster and an equally extreme pendulum on the Viking ship. Some women did not want to try the roller coaster ride at the beginning. But it was marvelous to see, that two more ladies joined the adventure, due to the

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<sup>39</sup> Interview 1, 18 August 2014.

examples of the other group members. Finally, those two women even went for another ride because the experience had been that extraordinary. I regard this as a nice and safe example of overstepping one's limits. Sure, we are simply talking about a roller coaster ride here, but especially team building seminars – be it with managers or students – often build upon such safe and compact shared experiences that also create a kind of body feeling and memory.<sup>40</sup>

My resume of the family park was therefore a surprisingly good one. The group was able to enjoy attractions that were mainly designed for children and families and therefore opened up for more funny, emotional and childish amusements. They somehow forgot the time, deeply laughed about the funny faces at the troll fall, started giggling and kidding each other and eagerly wanted to take another roller coaster ride. When I mentioned Unconditional Spaces in my interviews, a participant answered quickly: “I think a place like this is the Lunarpark. The roller coaster. It was amazing. I forgot everything. Everything that had happened in ordinary life.”<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, during my personal interviews, a person, who I regarded as a very serious and intellectual character, chose the family park as the most beautiful place to remember. This was somehow surprising because this honest choice and appreciation did not fit to the rather strict and distanced image, which the person had conveyed throughout the whole seminar. I therefore assume that, once a so called “childish” sight is officially chosen by the leaders of the seminar, the participants adapt to that choice and enjoy the inherent freedom and liberation from rational restraints given to them.<sup>42</sup> This experience again fosters openness and relaxation, which are important prerequisites for authentic encounters and the reunion in more official or professional settings back home in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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<sup>40</sup> As I do not want to promote specific teambuilding companies or experts, I use my very personal teambuilding experience in a climbing garden/crag in 2010 as a reference. I experienced some outstanding moments there, that I am able to remember and refer to, even after a long period of time.

<sup>41</sup> Interview 3, 18 August 2014.

<sup>42</sup> In humanistic psychology, there exists the term of the “inner child” which stands for the subpersonality of the inherent emotions, needs and desires in the sense of a child. It states the importance of nourishing and caring for everybody's inner child in order to be a satisfied, healthy and happy adult human being (e.g. Ferrucci 1986).

## 5. LESSONS LEARNT

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At this point, I depict the whole seminar of the Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue in Lillehammer to be a unique Unconditional Space. My consideration mostly stems from the experienced personal attitudes of the key protagonists of the Nansen Center, the comprehensive seminar structure - its balance, circle style and sensitivity – and the explicit unconditional elements, which I described in the previous chapter. The statement of a participant also points into that direction:

And I really appreciate that they put a lot of effort to organize all this. It's not that they just make a plan for the sake of it but they think about everything when they plan the day. (...) In general, I think that every day we spent together in this action diminished our prejudices. I think, finally, in this work, we would all find solutions to the problems. I am not talking about this small area but in a wider sense, you know.<sup>43</sup>

The facilitation team consists of experienced experts in dialogue work and embraces an unconditional attitude towards the participants. All facilitators are aware of their own impacts and open to discussion, self-reflection and authentic debriefing. The program itself is based on long-term best practice experiences in dialogue work, comprises a variety of different and well-coordinated activities. In fact, the big picture, the overall impression and personal experience of the seminar convey the impression of a comprehensive UcSp.

Building upon this assumption of a holistic UcSp in Lillehammer, I can now concentrate on lessons learnt of such an approach in reconciliation work.

The first benefit of the unconditional process structure is the relaxed group spirit. Current research in neuro sciences points into the direction, that a system can only reveal its self-regulation power, if it is not tense or in a state of danger or alert. In times of danger, all forces are used to

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<sup>43</sup> Interview 2, 18 August 2014.

fight the enemy or take flight, just to name the most important defense strategies. In extreme cases, no energy is left to fuel other life-saving, self-sustaining and healing powers of the organism or system.<sup>44</sup> This argument, which I deliver very briefly, seems to have massive impact in personal and collective healing. It should therefore be in the center of future research, as unfortunately it surpasses the scope of this paper. I nevertheless raise the hypothesis that any approach that succeeds in calming personal tensions and fostering deep relaxation, contributes an essential part to reconciliation and peace building.

The second benefit lies in the protected and nevertheless open space that gives room to emotions, feelings and personal encounter. Just as a participant put it: “Just enjoy. You can enjoy. But then, I always ask myself: Why can’t I have this? Why, why? Why my children cannot have this to see?”<sup>45</sup> As the seminar does not stop in the seminar room but expands over the whole week, eating, living, working and having fun together, the participants gain the opportunity to experience themselves and their neighbors in different daily life situations. As there is no pressure for pre-defined results, there is enough space for personal discussions, reflections and exchanges. Emotions, which are released and transformed in an informal sphere, are not brought to the table and dialogue session any more. Spare time thereby turns into a useful, resourceful and supportive dialogue space. “Yes, I was fulfilled. Yes.”<sup>46</sup> This simple statement of a participant captures the experience of a very personal Unconditional Space throughout the seminar. Another advantage lies in the time for self-reflection: “And it is also better for me because I also need some time for myself. That’s good. For the last six years, I did not have time for myself. I had to find a job. I had so many things to do. So I did not have time to think about myself.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See „Stress Management: Approaches for preventing and reducing stress.“ In *Harvard Health Publications*, [http://www.health.harvard.edu/special\\_health\\_reports/stress\\_control](http://www.health.harvard.edu/special_health_reports/stress_control), accessed 3 November 2014, combined with the principle of homeostasis (e.g. Emerson 1954, 73 and Fischer 2007, 187) and classical/operative strategies of conflict management (Schwarz 1990).

<sup>45</sup> Interview 1, 18 August 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Interview 1, 18 August 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Interview 4, 18 August 2014.

As a third benefit and in case that personal encounters and exchanges of emotions and attitude are not (yet) possible, Unconditional Spaces in dialogue processes at least offer an open space for visibility. According to Steinar Bryn, one goal of the seminar lies in the simple phenomenon of “seeing” each other, of realizing differences and similarities, without a need or pressure to adapt to anything or even formally reconcile.<sup>48</sup>

Due to my personal experiences in systemic constellation work,<sup>49</sup> I can fully support this approach. I learnt that systems strive for a state of balance. They tend to create tensions and conflicts, when elements are suppressed or excluded. The point of making visible therefore touches the core of rebalancing a given system and stimulating its self-sustaining and healing powers.<sup>50</sup>

Concerning challenges of the NCPD approach, I want to refer to possible difficulties in evaluating the long-term effects of these dialogue efforts and Unconditional Spaces in quantitative terms. As a reconciliation process is such a complex phenomenon that responds and depends on such a variety of influencing factors, the evaluation process tends to be equally complex and multi-layered. I therefore call for innovative, qualitative evaluation methods.<sup>51</sup> Quantitative evaluation and measurable goals seem difficult,<sup>52</sup> as changes in attitudes on a very deep and tender ground are

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<sup>48</sup> You might want to have a look at the song „See me beautiful.“ (Rosenberg 2002), <http://www.songtexte.com/songtext/marshall-b-rosenberg/see-me-beautiful-43e0bb87.html>. Accessed 25 November 2014.

<sup>49</sup> For providing an overview of systemic constellation work, I want to refer to Klein, Peter and Sigrid Limberg-Strohmaier. 2012. *Das Aufstellungsbuch. Familienaufstellungen, Organisationsaufstellungen und neueste Entwicklungen*. Wien: Braumüller GmbH. Hellinger, Bert. 2011. *Guided*. Germany: Hellinger Publication. Hellinger, Bert and Gabriel ten Hövel. 2007. *Anerkennen was ist. Gespräche über Verstrickung und Lösung*. München: Verlagsgruppe Random House. Ulsamer, Bertold. 1999. *Ohne Wurzeln keine Flügel. Die systemische Therapie von Bert Hellinger*. Deutschland: Goldmann Taschenbuch. Ulsamer, Bertold. 2001. *Das Handwerk des Familienstellens. Eine Einführung in die Praxis der systemischen Hellinger Therapie*. München: Akana. Cohen, Dan Booth. 2006. “Family Constellations”: An Innovative Systemic Phenomenological Group Process From Germany. In *The Family Journal July 2006 vol. 14 no. 3*, 226-233.

<sup>50</sup> Again see the concept of homeostasis, e.g. adapted by Dietrich Fischer for the field of conflict transformation and peace building (Dietrich 2007).

<sup>51</sup> Participatory observation, open interviews, group discussions, seminar diaries, creative approaches (LeBaron 2011) such as open writing/drawing/stream of consciousness etc. might be some creative suggestions, as a multi-dimensional approach tends to mirror and capture the comprehensive experience and phenomenon of reconciliation.

<sup>52</sup> I am referring to questionnaires which ask for examples the following questions: „How often do you see/talk to each other/have coffee with each other? (before and after the seminar) According to my experience and also supported by the personal interviews, I led (Interview 1, 18 August 2014), participants are quite aware of their roles and external expectations (and willing to deliver the wished results), which might influence the outcome of the evaluation.

difficult to detect and measure before they even appear on the surface of changed direct behavior. Sensitive approaches depend on a high level of trust, awareness of group dynamics, discretion and personal relations, which have to be built up over a long period of time and risk to be destroyed immediately by too direct or insensitive interviews or questionnaires.<sup>53</sup>

Having discussed the element and dynamics of the dialogue process with the Nansen staff and experienced the seminar myself, I can only go along with Steinar Bryn's suggestion: "Come and see for yourself! It is always the best to invite people."<sup>54</sup> Through personal encounter and experiences, I was able to relate to concerns of participants and facilitators alike and get a notion of the complexity of dialogue work and the contributions of Unconditional Spaces in the Nansen approach.

## 6. CONCLUSION

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While wrapping up my experiences at the Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue in Lillehammer and drawing my personal conclusions, the original image of a "cave for transformation that grows bigger with every group coming to Lillehammer" (Bryn 2014) appears in my mind. This picture captures the main elements of Unconditional Spaces - "safe shelter" and "spirit of freedom" – and closely links them to the dialogue work done by Steinar Bryn.

As I do not want to willingly construct similarities between these two concepts but simply follow the path that once opened up at the conference in Essex, my conclusion cannot be a final or comprehensive one. The concept of Unconditional Spaces is still evolving and expanding. It oscillates between the imagined ideal of unconditionality and the conditional reality of every day

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<sup>53</sup> We intensely discussed these issues with Steinar Bryn and Ingunn Skurdal on 10 August 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Quote taken from a conversation with Steinar Bryn, on 10 August 2014.

life. In between, I detect island of UcSp. I follow their traces, just as I follow the quote by Kenneth Boulding:<sup>55</sup> “What exists is possible” (Boulding 2002, 304).

Based upon this awareness, I describe the Nansen dialogue seminar itself as an Unconditional Space, enriched with specific unconditional activities. These spaces and activities are not perfect. They are not purely unconditional. Of course, our reality still builds upon dualities and contains entanglements on many personal and collective levels. But as the perceiving subject creates his or her own reality,<sup>56</sup> and I consciously put my focus on elements of unconditionality in dialogue work, these elements are likely to flourish and enrich their framework.

To put my findings in Lillehammer into a nutshell, I dedicate colorful names to the main components of unconditionality. I call them: “Ice breaker” (Olympic ski jump), “the new horizon” (open school), “the uniting bond” (family dinner) and the “laughing smile” (fun park). I regard them as key elements of Unconditional Spaces in dialogue processes. I resume their benefits of relaxation, emotional openness and visibility as well as their challenges in evaluation.

A final challenge remains the “knowing-doing-gap”, which addresses the difficulties in putting new findings or attitudes into practice. It also refers to the challenge of preserving the Nansen spirit back home in Mostar. But luckily there exists a whole Nansen dialogue network all over the Balkan states that bundles dialogue and reconciliation efforts and supports participants and facilitators of Nansen seminars further on. A participant summed up his experiences like this:

Mostly, you cannot expect something to happen like magic. You cannot expect something to happen over night. You cannot expect something to happen in seven days. But now, we are talking more to each other. We are joking more with each other. If I see someone, I stay and ask, what are

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<sup>55</sup> Kenneth Boulding is regarded as the founder of peace studies in the United States.

<sup>56</sup> See for example the UNESCO Constitution, adopted 16 November 1945 in London: “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.”

you doing? How are you? So that is a beginning. I can talk to him about other things, you know. It is hard to talk *about* them. But you can start to talk *with* them.<sup>57</sup>

Consequently, Unconditional Spaces own a special quality. Once being touched by an unconditional experience, a spark of this encounter remains within the system and personal memory. It is up to the very person then to preserve this unconditional pattern in everyday life and benefit from these tender islands of qualities of the heart.

See me beautiful, look for the best in me  
That's what I really am and all I want to be  
It may take some time  
It may be hard to find  
But see me beautiful.

See me beautiful, each and ev'ry day  
Could you take a chance?  
Could you find a way?  
To see me shining through  
In ev'ry thing I do  
And see me beautiful. (Rosenberg 2002)

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<sup>57</sup> Interview 1, 18 August 2014.

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