

On this continent one is well advised to practice the methodology of listening

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Conference: *International conference on Humankind at the intersection of nature and culture, 4-6 September 2006, held in Berg-en-Dal, Kruger National Park – organised by North-West University Vaal Triangle Campus in partnership with the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen, North-Rhine Westphalia, Germany.*

The New Humanism Project recognises that today's problems can only be solved together. This is a togetherness of others that constitute humanity. This realisation makes the intended humanism new. The Project is about negotiating rules and procedures for a culture of difference. And one of today's gravest problems is the construction or destruction of nature.

The conference was informed on the (South) African experience pertaining to:

- Witchcraft and healing;
- The environmental history of Africa;
- The ecological disasters caused by gold mining;
- The cultural history of the Vaal River;
- The problem of shrinking space (physical and cultural); and
- Theatre for development and communities bordering the Kruger Park

Wider problems have also been addressed. They include:

- Continued whale hunting suggests that destruction comes natural to us;
- The dialectics of reason and sustainable agriculture;
- Maps and control.

The latter topic brought about the one major controversy of the conference: What is culture? Do birds have culture? How are we to distinguish between human culture and animal culture while insisting that we are part of nature, bipedal animals with big brains?

The mediator in this controversy did the same in the first great opposition that defined the conference: Optimism in its extreme form pitted against provocative, misogynous pessimism. Nothing clears the mind like having extreme positions defended with intelligence.

Can we be trusted to change our nature? Or will we mess that up just as we have everything else, all of the rest of nature?

The possibility of a new answer comes from the new view of the brain that says we are not determined by our rodent or crocodile lymphoid system. We can and do shape our brain. We can choose to breed less and be a gentler species, more humane, realising the enigmatic universals of care and love, if we work at it, if we want to, if we practice, if we know ourselves, if we connect with and learn from children.

Genetic engineering is another fad, another refusal to face up to the real question and the consequences of its answer. If you want the best for your children as a responsible parent, connect, face to face, and see what happens – before you start tinkering with the genes. They are overrated anyway.

When dealing with the African other, we are tempted to immediately find positions on the Western ‘map’. On this continent one is well advised to practice the methodology of listening, to keep one’s own terms in suspension while one allows the other to say something that one has never heard before.

Do we have time? There will be no shortcuts. ‘Together’ entails the nitty-gritty work of inclusion.