CONFERENCE REPORT

13th European Psychology Congress, Stockholm, Sweden, 9 to 12 July 2013 honey and saffron: the ecp2013 experience

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Honey is the glow of beauty on the faces of striking women. The touch of healing in a thousand remedies around the earth. It is sweetness and life and its golden touch enhances our days from the beginning to the very end. And when at last the years have streaked our hair with gray and phrases like “darling” and “lambie pie” don’t fit anymore, it is the one expression of pure affection that never wears out between us, “honey I love you.” Because honey itself is indeed synonymous with love itself: A beautiful blessing created in a mysterious way. An expression of love and a special gift to man.
(Paetzke, 1987)

Say the word “Mehabahigher,”
Pound the riddled universe with fire,
Peel the wisdom of the planets,
Mash them well, wrap them in flowers,
Keep eyes open for five hours,
add some saffron, sprinkle stardust,
Twenty-two acacia petals,
Icy bones, and one desire
Priests decipher unknown language
In the attic burn the nonsense,
Then they dance and drink the ritual
Of rebirth of life from nothing
(Mairescu, 2009)

I walked down one of the cobbled streets of Gamla Stan, the older area of Stockholm, Sweden, and looked curiously at the deep orange ice-cream in my hand. I wondered what happens when honey and saffron are used together to infuse this delicacy. I
The 13th European Psychology Congress was held from 9 to 12 July 2013 in Stockholm, Sweden. Stockholm in a sense is similar to saffron, with saffron being the most expensive spice in the world (Leffingwell, 2002), so too does Stockholm strain the purse strings. The city is also colourful and bright and the sun shines until after 10 at night-time during the summer. It has an amazing public transport system including trains, the subway, busses, trams and ferries that run as smooth as heated honey. The venue was the Stockholmmassan, a building looking much more impressive on pictures than in real life. The venue, however, was not the only part of the congress that I found disappointing. Conference attendance was poor and various speakers did not show up for their presentations.

Being a psychologist who has never claimed to be neutral, I can say with ease that the presentations that I enjoyed most were those of the Unisa lecturers. I was struck by the logic of their arguments. I was also surprised by what I would previously have thought to be quite a curious combination – the research psychologists and the clinical psychologist. Their presentation ‘Critical perspective on psychological research training in Southern Africa’, spoke of this combination, a combination that in many ways could be likened to the dance that results when honey is combined with saffron.

Just like honey bees suck nectar from the living parts of plants or from plant-sucking insects (Bradbear, 2009), psychologists extract the juice of psychology through their observations. They collect the substance, regurgitate it and pass it on through a chain of co-workers and store it until it is needed (Bradbear, 2009). The decision on where to extract the substance from is a complex and interesting process and takes place through communication and recruitment and a constant decision-making process regarding role-fulfilment as to efficiently make use of resources in order to meet ever-changing needs (Bradbear, 2009).

Furthermore, honey bees need to visit millions of flowers and travel a distance equal to six orbits around the earth to produce one kilogram of honey (Bradbear, 2009), while on the other hand 150 000 blossoms of the Crocus Sativa are used to produce one kilogram of saffron (Leffingwell, 2002). Honey is used as a healing product, soothing coughs or sore throats and is furthermore used as dressing for wounds and burns due to its antimicrobial properties (National Honey Board, 2005). Saffron is also used as a medicine and has been indicated to be effective in treating conditions like depression and dementia (Natural Standard, 2013). Just like honey soothes a sore throat to restore a voice, psychologists representing Unisa, presented...
on how they are giving young psychologists the opportunity to let their voices be heard through mechanisms such as the Southern African Students’ Psychology Conference and New Voices in Psychology and also how in the People behind the Papers project, they provide already published and experienced psychologists with an opportunity to tell the stories behind their scholarly articles. To me, it sounded like a lot of healing, as I firmly believe that the telling of stories contributes greatly towards healing (White & Epston, 1990). It was beautiful to witness and envision the research psychologist and the clinical psychologist, dancing together while creating contexts for learning, healing and growth. You may ask at this point: who is the honey and who is the saffron? Honestly, I don’t know. But to me that was kind of the point, to begin to think about dropping the distinction and the hierarchy.

I found it difficult to listen to presenters with heavy accents and I wondered if they could understand a word that we say. I found many of the presentations to be quite quantitatively-based and when I spoke about my qualitative research I got the idea that they wondered why I would consider my auto-ethnographic work to be scientific.

The highlight of my congress experience was the Wednesday night when we were wined and dined in style in the Stockholm City Hall, home of the Nobel prize ceremony. I also enjoyed myself immensely visiting Gamla Stan when I joined the lecturers from Unisa for an evening of strolling through the streets, eating fantastic ice-cream and drinking red wine in a jazz club.

The other tantalising thing about the honey and saffron combination is that the flavour lingers in your senses long after the actual experience is done. And such was the ECP2013 experience, it lingers in my senses, even still.

All pictures by Sasja van der Merwe
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Sasja van der Merwe is currently completing her internship in Clinical Psychology at Sterkfontein Psychiatric Hospital. She has a special interest in the self of the therapist, creative therapeutic methods, forensic psychology and qualitative research.

REFERENCES


