

# TIME TO BREATHE

## EAY Secretary General's Report 2002

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It was one of the first real spring days. The sun was shining; nature seemed to have come out of a Mozart symphony, fresh and new. I could not be trapped at my desk any more, my legs started without any conscious impulses from my brain just to move my body away from the papers and the dictatorship of the computer and led me into the fresh air and I started running through the forest, alongside a river, up to the lake. Running, feeling the wind, the fresh air and the brilliant feeling of a new spring, I stopped to catch my breath, time to breathe.

I filled my lungs.

Do you know the smell of burnt grass? From a neighbour garden came the smell of burnt grass, and in a split of a second I was back to my childhood summers. My soul drifted away and my body relaxed, all my muscles at ease, my shoulders low, a smile starting to invade my face, eyes closed. All the good things of life came back to me and filled me all the way to the tips of my fingers. Safety, mildness, beauty.

It was one of those moments Pip would have called Kiss of life.

I had an encounter with myself, with my happy childhood. The smell of burnt grass gave it to me.

I was running down the small hill and along the beautiful lake. The smell of burnt summer grass was gone and my brain worked again, rationally, cool, analysing, trying to exploit that second of intense memory and use it for some purpose. I often go running when I am preparing another speech. I find it easier to discover ideas and new perspectives while my blood is pumping and sweat is streaming and my lungs are crying for more breath...The stillness of an office can often be too silent, too calm, too much detached from life itself.

What I discovered when I was running down that small hill, was that the memory of my childhood was much, much more than a memory. The smell of burnt grass was just the key to open up rooms inside me, rooms still existing, rooms full of safety and harmony and smiles and joy and excitement and curiosity.

Take a few seconds and try to find back to your childhood, find your rooms full of resources and energy, and try to find the summer within you!

That is where you will find new inspiration and motivation.

But listen! In my childhood was also fear, darkness, trolls in the evening. But it seems that happiness prevailed. Or is it so, that despite pain and suffering, there are rooms of summer within most of us?

Albert Camus: "In the middle of winter I at last discovered that there was in me an invincible summer" (The quote comes from the essay entitled "Return to Tipasa" in "The Summer" or "L'Ete"; Essays from 1939-53; Librairie Gallimard.)

I continued running along the lake. On a bench an old man was sitting enjoying the spring sun. He was a small man with white hair. I recognised him as the former chief of police in my hometown. He was an admirable man. I saw him in my church almost every Sunday. We started to talk and slowly the most amazing story I have ever come across was revealed.

This small, old man had been a true hero of war, back in the early forties.

1942-43. My country was occupied. Outside Trondheim in mid-Norway there was a big German concentration camp, especially for Russian and Yugoslavian prisoners of war. They were building the "Death-Road" towards the North. The young people from the Resistance Movement did a courageous secret action over months to help some of the prisoners to escape and then to lead them through the wilderness across the border to neutral Sweden. My friend, his name was Johan Wiig, was one of the young men from the Resistance Movement who was a guide through the wilderness.

He was captured by the Norwegian Nazis and put through heavy torture. As ugly irony of history the Nazis used the hotel of the Missionary Society in Trondheim as their centre for torture. He kept his silence through incredible pain. The leader of the Norwegian gang of Nazis was well known and feared for his cruelty. His name was Henry Rinnan.

During a transport the young resistance fighter was able to escape and got across the border to Sweden. There he was trained as a police officer. In 1945 he came back to his hometown and was given the responsibility to guard the Nazi-prisoners after the German occupation was ended in 1945.

He opened one of the cell-doors and there he found Henry Rinnan, the man who had tortured him in prison, the most hated nazi in the country. The prisoner with horror in his eyes saw the Angel of Revenge, Nemesis, opening his cell-door.

The story is incredible. The old freedom fighter told me how he had come to believe in Jesus Christ during the war, he said that he had been born again, and that when he met his old torturer, it had been possible for him to forgive the torturer. In the coming weeks and months he became the counsellor for the torturer, and he followed him all the way that day in October 1946 when he was executed for his crimes against humanity.

It made me humble to talk with my friend with the same name as myself. A small, old man with white hair. His eyes were giving away the summers within him; summers of reconciliation and forgiveness. His face was the face of a man who had lived a meaningful life, not a life in bitterness. And beauty is not only in young faces.

Running through the forest I come to an open space, green grass, some houses behind the trees. I lay down in the grass - time to breathe again, to rest, to enjoy the warm sun. Lying there I hear distant music from an open window:

*Song: I am fragile.....(Maria Mena)*

The girl singing is only 16. I used to live in the same neighbourhood as her. The most multi-ethnic part of Oslo. She is living at the other side of life, compared to my friend with white hair. She sings about being vulnerable, fragile, imperfect, and not always happy with herself - and still being free! I so much identify with her words. And I hear the summer within, the summer of hopes and joy and trust in life. And as I identify with her song and the two different thoughts - being hopeless and free at the same time, I remember from the Bible: Mark 10.15: "...I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Again this song takes me to the foundations of my life. As the smell of burning grass took me to my childhood summers, this young, thin voice of Maria Mena took me to the reason why I love the YMCA, the reason why I want to work here, more than I want to work in the church directly.

A life changing experience was to work with YMCA -Ten Sing in big cities in Europe, in England, Germany, Denmark, Switzerland. It was long before the Berlin wall fell and we could do the same behind the iron curtain...

With eyes wide open my heart received strong messages of life and hope and future perspectives through the trembling expressions of teenagers, shy and with low self esteem, in singing, dancing, acting. It was young people being given summer heat, safety, and a place to grow and prosper, not in wealth or financial richness, but in human experience and self esteem. They discovered that inside them were surprises. Inside them were gifts and skills and qualities, seeds that could develop and grow into huge trees and beautiful flowers.

I was a young theologian and I was there to preach to them, the Gospel of Jesus, not the gospel of the Church Culture Ltd.

And it was easy to preach to these young people. Because love and summer heat and feeling of recognition already had opened their minds and hearts. It was totally meaningful, teenagers listening to the Gospel. I think because the credibility was already established. What I talked about was the same as what the YMCA had practiced together with them.

*I am fragile, I am lonely, I am not perfect - but I am free! (Maria Mena)*

Time to breathe, time to consider the results of good work over years.

I want us to look at three dimensions of our YMCA:

- Our identity
- Our actions
- Our message

## 1. IDENTITY

I often envy Red Cross and Amnesty International and even the Church Aid-organisations. Their identity and profile is so easy to express, it is one goal, one mission and it must be easy to sell. And here we come, the YMCA, a beautiful, but strange song by Village People as our National Hymn, a wide variety of activities ranging from Ping Pong over Sky Scraper Five Stars Hotels to Prayer Groups and huge social institutions and even universities.

How can we sell this profile? Is there one profile at all?

I often struggle with this question, but my conclusion is always that to enforce a more narrow, clear-cut profile would kill the famous diversity of the YMCA. And I love that diversity, because it makes us relevant in so many different environments.

So let me take you on a dive into this diverse reality of our YMCA and help me, please, during this dive, to look for a pearl, to look for a way to express our identity and mission.

I see Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour, as the Paris Basis says. I am a theologian, but I need non-theologian terminology to walk and live with this man. The gospel is in the Bible, but every

new generation has to rediscover this gospel and find ways of expressing it in meaningful words. Let me try to paint a picture of my faith in Jesus. Take this picture and see if it reminds you of your own picture of your own faith. Maybe your picture looks so different. Then we can learn from one another.

My picture of Jesus Christ smells from burning summer grass. Why? Because that opens the doors to a heaven full of chocolate sandwiches, football, swimming, playing, a childhood of safety and harmony and endless nights of beautiful dreams.

The voice of Jesus Christ has a Swedish accent, I hear him talking to me when Jan Nissen is encouraging me to go ahead with a project in Litomysl, the voice of Jesus has a slight cockney-touch when David Pendle calls me about the Letna Park in Prague 2003, or a touch of Oxford English when Peter Posner discuss finances with me and we share a joke or two. Jesus has a strong Eastern European accent when he talks to me through my wonderful friend Michal Szymanczak and tells me that I am not that bad after all.

Do you understand me? The gospel is the summer within me, and this summer is growing and becoming stronger through my friends, when they share friendship with me.

When I make mistakes and sin, the gospel offers forgiveness. This is theology. How I experience it when I am crying over myself? That Jesus is taking me back to the summer inside me and tells me that his love for me is bigger than my weakness, and I can start smiling again.

I can hear my fellow theologians using another non-theological term, now about me: This is crap! Gospel as burning summer-grass, it sounds more like a vision of hell.

But:

The Gospel is dealing with body, mind and spirit, the totality, therefore it needs to smell of summer and often have a Swedish accent, in addition to the brain-stuff!

I have a mission in life. The YMCA has a mission. This is theological terminology. In my understanding this is how it is: Out of the warm summer of safety and harmony sounds the music, the Blue Music of creativity, spirituality, love and consideration, courage and braveness and unselfish friendship. This is my mission in life, and this is the mission of the YMCA.

This is the pearl that I found during my many years of diving into the blue sea of the YMCA: Identity is something given to us by Jesus. And it is experienced as a warm summer of love. You receive it as a child, or a teenager, and it makes you free, not perfect. Our mission is to give this summer of love and safety to children and youth, so that they can grow up to be harmonious personalities playing the Blue Music of reconciliation and unselfish friendship and share their summers within with new generations.

*Song: Summertime, when the livin' is easy. Summertime...*

This identity and understanding of mission leads us in two directions, namely Practical Action and Message, Prophetic Speech.

Will you then join me in a quick investigation into what we do in those two working fields?

## 2. PRACTICAL ACTION

I am basically more focused on the future than on the past. But a few of you told me last year

that your speech was OK, but we wanted a bit more of a traditional report. What did the EAY do last year? Of course our annual report is the Working Documents. But I will highlight some elements only, not all of it. Please see if you recognise the summer and the music!

In the ecumenical field we have got an agreement with the European Conference of Catholic Bishops and we are applying for associate membership in Conference of European Churches.

Catch the Vision this year has been postponed, but will take place in Jerusalem October 12-17 with the theme "Spiritual Roots for Reconciliation".

"YMCA Europe 2003" is taking shape and a lot of you here are already involved in different capacities. We have established a separate event-office in Prague, hired two new staff and we are making good progress. You will hear a lot more about this exciting event later on during our assembly.

In the field of Movement Development and leadership training the Balkan Peninsula has become the new priority and we have interesting developments in Macedonia and in Albania and we have two very successful Balkan regional conferences behind us. Please visit the sub-assembly focusing on the Balkan countries.

The other area of priority remains the countries of the former Soviet Union where we are working very hard to organise the second Russian Programme Festival in August this year.

We are in the middle of the 5th EAY Training the Trainers-Course, this time balanced in participation from West and East and 21 countries are represented.

A lot of work has been done to develop the EAY Training Centre and finalise the negotiations with the City of Litomyšl. The last weeks the Centre has been full of local school-classes visiting an exhibition of Christian humour.

As you will see in the report from the Auditors, the EAY is asked to guarantee for a part of the total cost of reconstruction of the building to demonstrate for the City authorities that we will be a long-term partner for them. The EAY Executive Committee has found the terms of the contract acceptable and we are now ready to sign it. At this time I will pay honour to Jana Vohralikova who has invested a lot of hard work in this project. Without you this would not have been realised at all. On behalf of all of us - Thank you!

The last thing I want to highlight is the wonderful progress with the idea of 15% EAY staff from National and Local YMCAs. Now we have 4 of those staff members, and very soon there may be more of them, and we are looking forward to the first woman to join this scheme! Thank you to YWCA-YMCA of Norway, YMCA of Armenia, Belfast YMCA and Geneva YMCA.

### 3. PROPHETIC ROLE

Then let us investigate the second field of responsibility, expressed in our EAY vision as our Prophetic Role. What do we say, what do we preach?

Normally I would have now talked about all the children and youth in all our countries who do not have the resources, the love and harmony, the pleasure and safety they need to grow up to become harmonious people. Our prophetic role of the YMCA is to speak out on behalf of all the children and youth with basic needs not being met. This is our responsibility and we shall continue to do so.

But this year there is another crisis, which touches us and makes it necessary to speak out. It is about the Palestinian children and youth who have nothing else inside them other than ice cold frosty winters. No summer heat, no playing and laughing, some of them have stopped talking at all. All they can feel is fear and pain.

Young people have lived under occupation so long that they have no future perspectives anymore. There is no summer waiting for them in their dreams any more. Violence, pain and hate are growing.

The General Assembly last year expressed solidarity with these suffering people and the violations of Human Rights in the ongoing conflict, especially for young people, whether Palestinian or Israeli, who are being denied peace, justice and security.

European YMCAs have done a number of projects in regard to this conflict. These have not been organised through EAY, but still there will be a sub-plenary on this issue where I am sure that you will get a good overview of the different actions and solidarity-projects.

As already mentioned The EAY has in co-operation with East Jerusalem YMCA planned a workshop for 50-60 European YMCA-leaders in Jerusalem. This is the second "Catch the Vision" workshop and the theme was planned to be: "Spiritual Roots for Reconciliation". Support was received from the European Youth Foundation. This event has been postponed to October this year.

Furthermore, the EAY Executive Committee discussed the situation in this crisis during the meeting in Madrid October last year and decided to appeal to all member movements to grant extraordinary financial support for the East Jerusalem YMCA because of the problems they were facing.

We supported the WAY Task Force for Middle East and sent Emile Stricker as European representative to this task force.

We have published the reports of the YMCA Observer to the Middle East on our website, and we have sent a letter to the National Movements to comment on the situation after the Israeli re-occupation of Palestinian territories and asked you to come prepared for debates on these issues during the assembly.

We have also invited East Jerusalem YMCA and Gaza YMCA to send representatives to this assembly, and we have included both a plenary session as well as a sub-plenary session for this crisis during our assembly.

Stephen from East Jerusalem YMCA is attending TTT (Training the Trainers) now.

This is what we have done to follow up on the resolution from last year.

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Our hearts are crying for the children who have stopped talking. Our hearts are crying for the youth who have no meaningful future perspective.

The prophetic role of the YMCA in this crisis is to speak out against violation of Human Rights and defend the rights of children and youth especially, wherever they are.

Today we are shocked by the violations of lives and rights of thousands of innocent civilians in the refugee camp Jenin and in other parts of the Palestinian Territories. This is not creating peace.

I quote from a recent letter to the Israeli Prime Minister from English YMCA and Y-Care International:

*“Offensive military action against an effectively captive civilian population cannot be justified, either by the actions of suicide bombers within Israel, or by the longer-term requirements of establishing peace and security. ”*

It must be allowed for the YMCA to speak out against the re-occupation of Palestinian territories and violence against civilians executed by the present Israeli Government. Even YMCA property has been destroyed. This violence must stop. There is no reasonable balance between the strength of the two sides. Our reactions therefore cannot be balanced.

But the prophetic role of the YMCA is also to keep at least two different thoughts inside our heads at the same time.

The first thought is this, and it is deeply felt and sharply formulated. The Palestinian people must be given freedom, dignity and justice.

The second thought is to say that we do not believe that violence will solve any conflict. That means that we always have to state also that we are against and do not accept, suicide bombs against Israeli civilians. This has to stop. Young Israelis have their right, as youth everywhere, to go to a disco without risking their lives.

And it is a terrible shame to see an increase in anti-Semitic actions in Europe. That has to stop. We have to stop it.

I know that some of you now sigh and think: Oh, what a typical weak statement, attacking both sides. To this I will say:

There has been a change in Europe, even inside the YMCA, on how we view this conflict. For Christian Europeans of my generation, it has taken us a long journey to see the suffering of the Palestinians, and to see it with our hearts. Now we do. And it was high time. But we do not help the Palestinian people by starting to forget about the needs of the Israelis.

The identity of the YMCA is rooted in Christianity and the Bible. This identity gives us the responsibility to speak out against evil, like the prophets of the Old Testament. It also gives us the responsibility to work for reconciliation as he who said: Love your enemies. This is especially true in times when almost nobody want to talk about this.

This conflict is now hitting the YMCA itself, because also here are two sides, one strongly connected with Israel, and the other strongly connected with Palestine.

Let us take the first steps ourselves to demonstrate both willingness for and skills to create peace amongst ourselves. Both sides I hear attack the other side for discrimination of the value of lives. But if we all agree as Christians, that all lives have the same value, it must be possible for us to talk that much with one another that we start to understand one another and can go together to participate in the pressure from the outside needed to force the peace negotiations to happen.

This pressure from the outside is essential and needs to be as unanimous as it can to reach its goal.

We need to keep two different thoughts in our heads at the same time in order to keep the perspective for the long-term future YMCA involvement in the region. We want to help to create reconciliation, peace with justice and dignity - one day in the future when war has

stopped. Let us continue, together, to reach out for the impossible!  
We work for peace - let us now walk the talk.

## CONCLUSION

What we have done now, has been to revisit our basic visions in the EAY.

*Inspired by its Christian ecumenical mission* we practice Christian values and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to fragile, vulnerable, trembling, living, loving and laughing children and youth all around Europe and outside.

*Moved by an open and creative spirit* we find thousands of ways to give children and youth the summer within so that the blue music can sound and healthy personalities can grow in body, mind and spirit.

*Actively involving young people* in our decision-making committees, in all the programme groups so that they can decide themselves on their lives and future.

*Prophetic role* demanding us to speak out in major issues touching young lives, this year we focus especially on Palestinian children and youth in their immense suffering.

*Uniting each other to realise the YMCA mission* - we dedicate ourselves to reach out to brothers and sisters of different opinions and find common ground so that we can walk hand in hand in the service for peace and reconciliation. And to give children and youth the summer within...

Johan Vilhelm Eltvik