

Matt Minahan's Daily Reports

OD Network Annual Conference 2002

Montreal, Canada

Date: Sun, 20 Oct 2002
From: Matt Minahan <matt@minahangroup.com>
Organization: The Minahan Group
Subject: Day 1 in Montreal

The clear crisp Canadian air and deep blue sky over Montreal yesterday framed the arrivals and reconnections with OD friends too long not seen. Jason Wolf, of our New Professional Learning Group and I rode the bus from the Montreal airport into downtown and had a wonderful chance to catch up and see the town.

Once here at the Fairmont Queen Elizabeth, a quick half hour in the lobby brought other good friends and colleagues, including Robin Reid, Amy Herman, Charlie and Edie Seashore, Bob Marshak, Matt Griffin, Pat Yankus, Maggie Hoyer, Bev Scott, Brenda Jones, John Parton (this year's program committee chair), Mila Baker and her husband Clarence, etc.

Three preconference workshops had already begun by Friday, including

- the NTL HI Lab intensive, staffed by Steve Jones, Judith Leibowitz, and David Glaser,
- Strengthening and Deepening Female Leadership, led by Rita Andrews, Rosemary Bova, Judith Noel, Carlotta Tyler, and Nancy Voss
- Creating Adaptive Systems that Work and Endure, with the wonderful Merrelyn Emery, and Lisa Kimball had already launched online the *pre-pre* conference with more than 100 people at www.groupjazz.com.

This morning's ink black night slowly yielded to clouds and a chilly rain outdoors today, but everything was cozy and warm, and buzzing with excitement indoors as another six sessions launched today (Saturday), including

- an AI session with Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten Bloom
- a one day session on the Gestalt approach to coaching
- a two day experiential session on Group Development theories that I am leading with Pearl Acquaah, Laurie Lemieux, and Jeff Brooke.
- a session on quantitative measures for all us of numerically challenged OD types
- Bob Marshak's session called Claiming Your Power as an OD Consultant
- the Graduate Student/New Professionals Forum with Brenda Jones.

Personally, I am relieved to presenting during these two days of pre-conferences, because I would find it almost impossible to select from among the incredible wealth of talent and good ideas that are offered here during the preconference intensives.

So, the gathering has begun. The preconference sessions are underway. It looks like we're off to a great start. Follow along with these messages, or just come to the conference. There's still time to decide and lots of time to participate. Hope to see you here!

Matt

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Date: Sun, 20 Oct 2002 23:35:25 -0400
From: Matt Minahan <matt@minahangroup.com>
Organization: The Minahan Group
Subject: Day 2 in Montreal

Several hundred new arrivals today . . . the pre-conference intensives wind down . . . and the gala opening of the OD Network Annual Conference this evening.

I don't have a lot of news about any of the pre-conference sessions, except our own, so I'll share a bit about that. My Johns Hopkins colleagues Pearl Acquah, Jeff Brooke, and Laurie Lemieux and I presented an experiential session for 25 participants on 4 group development theorists -- Wilfred Bion, Will Shutz (FIRO-B), Herb Shepard and Warren Bennis (Bennis and Shepard), and Alan Drexler and David Sibbet (Team Performance Model) for a half day each. What a great luxury to spend 3-4 hours in depth with 25 colleagues on each of the 4 theories!

We used the same basic structure for each theory: Participants engaged in a 25 minute simulation which we videotaped, we did a 20 minute summary of the theory, and then spent 2+ hours in viewing the videotape, in search of the evidence of the group development theory. Besides the sheer fun of working with hugely talented colleagues, and working with powerful models and theories, we had a BLAST with the simulations and seeing the theories in action, and the feedback from participants has been universally positive.

Peter Vaill arrived this evening, rolling up in his wheel chair, and was greeted by Kathie Dannemiller, who rolled up in her wheel chair. It was a great sight to see these scions of our field, both looking well and fit, sitting knee to knee in their respective wheelchairs! This is Peter's first conference since his serious viral illness last fall, and it was GREAT to see him. (Immodestly, I'll brag a bit. I've been convening the Men in OD Session for most of the past 10 years now, and when Peter and I first embraced this evening, his first

question to me was, "What time do the Men in OD meet tomorrow? Our Men session in New Orleans was the best session I've ever been to! We stayed for hours after it was finished; we just couldn't leave!")

Denny Gallagher launched our Dick Beckhard Memorial Mentoring session this evening, with almost 200 hundred mentors and mentees being matched and getting to know each other; Denny will close this year's mentoring program at breakfast on Wed. Shortly thereafter, the annual membership meeting of the OD Network took place this evening. OD Network membership stands at just over 3,800, and there are several new initiatives that the Board and staff are working on. One of the most hotly contested was the new election process, which this year resulted in a slate of candidates prepared by the board, generating just 3 candidates for 3 vacancies. The board committed to review its process and to communicate about it more fully in the future.

Tonight's gala opening -- hosted by our Montreal host committee -- was graced with jugglers and street artists and stilts walkers and strolling musicians and bubble blowers. They floated throughout the huge ballroom, a very entertaining but non-obtrusive presence during the whole gala opening.

So, the conference is officially open, and we're off to a great start! We hope to see you here, and, if we can't, just know that it's great fun to see all these great people all in one place.

Matt

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Date: Mon, 21 Oct 2002 22:43:57 -0400
From: Matt Minahan <matt@minahangroup.com>
Subject: Day 3 in Montreal

On my way to bed last night, I was on an elevator full of New Professionals -- including Jason Wolfe and Matt Griffin (our odnet-nplg listservants) -- all of whom were running up to their rooms to get coats to go out and play in the snow showers that we had here in Montreal around 10:00 last night! Ah, the joys of youth! They went out to play in the snow -- I went to bed!

This morning was the first plenary of the conference -- network awards and Fritjof Capra.

Our MC for the plenary events so far has been Jonathan Ross, whom I've seen at conferences for several years but never spent any time with. Well, his handing of the 500-600 people in these plenaries has been a lesson in patience, wit, and inspiration! He led us in a wonderful connections ice breaker this morning, asking us to form physical connections with people in the room that we knew, so we were up and all over the room, in what felt a bit like a giant game of Twister!

Then the awards. Edie Seashore and Barbara Bunker provided a brief, and wonderful précis of Peter Vaill's contributions to NTL and ODN, and then presented him the Life Time Achievement award for the network, citing his "permanent white water" as a metaphor that has made a lasting change in our field. Peter reminisced a bit about, and remembered his favorite ODN session, in 1987, at which he and the participants brought poetry and wrote some of their own. Sitting erect in his wheelchair, with confidence and conviction, he then recited from memory a deeply touching poem, and received a standing ovation from everyone in the room.

Warren Hoffman, our selfless and tireless ODN Webmaster, presented two Service to the Network awards, the first, richly deserved, to The Meta Network -- Frank Burns, Lisa Kimball, and Scott Burns. They hosted our email discussion lists and our Caucus online conferences for years, charging us nothing for their time, the bandwidth, or their server costs, and continue to be integral partners in supporting the OD Network's virtual work. Lisa accepted the award on behalf of Frank and Scott, and reminded us that the 20th anniversary of The Meta Network is coming up this spring, and encouraged us to work, along with them, to close the gap between the human condition and human potential.

The other recipient was your humble scribe here, who babbled a few words about networks and nodes and creating channels between the nodes that hopefully become places where people come out and play -- in the spaces between the nodes of the network. (It's amazing how inarticulate a person can be at just the moment they want to be just the opposite!)

Then, the opening keynote speaker -- and what a great way to kick off the conference of a Network organization -- with Fritjof Capra, who spoke about the organizations as networks, drawing deep parallels between living organisms and human systems in organizations. It was a wonderful connection of complexity theory to our own body of knowledge around human systems and change. He also referred several times to his roots as an environmental activist, and encouraged us to work to design socially and environmentally sustainable organizations. His book, *The Hidden Connections: A Science for Sustainable Living*, has been a best seller all day at the conference book table, and it's great to see so many copies tucked under the arms of people roaming the halls here.

There were about 15 concurrent sessions in the afternoon, followed by affinity group meetings -- we had yet another deep and intensely satisfying meeting of the Men in OD -- in addition to the New Professionals, and gODparents, and global forum, and GLBTs, and Latino/Latinas.

And finally this evening, Kathie Dannemiller convened a world-class panel -- including Sandra Janoff, Diane Whitney, Dick and Emily Axelrod, Steve Cady, Peggy Holman, Barbara Bunker, and Billie Alban -- called *Taking Whole Systems to the Next Level: The Pioneers Learn from Each Other*.

Whew, what a long day. What a great day! I'm zonked.

Matt

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Date: Wed, 23 Oct 2002 00:37:16 -0400
From: Matt Minahan <matt@minahangroup.com>
Subject: Day 4 in Montreal

A *glorious* sunrise, a wonderfully exhausting day, and great fun at the gala. That pretty much describes today here in Montreal.

There was no accumulation from the snow showers we had a few nights ago, and temps here have been between 5 and 10 . . . (that's Celsius!) or about 40 to 50 F.

After a couple of cloudy mornings, this morning's sunrise was remarkable for its mix of clouds and clear, and the half hour parade of color -- from glimmers of yellow to bands of orange, to sudden red, and then quickly back through orange to yellow to dawn. What a wonderful gift from Mother Nature for such a blessed day!

Le Mun Wah was this morning's keynoter, and it was a wonderful, and emotionally exhausting 3 hours. He is a Chinese-American community therapist, documentary film maker, performing poet, and educator, who has been working on the dynamics of unlearning racism. He began with a stunning story about how he had been forced to leave his seat in an exit row of an airplane -- in an apparent act of racism that was not duplicated with anyone else on the plane -- by an overbearing flight steward. He said it happened to him 3 days ago. It was quite powerful.

He then asked for 12 volunteers for an activity "that will be painless." 15 of us, including your humble scribe, formed two groups, balanced for gender and racial diversity. He asked two additional volunteers to leave the room, during which time he told us that, "using everything just short of physical violence," we were to refuse to allow these two volunteers to join our two circles. It took about 10 seconds for our group to decide we would not -- no, we could not -- do that, and decided that we would welcome the newcomer, and we did. The other group took their instructions more literally, and struggled for more than a minute to refuse eye contact and admission to their newcomer. After only 60 seconds -- that seemed like several long minutes -- he came and joined our group.

And then we spent almost 2 hours hearing from each individual in both groups about our choices, and why we made them. Proud of our decision not to exclude our newcomer, our group was stunned to find out that one of our members, Cheryl Wesley, an African American woman, had initially said she didn't want to exclude the newcomer, but that no one responded to her and no one noticed her, but that when a white man, Charlie Seashore made the suggestion, everyone listened. Boy that did that give us lots to work on! The second group, which accepted the task and excluded their newcomer, had lots to work on, too. Barbara Bunker said later, only half-joking, "We've finally discovered the large scale T group." It was wonderful, and I felt like a used dish rag when it was over.

This afternoon we had another 15 concurrent sessions, and the First Annual Student Paper Competition, for which 15 papers were submitted from 8 schools, on the topic "The role that OD can play in making the world a better place." Three finalists were selected by the committee of Brenda Jones, Geoff Bellman, and Frank Friedlander, and the finalist will be announced in Wednesday morning's plenary.

Le Mun Wah late this afternoon premiered his new film, Last Chance for Eden, a documentary filmed with 9 racially diverse women and men who gathered over two weekends to talk about racism and sexism. Those who were there -- your scribe was still recovering from the morning and chose to nap -- said it was a very powerful session.

Finally, at the end of the long busy day, a gala with great Canadian food -- I had caribou for the first time -- and wonderful desserts. The dancing started around 8, and was still going on as I left about 20 minutes ago at 12:15. There's something very cathartic in dancing and sweating and drinking and yelling and singing loud and just being physical after a week of intellectual stimulation like we've had at this conference. We'll all be zonked tomorrow, but we'll worry about that then. Tomorrow's closing keynote is Meg Wheatley. More on that tomorrow -- or maybe I should say, later today!

Meanwhile, there are two bits to followup from previous days' messages: Several of you have asked what poem Peter Vaill recited in receiving his lifetime achievement award on Monday. It was "A Ritual to Read to One Another" by William Stafford. And, following next is some followup information from Carlotta Tyler about the Strengthening and Deepening Female Leadership preconference intensive from this past weekend:

Strengthening and Deepening Female Leadership was a profound experience for those who attended. "This was like spending two days at a spiritual spa", said one participant. Presented by Rita Andrews, Rosemary Bova, Carlotta Tyler and Nan Voss, and co-designed by Judith Noel, the two day experiential intensive saw 29 women bond quickly and dive deeply to explore new lenses for looking at what women bring to work and life out of childhood and how that influences what they experience as adults. Most exciting was introduction of the universal female lens of Mother, Sister and Daughter, researched by the presenters in a nine year living lab, the Women's Leadership Collaborative, which studies the dynamics of the all female group. This and other female-relevant models were compared with participants experiences of the ways in which they relate to and are seen by other women and men at work. "I was on the fence coming to this, but it was the best thing I've done for myself all year" said another participant. The design group is excited to offer the session as a week-long seminar, as suggested by women who attended.

Contributed by Carlotta Tyler.

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Date: Wed, 23 Oct 2002 23:13:40 -0400
From: Matt Minahan <matt@minahangroup.com> >

Subject: Closing Plenary in Montreal

There's something welcome, and yet disappointing, about a conference closing.

On the one hand, it's a welcome relief from the pace and intensity of living in close proximity with 700 other souls for 5 days -- particularly for people with a preference for introversion. Enough of all of these people, already!

But it's also the end of a community of practitioners and believers and people of like mind and heart which we ourselves have constructed, gathered around the hearth of our field, to sit knee to knee and elbow to elbow and cheek to cheek to look into our selves and each other and our field and the world reflected in the glow of this hearth fire that we create for 5 days.

Both are up for me right now, especially with what Meg Wheatley spoke with us about -- details to follow.

And then, there's the conference cold. I was sitting in the closing plenary, coughing and honking and snorting and blowing, along with about 200 other people, who also seem to have shared our germs during the conference . . . ah, the benefits of human contact! More on that, too, in a moment.

But first, the closing plenary began with the announcement of the three finalists in the First Annual OD Network Student Paper competition. They were D. Kirk Hamilton from Pepperdine, Sara L. Orem from Fielding, and, the author of the best paper, Debra Orr-Alfeo from Benedictine, whose paper was "Enhancing Organizations through the Use of Aesthetic Practice."

Meg Wheatley was nothing short of inspirational. Her message -- at its core -- was that we, in our field, need to be keepers of human wisdom and to sustain and develop the social fabric of human kind. She said that globalism has "won" around the world, bring the values of individualism, speed, and greed. (She noted, by contrast, the African folk song, "Oh God, please don't make me an individual.")

She said that we should no longer be facilitators, or change agents, or knowledge managers, or OE consultants. Instead, we should be keepers of the wisdom about what it means to be human, and challenged us to consider that, if we don't, who would?

We were sitting at 8 person round tables, and Meg asked us, "What do you need to do to claim your authority to speak the truth that you know to be true?" She then guided us in using the World Cafe methodology (<http://www.theworldcafe.com>) to circulate among tables and carry each conversation farther and farther into the room. Meg referred us to her institute's web site, <http://www.berkana.org> for more details and some of her other writings. Several people with whom I spoke were deeply moved by the conversation, and it left us with a huge challenge as a field, and as individuals. As someone in the plenary said, "We need to move from reflection into action!"

After the standing ovation, she and hundreds of people lingered in the room, continuing the conversation, saying goodbye, and sharing the last germs of the official conference cold.

After lunch, we began our first-ever post conference sessions, including the Dialogue on the Color of Fear, Future Search in Large Diverse Groups, Creating High Performance Cultures through Coaching, and Managing Complexity through the Whole Scale Approach.

I'll add a few lines about that tomorrow.

Meanwhile, I'm officially fried: exhilarated from all of the people contact, exhausted from late nights and busy days, emotionally raw from the intense work we've been doing with Le Mun Wah, challenged and hopeful based on Meg's talk, and desperately missing my children and wife, worried about their safety back in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Finally tonight, John Dowd found on the internet and sent me the words to the poem that Peter Vaill recited on Monday morning:

A Ritual to Read to One Another

by William Stafford

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dyke.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give yes or no, or maybe

should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

XXX

Date: Thu, 24 Oct 2002 21:26:21 -0400
From: Matt Minahan <matt@minahangroup.com>
Subject: Goodbye, Queenie!

Those who know well the Queen Elizabeth hotel in Montreal call her the Queen E – which has apparently been adapted by the local French speakers to Queenie! -- and we had a semi-sweet parting of company today.

She has been such a wonderful and warm and hospitable home to our OD Network community -- serving as the container for the metaphoric hearth around which we've huddled at this conference. More on the goodbyes in a moment, but first . . .

It was a strange three hours on Wednesday, between the vast departures of hundreds of people at the end of Meg Wheatley's closing plenary at 11:00, and the reconvening of 5 post conference sessions and the board meeting. By 2:00, we had shrunk from 700 to less about 200. The exhibitors and vendors had packed up. The community room, massage area, popcorn machine and message board were gone, and there were other people meeting in very spaces that had held, contained, witnessed so much that was meaningful and true. It was a bit like hanging around after the party, maybe to do the dishes and help the hosts -- full of strong and wonderful feelings, tired but happy, and already missing all of the liveliness that had been going on in the space just hours ago.

The closing of our Color of Fear post conference intensive was very powerful. We spent almost an hour (of 3) in checking in, and revisiting the feelings that had come up yesterday. Then we watched a short video of a confrontation within a racially mixed group, after which Mun Wah and Roberto Almanzan asked us to identify our feelings and reactions. We then paired with another person with whom we developed a couple of sentences for an intervention that we might make in that video, two pairs role played their proposed intervention, and Mun Wah and Roberto gave feedback and suggestions to the role players on everything from distance, pace, word choice, and tone of voice. It was extremely educational, and sparked a wonderful dialogue that lasted long past the allotted time.

Mun Wah's company, Stir Fry Productions (www.stirfryseminars.com), has over 35 training courses for trainers and facilitators and just plain folks who are interested in working the issues of diversity -- either gender or racial -- in their lives. I highly recommend them!

And then a final goodbye to the Queenie. The Montreal underground connects about 4 square blocks under the hotel, and then one floor down are the trains that connect through

to other parts of Montreal -- rather like a organ of the body, through which thousands of people an hour collect and connect, do their business, serve the greater good, and then leave. For me, it was a last sandwich in market, a quick stroll through the shops, a last look at the train platform, and then onto the airport bus.

For this kind of event to happen, a few people need to do a lot of things. This year's conference planning committee deserves a huge round of applause for designing an event in which almost 700 real people met came together and accomplished the feat of being human beings together, everything from selecting a theme, deciding on keynoters, selecting presenters, coordinating with the local planning committee. As a member of the planning committee for next year's conference in Portland, it feels like the bar has been raised significantly, and that we'll have very, very large shoes to fill! Please join with me in acknowledging Carlos Aguilera, Barry Cross, Janet D. Fiero, Naomi Kahane who was the liaison with the local planning committee, John Parton who was the committee chair, Kristine Quade, Robin Reid, Jonathan Ross, and Jane Weiss.

The Board doesn't play a big role -- as a board -- in our conferences, other than conduct the annual member's meeting. However it was great to have them present throughout, and particularly good to have them engaged in intensives and sessions and available to speak and meet with them the throughout the conference. Thanks to Mila Baker, John Carter, Elena Feliz, Brenda Jones, Larry Marquit, John McCall, Chrissa Merron, Arnold Minors, Robin Reid, Bev Scott, and Jason Wolf.

The OD Network staff was on hand in force, including Kathie O'Brien who has been the sweet and welcoming face at our registration desk for the past several conferences, Mirlande Parker, Beverly Burton and Linda Isons, who have helped with logistics and registrations and everything else that's needed to be done, Maggie Hoyer our Associate Executive Director (who had 600 people attend her birthday party -- and the conference opening plenary -- on Sunday night), Pat Yankus, our conference coordinator, who manages the impossible task of making 6,000,000 details happen flawlessly and saying no sweetly and firmly without ruffling the egos of our primadonna presenters -- myself included!, and Amy Herman, our Executive Director who was in all the right places at just the right moments, saying all the right things, to all the right people, and still found time to discover and refer to about half a dozen of us to a leather goods store in the underground with great deals and a sale on coats and pants. (Thanks for the tip, Amy, my coat already feels wonderful!)

Meanwhile, wish your Portland Planning Committee good luck between now and next year, and put October 10-16th, 2003 on your calendars, and we'll see you there!

Matt