

Freeing the caged consciousness – Liberation in neoliberal times

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Those who are acquainted with my organisation, “Motief”, know that we love stories. Stories that reveal something of what usually remains hidden in everyday life. Stories that help to find the way, like a small trail of breadcrumbs, when seeking justice. Stories that keep you alert and warm, when the exodus appears to take longer than expected. We have them in all forms and in a variety of sizes: prophecies, parables, poems and metaphors.

“Freeing the caged consciousness - Liberation in neoliberal times” is the title of this essay.

Even now I can see you thinking: “How on earth am I going to cope with this monstrous title? Who has concocted it?” I plead guilty...

A weighty title like this begs for a story. That’s why I have a parable for you. It runs as follows:

“Living in neoliberal times is like unto a woman who ended up with a rash each time she had been in the local swimming pool. The itching was unbearable and she worried about the scars, caused by her scratching. She consulted a doctor who prescribed some ointment, to be applied before and after swimming. The itching disappeared instantly, but after some more swimming, the woman started with a different problem. This time, she suffered from serious bouts of asthma. The doctor prescribed an inhaler, to be used before, after and - if necessary - during swimming. The bouts of asthma diminished. But one day, the woman noticed signs of paralysis when swimming: her arms became as heavy as lead, her feet refused to go on paddling. And while she was slowly sinking she noticed the legs of the other swimmers, passing in slow motion above her. They were all fiercely red and chafed. When she reached the bottom of the swimming pool, as she was becoming light-headed because of the lack of oxygen, she saw a rescuer approaching. He was carrying a notice board. And just before everything turned black, the woman could make out what it said. It read: “If you are here, there’s something wrong with your swimming skills”. And underneath that, in tiny print: “The operators of this pool cannot be held responsible for any accidents or injuries.”

Using this story, I’ll try to make my way through the weighty theme on hand. And I’ll do this in 7 steps:

1. Reality: when it itches... should you scratch?
2. Neoliberal logic: an ointment for every type of itch?
3. The patients: who is feeling the itch?
4. The cure: apply ointment or stop swimming?
5. Almost forgotten: the diagnosis!
6. The cure (second attempt): you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours

7. How can we cope with the itch in the long run?

1. Reality: when it itches... should you scratch?

Let's start our analysis in everyday reality. Being a socio-cultural, educational organization, specialising in "ideology and society", we come across everyday reality from various angles... during our workshops, we hear stories from individual searchers... and during our executive seminars, we hear stories from professionals on the ground, through the discussion of actual cases.

I start with a fragment of everyday reality that emerged during one of our courses. The central question in that course was: 'What alienates us from ourselves and each other?'

A young mother of two talks about the devastating pressure of work under which her husband is groaning under until recently. He works for a major bank. And she goes on to say how this had almost lead him into depression.

The adverse situation has slowly been resolved as his employer has assigned him to a different post, (albeit a lower position than previously). The outcome is that the man now earns less, but feels better.

The only problem now is, that the repayment of their mortgage is a problem.

A solution for this still has to be found. When asked if 'moving to a smaller house' could offer a way out, they offer a lot of resistance. The wife's answer was: "After all, this has to do with our children. They have a right to their own bedroom, and a garden to play in. Or do we have to deny them all sorts of things..? In a short time, they won't belong a school any more."

That's just one example of how 'irritation' grows. Let's bear the itching for a while.

Another example. During our executive seminars, we get a lot of questions about 'learning to cope with religious and ethnic-cultural diversity". It's a common question, raised in all sectors, but nowadays we get questions especially from the service industry sector: from social workers to juvenile workers, from educators to social workers and nurses, ... everywhere people seem to find themselves in difficulties when they have to deal with the increasing diversity in our society. What strikes us time and time again during these executive seminars when discussing cases, is that it is not so much the diversity of the clients which confronts the professionals with insuperable dilemmas, as the work setting, or working context, in which they find themselves. This work setting is typified in all those various sectors in the same way. It's a question of:

- various rules and procedures that have to be complied with to enhance efficiency through a fixed series of 'professional interventions', while applying a 'professional distance' towards the client.
- a far-reaching division within the work process, which causes workers to lose touch with the person

who sits in front of them and with that person's context. And consequently both the purpose and the sense of the worker's own action is lost. Professionals feel themselves to be a tiny wheel in an enormous machine.

- bureaucracy is exploding: 'The numbers tell the tale!' is the motto. Being accountable to the managing director or to the private or governmental funding body, takes on absurd proportions. The result is, professionals who can't see the client any more because of the piles of paperwork which means they barely have any room for human contact.
- young managers, freshly graduated from university, reorganize working patterns in an incomprehensible way. While experienced workers have no say in the management of the working patterns.
- a startling lack of consideration and ethical reflection concerning the reasons behind and the aim of professional task/assignment.

In short : in the working patterns and contexts of all these professionals, we see a business like development in a sector pre-eminently concerned with people. The effect of these new patterns of working on the employees can easily be guessed: a cocktail of stress and alienation, demotivation, vague frustration, mutual competition, psychological breathlessness, burn- out.

In this frustrating context, the problem – let's say the 'itch' – is labelled as excessive diversity. Of course, in a monoculture of efficiency, there is indeed no room for diversity. But it's not only diversity that causes the itching. Also staff shortages create itch-tendencies. Increased work pressure comes at times when we constantly receive the message that we'll have to work longer with retirement retreating further into the future. The itching is everywhere and it is not even clear where we ought to scratch.

It is understood that people have a very short span of attention, so I anticipated on that by including a commercial break: (short video: feel good at work; how to cope with stress... answer: talking about it helps → www.Voeljegedophetwerk.be)

As 'talking' reportedly can help, I will go on talking for a while...

The tendency to promote a more business-like atmosphere is not new; it has come over from the profit sector to the not profit scene, through a managerial culture that has been delivering 'surplus value' for the former. The word goes that it's about time we started 'professionalizing' in the charitable (soft) sector, that we devise 5-year plans with strategic and operational goals and the actions involved - everything should of course be expressed 'SMART'-ly.

SMART is short for Specific, Measurable, Acceptable, Realistic and Time –bound. Because 'the numbers tell the tale', remember? Naturally it needs a bit of translating for use in the 'charitable' sector, but it is not

impossible.

For instance: In order to measure the effectiveness of your service, you must first and foremost present your services as products. In order to then assess human relations – the relationship to your client for instance – you shouldn't think of people but of 'consumers'. And finally to weigh the surplus value of your actions, you shouldn't look at the impact they have on your target group, but you must focus on the number of consumers buying your products.

You organize a needs-inquiry among the stakeholders (the 'interested parties') and you attune your service to it. Supply and demand. Simple.

I'll get back to this later. Let's first take a better look at the itch.

2. Neoliberal logics: for every itch an ointment.

These days, psychoanalyst Paul Verhaeghe offers an impressive damning analysis of present Western society. In his last book 'Identity' he analyses how we – influenced by the neoliberal meritocracy – try to construct a uniform identity, by which we are able to keep up the appearance of being accomplished and successful, 'in control', multifunctional, flexible and stress proof, permanently developing, managing ourselves, balanced and above all: happy. Those who can't succeed to match up with this ideal picture, are losers and drop-outs, but they have only themselves to blame.

Paul Verhaeghe phrases it as follows: in this era of the 'constructable' human beings, the majority feels more than ever responsible for their own failure. Research of social scientist Piet Bracke confirms this: there are far more depressions than there used to be, the people involved experience their depression as a personal failure. In the case of fear disorders there are two major afflictions: fear of failure and social fear, understood as a fear of others, who are either judges or competitors or both at the same time.

Failing is represented as an individual problem, and this is disconnected from the social context.

However our striving for the ideal image of 'winner' has not come out of the blue. The norms and values that are dominant in our society originated in a particular context, they have grown in a very real material reality. One might say that every model of society creates its own ideology in order to be able to justify why things develop the way they do.

An obstinate capitalist society, based on unlimited economic growth, competition, efficiency and profit-making ... needs citizens who are prepared to participate in unlimited growth, who focus on achievement, who look upon every other creature as a competitor, citizens who are prepared to shape themselves into efficient machines, but who send out the calmness of a zen monk at the same time, while leaving the 'losers' behind - without any scruples.

Let's listen to Paul Verhaeghe for a moment:

www.youtube.com/watch?.....

In his previous book 'The end of psychotherapy' P.Verhaeghe described how neoliberalism has fundamentally re-modelled his own profession. When everything gets 'commodified', when everything is treated as a product that can be marketed in order to yield profits, even people themselves ('human capital'), even human relationships, even our emotional life; when everything can be turned into commodity (merchandise), than you get the effect that social workers no longer need to support their clients in the process of seeking autonomy, mental well-being and real freedom of action.

The task of social workers in this neoliberal context can be limited to tracking dysfunctional or deviant behaviour. The symptoms need to be defined in terms of 'disorders' or 'ailments' in order to proceed to eliminate the symptoms with medication. For example: a lack of concentration and excessive undirected activity will be defined as ADHD. We 'll solve the problem by prescribing a medicine called 'Ritalin. Diagnosing is unnecessary and even counter-productive, because searching for the cause of these 'disorders' would be time-consuming, would enhance the costs and would probably demand structural social changes. All of which are undesirable when 'time is money' and when our economic model mustn't be fundamentally questioned.

The result is that mental health care focuses less and less on finding a cure and focuses more and more often on reshaping the individual into patterns of (economically) desirable behaviour, or in other words: fitting into the system, integration.

Fundamentally it revolves on people having a "mentally stable" disposition alongside physical health in order to keep running in the rat race, in a flexible and efficient way.

In other words: a circular movement is in operation. The neoliberal society creates its own disorders (concentration disorders, eating disorders, depression, ..).These disorders are individualized (taken out of their social context); the solution is sought in fighting the symptoms, and a complete industry is built around it. For every itch an ointment.

3. The patients (lower class and middle class): who feels the itch?

In spite of all the ointments, you don't need to be a doctor in order to realize that, without a diagnosis, the itch will keep manifesting itself in new diseases. That's clear. And people eventually experience an irritation for which we don't have an adequate medicine. And it is obviously not an exceptional case; it exists within broad strata of the population.

Perhaps there is not so much something wrong with yours and my skin. Could the cause of the itch maybe lie in the composition of the *water* in which we swim?

As I was saying earlier: the amount of marketing and rationalizing which we experience today, is neither new evolution, nor is it restricted to the domain of Paul Verhaeghe's profession. He himself describes how he has not only recognized this alarming evolution in the complete medical sector, but just as much in

education, the academic world, in welfare and cultural sections.

Twelve years ago, Roger Jacobs and Jef Van Doorslaer already noticed the same tendencies in what we call in Belgium 'institutes for basic education'. These two educational workers have supported for many years low-skilled people who seek to consolidate their position in society. They focused on developing essential basic skills: linguistic skills naturally, but also political consciousness and insight into how to people can organize themselves in order to better stand up for their interests. In other words: they organized emancipatory life-long learning.

In their book "The pumphouse of the 21st century", Jacobs and Van Doorslaer described how their emancipatory aims got boycotted more and more during the nineties by the "Third Way" (the political position that tries to reconcile right-wing and left-wing policies) and "the Active Welfare state".

Tony Blair and Gerard Schröder introduced this Third Way-thought in Europe in the late nineties. They drew up the basic plans for a 'new kind of economics' in which competition, liberalization, education, and training would be the leitmotiv and in which a lot of attention would be paid to cultivating these ideas, and spreading the ethics of the free market.

This new economy had to become a compromise between the pure liberalism of Reagan and Thatcher and the welfare state of the social democrats.

If you consult the objectives of the manifesto that Blair and Schröder wrote on this subject, you will read that, in reality, the issue at stake was a total reform of our society into a radical free market society and, moreover, in such a way that citizens would come to believe that the accompanying demolition of our social welfare state was not only inevitable but in everybody's interest.

The results of this 'new European way' were first noticed in the setup of 'basic education'. The authors of "The pumphouse..." described how they were more and more engaged in 'disciplining' and 'activating' people; they noticed how basic education was used as an instrument to deliver 'system skilled people' with the indispensable skills to be traded to employers on the labour market in a flexible and loyal way. And those who can't manage to fit into the labour market after all the efforts of the government, shouldn't complain but rather cry mea culpa.

Lifelong learning is no longer focussing on the awakening of consciousness, on analyzing the given reality, on acquiring insight in order to bring about changes into this reality. No, lifelong learning in an active welfare state focusses on adapting to the existing order and on functioning optimally in it.

It's interesting to see how this 12-year old analysis only now finds response in today's society- now that a psychotherapist cries wolf. Now, not only the educational workers who work mainly with 'marginalized' groups. The 'itch' has reached the middle classes. And individual assistance has now also been called upon in order to help 're-activate': middle class people begin to drop out too, they can't keep their heads above water anymore. For them also it's become 'sink or swim'.

Everyone gets equal opportunities. You are responsible for your own failure or success. So, take good care of yourself.

More about this subject, after this commercial break!

(We look at 2 TV-commercials:

- 1. Your skin should be hydrated 7 days out of 7. "Garnier: take good care of yourself."*
- 2. Save your family practical and financial worries. Arrange your own funeral."*

"Delta funerals: that's the way to take care of each other.)

So... where were we. I'll try to summarize.

Treatment: Rubbing with ointment or stop swimming?

The operators' swimming pool is not responsible. There are no rescuers. Swimmers who are drowning urgently need to reflect on their swimming techniques.

That is what is impressed upon us in the neoliberal story. It is stated thus: "social security is slowly getting unaffordable. We will all have to work longer. We will all have to speed up. Consequently: don't burden society by your illness or unemployment: save up for your own pension. Always remain young. And if you can't manage that, then at least arrange your own funeral."

In this atmosphere 'change' has almost become inconceivable. There seem to be no other options, besides swimming. Surely the first article of faith in 'neoliberalism' is: "There is no alternative" (dixit Thatcher).

If we believe in this article of faith, then we can indeed only choose between: sinking or swimming. The situation today is such that a large section of the population has accepted this dogma. Full stop.

And this group of people needs all its energy to keep themselves afloat.

It's reality that can't be ignored. So let's have a look at its precise meaning.

As stories can sometimes help to look at our own reality from a different angle, I invite you to listen to such a story.

This story is told in the Matrix, a 15-year old American cult movie by now, the first part of a science fiction trilogy in which our future world is depicted as a destroyed planet, dominated by artificial intelligence.

Machines are using the earth to breed human batteries. So, humans serve as renewable sources of energy for those machines. The machines are using a computer program, called 'The Matrix', In order to keep people ignorant and under control, unaware of the repression they are under.

This program is a computerized simulation of what the world was like in 1999, just before the planet was destroyed. It's a chimera, an illusion of a world, in which the actual system remains invisible. Instead a dream world is projected in the heads of people, in which a private house, a garden, a nice car, are the ultimate goals. A world in which people work, eat, buy and invest and everything seems 'normal'.

The story now runs as follows: a group of rebels, find a system default in the computer program and use it to escape from the Matrix into the real world. These rebels regard it as their task to liberate the others

from their fate as human batteries. As soon as people are made aware of the sham world in which they live, they get the choice between a red and a blue pill: when they choose the red pill, they are roused from their make-believe world and they are only left with the option to take part in the battle against the machines. When they choose the blue pill, their memories are deleted and they return to the peaceful make-believe world of the Matrix and thus they succumb to their existence as human batteries.

It's an interesting question which confronts us in *The Matrix*: which choice do we make? Would we take the red pill and would we take up the fight with the often invisible enemy or would we rather choose rest and ignorance, so the blue pill.

The choice of the red pill is a difficult one. It means: waking up from misleading appearances, facing the harsh reality of a destroyed planet and an exploited human race, and flee no longer.

It takes a lifelong commitment to struggle every day with an apparently invincible enemy. It is chasing the dream of liberation - probably not even for yourself but, at best, for future generations. However, awakening of consciousness does not lead to liberation automatically and by definition, as the movie shows. On the contrary, the process of awakening consciousness, initially *increases* the suffering: you are faced with the harsh reality in which you find yourself, and you are burdened with the notion that an escape means an immense, almost impossible, assignment that will demand a great number of sacrifices. The certainty of loss will be weighed against the uncertainty of the gain (benefit?) – and when making this choice, the heavy certainties will often outweigh all the rest. Real emancipation will only get a chance if people are up to the reality of growing consciousness in the long run, and, eventually, manage to really master their own world again. Just how difficult this is, is illustrated in the movie in a scene in which one of the liberated rebels gives up the exhausting battle with the machines in order to be submerged again in the lovely dream world of *The Matrix*.

Let's watch this particular scene from *The Matrix*:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7BuQFUhsRM&feature=related>

The reality we experience may be only appearance, still... ignorance is bliss. The loveliness of switching off your brains after a difficult day's work, the joy of stretching oneself in the easy chair, to submerge yourself in the dream world of *The Bold and the Beautiful*, to imagine the flavour of the masterly dishes in *Masterchef*, to feel your traffic jam frustrations drifting away while watching images in which irresponsible speeders, who raced past you some time ago on the hard shoulder, are now caught by the police. 'Justice', at last...!

Ignorance is bliss... for what good is a freed (liberated?) consciousness if the world around you is beyond salvation, if the enemy you're fighting is often intangible? Why not enjoy our captivity? What can you do with the awareness that banks lead us in into a global crisis if you're tied up with the same banks for your

mortgage? What good is the awareness that we are despoiling the natural resources of our children and are polluting our planet in an irreparable way if you feel forced every day to drive 120 Km to work in your decrepit car?

Perhaps you feel it yourself right now, while you risk succumbing even further under this analysis: we do know what causes the itching, but do we really want to know? Since our feelings of powerlessness are often overwhelming. Contrary to underprivileged groups and minorities who still dare to hope to climb the social ladder, for most of us, 'middle class people', 'change' is often associated with abandoning privileges and apparent certainties.

5. Almost forgotten: the diagnosis!

OK. Suppose we accept that the cause of our problem is not our miserable swimming technique but is due to the composition of the swimming pool water. What do we then do about our impotence? Are we capable of believing that there *is* an alternative? Can we reinforce the belief that, together, we are able to create a society in which the central focus is striving for humanity, instead of seeking self-serving profits? What would it take to make us choose the lifelong battle against the dominant tide and the pretence? How can we persuade each other that true happiness is not to be found in a fashion make-over or in a 'Cook of the Year' nomination, not even in the astonishing amount of 745 friends on Facebook?

How can we help one another to realise that we don't have to engage in this struggle single-handed, but that we can give rise to such a thing as 'working in partnership'; how can we bring into remembrance that backlash movements have already been capable of carrying through substantial change in the course of our history? How can we remember that in these critical communities, despite all the inherent setbacks and complex issues of that struggle, community patterns and partnerships were developed, resulting in a different and deeper kind of satisfaction, happiness, well-being? How can we remind each other that it already *has been done* – before our time? That there have been people, who found the key to free their caged consciousness. Perhaps temporarily, but substantially and with a profound impact on later generations. What would it take for us to believe, once again, that the society of our dreams can indeed be created?

6. The Cure (second attempt!): You Scratch My Back, I'll Scratch Yours

If we do believe that change is possible, this begs a strategic question: How do we get started? What does it mean 'to liberate our imprisoned minds'? For ourselves? For our commitments in civil society organisations? For these organisations themselves?

Today, we will ask several actors from civic organisations and religious communities to answer this question, because in a democracy, the design of local society merits extensive public debate, instead of

being shaped by a small elite. If backlash movements (i.e. movements who safeguard the interests of vulnerable groups and minorities) do not sufficiently fulfil this role, then the design of our society is completely left to the control of banks, transnational firms and employer organisations.

Currently, the voice of civic organisations is too weak to influence the debate on the design of society. One of the fundamental reasons is that more and more of these organisations are themselves permeated (tainted?) by neoliberal logic, and by commercialism and the culture of efficiency-based management we mentioned earlier.

Proof of this is not only found in the quantifiable 'management-speak' of our current Five Year Plans. It also shows in the timid and careful way we describe our task nowadays. For how much credibility will they grant an organisation or a parish that still claims to pursue social justice? Will they not become suspicious if you say you are promoting critical social awareness?

It has become tainted with a 'sinister' connotation, and soon they take you for a sect that wants to manipulate people into choosing a direction they do not really want to take. If you want to be politically correct, it seems like you need to adopt a 'neutral' approach: do not try to steer into a certain direction, refrain from forcing your point of view on others, do not burden people with insights they cannot change anyway. Accepting this kind of 'neutrality' means that we allow ourselves, as progressive social organisations, to be crippled from the outset. The reason for this inhibition to take a clear position is because we completely absorbed the dominant logic. .

The neoliberal story has tainted the language and vision of our social organisations as well. This causes semantic confusion and disorientation, and the subsequent practice or attitude is all but neutral. We only need to take a look at what the voluntary sector, associations, socio-cultural training organisations, ...have to offer.

Over the last twenty years, their programs have steadily moved in the direction of 'adjustment', with a decrease in activities that focus on social debate or that encourage people to reflect upon alternatives for social issues. By contrast, courses for the development of individual talent, self-help and self-management (e.g. positive thinking, relaxation, etc.), the tweaking of 'relevant' skills for the labour market, and 'required' skills (e.g. the use of social media) are booming business.

We lost the notion of 'autonomy' somewhere along the way. In an individualised world, autonomy can only mean that individual citizens choose for themselves how they want to live, regardless of those who surround them. This supports the myth that we do not need the other to exist. That is not the kind of independence that leads to a critical point of view. This kind of autonomy drives a wedge between us, divides and controls us.

We have lost the notion of 'emancipation' somewhere along the way. In a world that encourages you to take care of yourself, we began to define emancipation as 'empowerment': manage your own life, reinforce

your own position. It strengthens the myth that man is a predator and that only the strong survive. Successful 'empowerment' leads to individual self-care and improves one's stamina. This is in itself a good thing, provided that this new self-confidence and newly found strength are used to unite people in the pursuit of emancipation and the creation of change. If not, then 'empowerment' only consolidates the existing system.

This raises some dilemmas and challenges for present-day social organisations, as well as for you and me. Here are a few of the dilemmas I see:

→ **First dilemma: We'll have to make a choice.**

It is impossible for us to be winners in the rat race *and* make change at the same time. We will have to make a selection from the list of activities we want to invest our energy and time in. First of all, we face the challenge of clarifying our language and our vision, and to arrive at a biased positioning in our social organisations, as well as in our jobs, in education, at the hospital, the neighbourhood association, the Fair Trade shop, ... If we want to create an alternative society, we should, first and foremost, clarify what we stand for and precisely where we aim to go.

These questions might help:

- Do we want to move towards commercialisation (commodification?) or humanisation?
- Do we want to help people to adapt to the economic system or do we want to encourage them to question the system?
- Do we want to apply the ointment and soldier on, or do we want to tackle the cause of the itch?
- Do we want to train humans to be 'system skilled' or do we want to train our skills to create a humane system?

To be partial means to nail our colours to the mast: To call a spade a spade, to put a face to the invisible powers that are pushing our businesses and organisations in an inhumane direction.

We shall have to take the driver's seat again and fill our Five Year plans with our very own targets.

We need a compass, a gauge for questioning ourselves and each other critically. Here are a few directions that can help us to get it into the right line:

- The focus is on people. Not on paperwork, numbers or profit.
- Human dignity is given priority over individual freedom.
- We consider the interdependence of people to be a strength rather than a weakness.
- Let us agree on what we mean by emancipation: to get organised in order to defend *common* interests, in order to expand the elbow room and a better quality of life.
- Solidarity is a guiding principle for our actions; it means the structural correction of genuine

inequalities between people and the protection of collective living conditions.

- Let us agree that our work will take at least half a century before the impact of our actions can be 'measured' for the benefit of the history books. In other words: let us keep our long-term aim in mind.

Please note: Choosing change also means learning to 'fail'. Those who no longer swim with the tide will not be applauded.

→ **Second dilemma: Who can be our partners in making the change?**

The shift in the definition of 'emancipation' to 'empowerment' also caused a shift in our priority target group. Twenty years ago the term 'emancipation' was only used for disadvantaged and minority groups, whereas nowadays civil society focuses on the middle classes.

Meanwhile, we despatched the disadvantaged groups to separate organisations, that represent the interests of the poor, the disabled, the immigrants, ... This principle of setting up separate organisations might benefit the representation and emancipation of disadvantaged groups. However, the current far-reaching fragmentation of a progressive civil society creates alienation as well and this serves nobody's interests. It consolidates the class struggle and it undermines solidarity. We need one another in order to design alternatives: to detect our own blind spots, to keep each other awake, to work towards the same goals, to raise our voice and ensuring it will be heard.

Working together also means we need to stay in touch with concrete reality: we need a continual reflection on the different perspectives and a focus on the vulnerable. Do we offer activities that meet the needs of low and unskilled workers? Do we provide easy access to our services for people with disabilities? Are our activities affordable for financially vulnerable groups? Do these people contribute to the policy-making of our organisation and have a say in our goal-setting process? etc.

So where do we begin, once we've re-established a closer co-operation? All our initiatives should undermine the dominant way of thinking. For caged (occupied?) minds can never lead to liberating actions. Therefore : Unmask the myths. Keep dispelling the myth of neoliberal religion and gain insight into its logic. The current economic crisis, ever closer to home, also provides an opportunity. More and more people experience that this kind of economy, this way of coexistence, does not create stability and wellbeing for all. On the contrary, it generates exhaustion and exploitation. This alarming experience in large sections of the population is cause for concern, but it also fortifies the urge in the search for alternatives. Widespread indignation can grow to be an important motor to convince large groups of citizens that the economic system can, and needs to be changed.

→ **Third dilemma: How to dismantle our powerlessness?**

It is impossible for an individual to achieve emancipation by himself (on his own?), without the support of a group. So we need to organise groups, to forge bonds between people and have them re-experience the rewarding taste of solidarity and unity.

In our groups, we need to 'unlearn' the idea that we bear individual accountability for our failures. We need to count the strength of our numbers – realizing how many of us 'cannot cope' anymore - and to calculate the square root of our collective power.

Together, we need to explore the links between the entrapment in our personal environment and the entrapment that is being organised worldwide. Together, we need to diagnose the cause of our ailments and to design and shape our collective healing process, in practical terms, here and now, step by step. We need to experience how concrete, rewarding initiatives, however small, can be a stunning source of new breath and energy. We need a renewed belief that this energy is the only long term remedy.

→ **Last dilemma: How to get yourselves organised?**

We will need to look beyond the walls of our own communities and churches and enter into a co-operation with like-minded colleagues, groups and movements. We will need to agree on which steps to take and which direction to follow, and how to supply each other along the way with nonconformist understanding, encouragement and humour. Best way to start is to make a beginning.

8. How can we cope with the itch in the long run?

To conclude, let's return once more to our parable.

Changing the composition of the water while we stay afloat probably calls for a new swimming technique. What can help is the thought that we are all in the same pool together. We will have to learn the collective crawl.

We shall have to be each other's deep breath, each other's driving force. It might cause a skin rash; perhaps we have to get used to a red, sensitive skin. This not only requires a fighting spirit; we will have to stick together in a caring, tender and healing way.

One thing is certain: there are no wonder ointments, nor is there a lifeguard, except the one with the warning on the notice board.

We shall have to become the change we are seeking. Or as the Occupy movement put it: 'We are the ones we've been waiting for'.

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