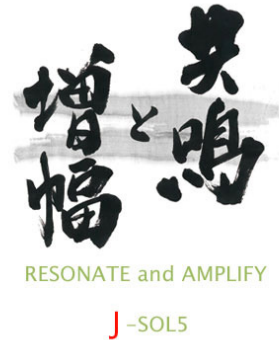


## J-SOL 5 – “Resonate and amplify”

*Kyoto, Japan, 23-24 June 2012*

*Report by Mark McKergow*



It only seems like yesterday since I reported on the first Japanese J-SOL event in Tokyo in 2008. Since then this series of conferences has developed into an annual event for Japanese ‘solutionists’ (now a



Japanese word) to gather and share experiences, ideas, good practice and community. The 2012 venue was Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan and a place of great history and significance in Japanese culture – a city with hundreds of temples and shrines waiting to be discovered amongst the bustle of a modern metropolis.

130 solutionists gathered in the Terrsa Centre just down the road from Kyoto Station and its gleaming *shinkansen* bullet trains, around the theme of ‘resonate and amplify’. The conference logo was beautifully painted by calligrapher Shobun Setsu. In his introduction to the conference, Yasuteru Aoki mentioned the microanalysis work of Janet Bavelas and others, and the many variations that Steve de Shazer used in his responses to clients – many variations on “Mmm, huh” to convey different levels of encouragement and interest. This conference was a lot about actual organisations using SF ideas in their everyday communications, routines and work practices, and it was excellent to see the connections between apparently arcane analysis and real-life management.



The room was decorated with a ‘Facebook’ – a sheet for each participant with their photo and interests (I never knew that Simon Lee was a keen horseman as well as a popular SF coach and trainer!) – and we were asked to leave compliments (“OK messages”) for everyone on post-it notes. By the end of the event *everyone* had 8-10 comments – very impressive. Participants came from many fields – public sector, health, manufacturing,

universities – as well as coaches and consultants. We also had two ‘young ambassadors’ who were given free places having made a case about why they would benefit from joining, and they made a very good impression and impact on the event.

The first plenary featured Peter Sundman from Finland speaking about ‘creating *ba* in a solution focused way’. The name of his company is TaitoBa, showing his early recognition of the importance of *ba*. There is an element of ‘reverse importing’ about this - *ba* is a Japanese word meaning space or place, which has become internationally used following the work of Ikujirou Nonaka to mean all aspects of the context in which meanings are created. Peter talked about the way in which he and his colleagues had become aware of the possibilities and importance of space as they looked for a new office space – eventually (and unusually) buying and fitting out an office to their own specifications. He showed examples of their work in coaching leaders and managers using processes of dialogue, reflection, sharing and restructuring – including making physical models from whatever was available (even toilet rolls!) within a carefully created physical and psychological space.



We then split up into smaller groups for two rounds of workshops. I noticed that many of these were given not by consultants or coaches but by managers or teams from inside organisations. Japan was the source of the idea of ‘SF-inside’ – using SF ideas in ways which may not appear obvious to customers or others, but are an important element in the day-to-day operations. I went to a very interesting workshop by the smartly-uniformed team from ZACROS, a medical packaging company. They are not strangers to J-SOL and it was excellent to hear how they are progressing. During new employees induction they are taught FF and SF – Fact Focus and Solution Focus. Fact Focus is the name given by ZACROS to conventional problem-solving, and it’s very interesting to see the way they use these two modalities alongside each other, but clearly separated. This makes excellent sense to me – there is of course value in analysing and solving problems, in the right kind of situations (where things are mechanical, simply related and relatively stable).

My own workshop on ‘rutenso: the art of working with constant change’ was well attended (you can see a few of the real enthusiasts on the right!), and it was very useful for me to explore this idea – how do we work in a world where change is happening all the time – with a Japanese audience. Amongst other





things we read a poem by Daoist teacher Chuang Tzu about ‘cutting up an ox’ – a metaphor for slowing down when things get hard – and looked at ways to move towards more dynamic steering (a small step at a time) in running an organisation. Hiro Nishida was an excellent interpreter, and Hitoshi Igarashi translated the materials. Dominik Godat also used the opportunity to run a workshop about SF Leadership, gathering Japanese ideas to take onwards to SOLWorld 2012 in Oxford.

We moved on to the first of two Open Space sessions, energetically opened by our good friends Ponta (Katsuhiko Honda) and Masa (Masa Ishikawa). Each slot had twelve spaces, and there was a great rush of convenors to hold discussions. I was impressed by the number of people asking for help with challenges – in the international SOLWorld conferences we see most people want to share something (or even show off!) rather than seeking help.



Then it was off to the J-SOL cabaret with all the excitement and energy we’ve come to expect from such events. Kyoji Ito was Master of Ceremonies in his traditional dress and not-so-traditional keyboard neck-slung synthesiser, Jenny Clarke was the toastmistress and gave the opening ‘Kampai!’, and a range of musical performances followed – including Jenny joining the J-SOL Girls for a traditional Japanese song about a frog, Liselotte Baeijaert singing Kate Bush’s *Wuthering Heights*, Western guests being challenged to guess the meaning of Japanese songs and finally the J-SOL band in a series of tunes culminating in John Lennon’s *Love*.



Day Two opened with some reflection and another round of workshops. I joined Michael Hjerth offered his usual stimulating take on SF practice looking at ‘affirming questions’ – how a question can be both a compliment and the springboard for the next piece of conversation. Other topics in this round included Jenny Clarke on using Multiple Intelligences in SF training, three managers from different sectors looking together at how they use SF in daily work life, and a team from Lab West sharing their experience of building SF study groups within their company. This is a very exciting idea, and I’d like to find out even more about it to see how we might promote conscious SF work more widely.

After lunch we gathered for a plenary dialogue about ‘resonate and amplify’ – European solutionists reflecting on our experience of Japanese culture and how we see it connected to SF. Peter, Michael and I offered our thoughts – mine focused on the awareness of change and transience one sees in the Japanese, and the paradox of them then making everything so highly (and well) organised. Perhaps an awareness of change



also brings a need to take great care? In the UK, it seems to me that we are much less aware of change on a day to day basis, everything seems very stable – and therefore we don't feel the need to take so much care as it will all be the same as last time? A closing session of reflections, compliments and thanks followed, culminating in the handover of the SOLWorld candle and candlestick from Greece (via the Summer Retreat) to Japan and on to the UK for the eleventh international SOLWorld conference in Oxford.



The Japanese attention to detail was shown at its finest in the wonderful cultural itinerary arranged for the overseas visitors by Ruiko Aoki. We were shown temples, Zen gardens, bamboo forests, 1001 Buddhisatvas, given classes in Zen meditation and calligraphy,



participated in a tea ceremony, treated to a vast array of Japanese food and drink and finally (for the survivors) introduced to the idea of a private 'Karaoke box' where we sang into the small hours. This was the most marvellous and detailed introduction to how Japanese think and act, what's important and how they approach life. I am looking forward returning the compliment in some small way by hosting a groups of visitors from Japan to a couple

of days of Shakespeare in Stratford-Upon-Avon before the Oxford conference.

My thanks to all the organisers who made this event such a memorable success – in particular Aoki-san, Ruiko, Satsuki Fujisawa for her behind-the-scenes work, Kikue Saeki and Katsuya Nakano who did a lot of hard work with videos and support, Miyuki Tobe and Teruko Watanabe, Ito-san and all the J-SOL team. Also thanks to the translators Hiro Nishida and Yukiko Shimase, our supporters in whispering translations including Yuko Yamamoto, the translators of all the papers and handouts into Japanese, and ALL who have us such a welcome.



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