

## Requirements for completion of the CAGS program

### Field Study project

Role model in practice: Markus Alexander, Edmonton

Study: Staying in Edmonton from 3.-14.10.06, where Markus is building the WAO; World Arts Organization. Attending his seminars, meeting and having discussions with him and various people involved.

Interview with Markus Alexander (M), led by Bernhard Mueller (B).

*B Thank you again, Markus, for letting me learn with you. About this interview with you as an expert in the EXA-field: if the seminar yesterday was an experience for you as well, how do you describe it? What did you really do yesterday?*

*M (Smiles) It is pretty simple, really. It's like when you go for a walk in the woods and there is already a trail there. I don't think I made a new trail; I went down a trail that I know, and the season was a little bit different and the people were different, but there was a kind of familiarity with the woods and with the trail so there was a kind of relaxness. There was also a delicate excitement about taking people on a trail that I know and they didn't know. I wasn't exactly sure which trail we would take since there are lots of different trails in this wood, but I basically had a sense of where in the woods we are going to go and how far in the woods we are going to go.*

*So there were definitely some surprises for me, but it's important for me to go into the area of the woods that I know so that if someone is feeling lost I can get them back on the trail.*

*B What do you mean by trail? What is a trail?*

*M Last night I talked about taking a safe risk. It seems like taking a safe risk means that the participant is trusting that the facilitator has some idea of where he is going if he is saying "follow me." The trail is maybe like a trail of thinking that I have about how to get somewhere...or a trail of logic, a trail of unfolding, a trail of a sequence of events in order for IT to arrive. So I am not going to a totally new place; I've been down this path many times over the last many years, so yes, it wasn't a strange place for me, it wasn't a totally new place. It was new because it was this group of people, and every time I work it's different, but I didn't want to project a kind of confidence that wasn't real. People could sense that and say, "Ok I'll go."*

*I need to have a good balance of I know what I am talking about, and I have a sense of this because I've been there. At the same time, this is also a genuine experience of excitement to be doing this with these people at this time, and to not be quite sure what it*

is going to look like or where it's going to go... *really* not quite sure.

*B And what about the wood? What kind of forest is it?*

*M* A friendly forest. You know it's not therapy. It's education...it's an educational environment...so it's not a dark wood. It's also not overly bright because we are not trying to be cheerful and trying to make people feel safe. It's just a very common wood, not so special, just so that people could feel like it's not a big deal that we are just going for a walk in these woods. It's a pleasant day, there are trails, there is a leader, and no ferocious animals; there are just some birds and little squirrels, and maybe we will see a deer. So there is a kind of 'no-big-deal-forest,' just nice, just easy...relaxed and not threatening. Because it was the first time for many of them to do this work, there was no need to create something that is especially difficult; it's not necessary.

*B Does that mean that the wood could change when they are longer with you on this trail?*

*M* Yes, and that is really up to them. After a while, the depth of the work has to do with their willingness. With this image of going deeper in the wood, sometimes it gets darker. It's not necessary, but it could be very powerful to go to deeper places. Going to where the woods are a little bit thicker or less navigable could be exciting. People are in less familiar territory and seeing things maybe for the first time...and in front of everybody.

*B You mentioned different kinds of trails: trails of thinking, trails of unfolding, and a trail of a certain logic in a sequence of steps. What was leading you in this trail yesterday?*

*M* Clues from the outside, a lot; logical sequence; skill; being sensitive to playing a very active role in the evening's unfolding in a way that would make sense to people. Making choices that seem like a very logical next step, with no huge surprises about what I do. Instead, little delicate surprises like, "Oh, you are bringing 'you' very close" or "You are adding the voice now."

*B When you say it makes sense to them, what is the overall context of this education so that within it all this makes sense?*

*M* That what they're learning have a practical application, that they are learning a skill, that they are learning how to teach someone how to do this who is not skilled, who then in turn is going to teach it to other people who are not skilled. That the greater context is: is what I am asking them to do a reasonable request, because I'm asking them in turn to ask somebody else to do it. They have to be able to imagine at least that they could ask someone to do that.

Some of the time some of the people feel certain modalities are scarier than others, and so it becomes my job to say, "Sure it's scary; it makes sense because you're just starting to learn, and you don't have to be afraid of the scariness. It's just scary to try something new and risk making a fool of yourself. Have an attitude of 'Let's just try it and see what happens.'"

*B Can you say something about your intention within this context?*

*M* Profound impersonal intimacy...that music-making creates the possibility of profound

intimacy, but it is really impersonal. In the expressive arts experience we are not knowing anything about each other's childhood or fears; we are not necessarily vulnerable at a level that exposes personal stories. So the profound impersonal intimacy is two notes rubbing together, your note and my note, or your beat bouncing off my beat, or my notes sliding up next to your notes, or your back against my back while I listen to my breath; profound depth and subtlety without it beginning with something personal.

It begins with something deeper, something more soulful, something that resonates before the person. It does include the person and affects the person, but it doesn't start on the personal level. So where we are coming from is from the music and then it will move through the person, but I'm not starting from myself as a person or looking at them firstly as who they are on a personal level.

In that sense it isn't a traditional psychotherapy. I'm not trying to do something therapeutic or trying to change them on a personal level. I am bringing in an art-form, in this case music, to create an environment for expression. In that, there are so many opportunities for them to express themselves from a place that's before the person...pre-personal.

*B How do they experience this pre-personal aspect?*

*M* It is spontaneous and unselfconscious. It's a natural phenomenon for us to make sounds that are what could be referred to as primal, the way that primal cultures make music. They do not necessarily express personal problems but maybe are songs of the harvest or the water-song or the wind-song.

*B So songs that have a theme in their centre?*

*M* Not necessarily... it isn't necessarily my intention to have a theme, but it comes from a place before concerns, personal concerns. I think themes probably evolve, but it's even before themes...like when we started drumming; just very elemental expression, elemental.

*B So let's go to the set-up. When people are arriving, coming into the room, how do you and did you create this pre-personal way of assembling...or way of synchronisation of people's intention to be there and to follow each other?*

*M* I guess the key word is enjoyment. I know for me I just enjoy playing the drum. Then one person may want to join me enjoying, and then a next person, and it gets as simple as that. I think enjoyment draws people into play space and then play space gradually gets bigger as the enjoyment grows.

I think that's what happened last night. The opening, as they first came in, was a way to draw people to the pre-personal, to leave their concerns from the day behind...or the concerns from the year behind, or the concerns from the last 20 years behind...and just be fully present in a way that demands them to just be present and sensitive, and engaged...connecting, listening. It's as if they need all of their senses to function in what's happening.

So it's not that you are pushing anything else away; it's just that there is no room in the awareness because it's so filled with all the things you need to address in order to participate in this music-making. Your awareness is filled with all the things that you need to do to make music.

*B I was thinking about how you are shaping your leading role to enable such awareness in people.*

*M That's my favourite way of leading: to be in the art-form to lead within the art-form. When I play the piano I make certain suggestions musically about up or down, loud or soft. Once in a while I will suggest something verbally to increase my influence on the process, particularly if people are really needing a little bit more guidance. They may not have a lot of experience in improvisation, and I don't want to go on for an hour and see that people aren't hearing each other well. I might interject so that they come closer or get quiet in order to start hearing each other again. If they start losing the beat, lead them to get quieter.*

*B You are creating differences in order to check out how they can follow.*

*M No, not to check out if they can follow, but rather, if I see them starting to lose it I do something to intervene. For example, if the music is starting to repeat too much and gets small, I do something to open it up. I let them relax and get big, really help them to stay with it, and then when I see that they start to feel like, "Ok this is enough, this is too much," then slowly bring it back to something that they can sustain with less anxiety.*

*Sometimes anxiety can be on both ends, producing something too small, too subtle, too delicate, and I want to relax and make it bigger; sometimes it's being too big, too expansive, too powerful, too all-out can be uncomfortable, and to bring it back to something that is just a relaxed, opened play-space. But if I find that they are too safe or not hearing each other, then I'll interject something that will create an opportunity for them to learn something, and to not just stay with what is familiar.*

*B Are there other ways to produce such a ground for a set-up, for the learning process that comes afterward?*

*M Yes. Several takes. You do a take. You don't say anything during the take. Then you ask them to talk among themselves after take one. "What worked?" Then you do a take two, and you ask again, "What worked? What didn't work? What do you want to let go? What do you want to keep?"*

*B And other than music, other modalities?*

*M Ask me the question in another way?*

*B We were talking about this set-up that you were creating yesterday when people were arriving, creating a kind of music-play in order to arrive, in order to be aware, in order to, as I would say, establish a kind of synchronization to be ready for doing the process together. You did it with music, with instruments. Are there other ways to create such a set-up?*

M Sure. You could really use any modality to warm up the space. Sometimes you know to just tell people not to talk when they come in and just walk around the space in some simple movement. The idea is for people to start to shift their habitual way of thinking and feeling and moving into this slightly different realm.

B *What is the difference?*

M It's what Paolo talks about in the ordinary and the extraordinary. From the ordinary life they are moving into the artistic experience; that's the extraordinary experience that is quite expanded. We don't live in that space; it's really studio-space. At the end of the evening there is the coming back to the ordinary, but it changes. The 'ordinary' changes in an unordinary way because of the heightened awareness. So, they come in taking care of ordinary things, like driving themselves there, and I take them into being in the studio, into immediately setting a tone in the room in the sense that what we are doing there is not rooted in the ordinary. It is rooted in the extraordinary and I tell them we are going to play for a while to stimulate that area of your awareness...the extraordinary expanded, the spiralling out, the spiralling in, the sparkling.

There also have been times when I've started in the ordinary and we would see if everybody is ready to begin. That works, too. Last night I really wanted to begin in a kind of coming-together ritual.

B *Let's jump to the end. What did you observe as a difference in those people, in the aspects that are relevant to you as a leader or trainer in this process?*

M Ask the question again?

B *You have described the opening phase, the set-up, also a shifting in the way of making experiences...in the way of being aware, and preparing the field or the ground for a learning process that can happen afterwards. So the closing that you just mentioned before would be another phase, that you as a leader or trainer can observe in terms of differences or hints or clues which show that something essential has happened to the participants.*

M That's what I want to hear from them. I don't have to go with just clues. I want to hear specifically, "What did you notice?" But more than me knowing, I want them to know what are they able to do now, maybe with a little bit more ease what was difficult before. Did something shift? It is not important to me to know each individual personal shift. It's not hard to sense whether or not it worked. When I sense it worked then I pretty much leave them on their own...like last night when they worked in pairs...for them to say "I'm more able..." and to say specifically what that is so that they can take responsibility for that shift into increased ability.

If I think that an evening isn't very successful, then I would want to hear from everyone and give them some support in being patient with themselves... but I thought last evening there was enough enjoyment, enough confidence, enough obvious, apparent "it worked," for me to ask people to pair-up and talk about how they completed the sentence, "I am more able to..." For them that was sufficient...that from the beginning to

the end their ability to enjoy facilitating music increased, their ability to make peace with the amount of skill that they have is the amount of skill that they have... and that people get better by practicing; that they make peace with this is how much skill I have, to make peace with the different styles that everyone has, and to say, "That's my way."

Hopefully each person had at least a glimpse of the fact that in this barnyard we've got lots of different kind of animals, and not every animal makes the same sound, not every animal moves around the barn the same, not every animal likes the same food.

*B So there is a kind of increase of competence that they can be aware of themselves. My question was whether there is a kind of increase of competence that you as a leader can see, the way you facilitate.*

*M Yes, in most people you can see it, you can hear it, you can feel it. It is my job to do the best I can to just be where every single person is... and if someone seems to feel frustrated or lost to find a way to include them again. This is adult learning, and I also expect them to say "I had a problem." I check-in several times with them to see how people are doing....are they ready for what's next. Yes, it feels like an adult learning atmosphere and I don't pander to them very much. I say, "Ok, we are ready, we're going to the next thing," and, if someone is afraid to or concerned, I expect them to say "I have a question first." I give them credit for asking and saying what they need to say, and then we move on.*

*B Do you think that's specific to adults and children wouldn't do that?*

*M It's specific to a training program. I am not talking about working therapeutically. I am talking about adult learners and it's different. I would work much more slowly and much more delicately, with much more subtlety and a real sensitivity to how safe people are feeling in a therapeutic environment. In a learning environment, however, it is like, "Ok, distance yourself a little bit. We have a lot of material to cover, and I want you to have a glimpse of how to do this. Help yourself. If you feel a little bit scared, suck it up, deal with it, learn how to do this. I am not asking you to be totally comfortable. If you are not totally comfortable in this modality, well guess what, somebody else is uncomfortable in the modality you are comfortable in, so you can make a note that you are not totally comfortable and get over it and learn how to do this."*

So it doesn't have that same incredible sensitivity to each person if they are feeling vulnerable, as in the therapeutic situation. You just sort of stay there. I want to be sensitive, but I want to be sensitive to not creating something for them to do that is too personally exposing and will distract them from actually learning the theory.

*B So you make the difference between adult learning and adult therapeutic sessions, and not adult and children.*

*M To some extent I would certainly make a distinction between adult and children, especially when they are very young children, but working with children is not my area of expertise, so I would not be the person to talk very much about the difference between*

adults and working with children. It's not an area that I've become an expert in.

*B You mentioned that you met some surprises. Could you tell me a little bit about what surprises, and what was 'The Surprise' of the surprises? You mentioned at the very beginning, following this trail...that although you knew it was there already, there were some surprises.*

**M** Yes, there were hundreds of little surprises: an expression on a person's face, a person's willingness to participate, a person having a problem...just one after the other, so many surprises. While some of what happens is familiar, the familiarity is more about the 'how' to do it, but it feels like one surprise after another in the area of 'who' is doing it, because of having worked with some of these people before, in addition to several I don't know very well. I'm not sure if they are going to say, "I loved to do it" or "I hated it" or "I was afraid" or "It felt easy."

I'm always touched by a person's willingness to trust. I saw a lot of willingness to work and that's very freeing for me, that I don't have to worry about taking care of difficult memories they have, or of their being frightened. And if there are those concerns to take care of, then, "Ok...it's all scary. So what? Let's just do it." There weren't any surprises that I would say were huge, but I would say, one after the other, I'd be--probably a better word would be delighted-- by the students' willingness to be vulnerable, to try something new, to trust each other, to express appreciation, to enjoy being part of a group experience, to enjoy and be willing to let me lead. I am delighted; surprised is almost too strong a word. There is an element of surprise, but it is much more just delighted.

*B So let's talk specifically from the process when you started with the question about what is a beat and what is rhythm.*

**M** Yes. It was instructional, and it had to do with building skill. I didn't want to start with improvisation. I really wanted them to say "Oh, we're learning something very specific here." I started to make distinctions using language. It's also a way of setting a frame for the work...to frame something as big as working with music with something like "Ok, we're going to work with beat and rhythm." It was a chance to ask if someone can give an example, and when Andrea confidently said "Oh, I can do it" and then wasn't able to do it well at first, she took a deep breath and said, "Oh, I don't know how to do this" and she stopped trying to be creative. She just really listened, and then she had a lovely shift to a quieter place. Then it became delight in her, a big delight, that she was able to just calm down and be able to do it.

*B What was the leading quality that enabled her to go through these steps of taking a risk, being embarrassed, stepping back, coming again with an easier and more simple way of doing it again? What was the leading quality that enabled such a process?*

**M** Humility.

*B What do mean by that?*

**M** She was serving whatever we were working on; she wasn't serving herself. She wasn't

there to prove anything about herself or to learn just for herself. She wanted to help move the class forward, she was genuinely doing something to be helpful. So she came back to her skill that she knew she had in order to help this move forward for all of us. For me, for her, for the rest of the class, it was just coming back to what our intention is...to learn together and to take risks and to try. She didn't get all caught up in self-deprecation or in doing it 'wrong' or getting afraid. She just got back on track of what we were doing there: learning together. She saw that and said, "Ok, I volunteered to try it, so I'll try it again" in a kind of good-hearted willingness to just do her part in having the class move forward.

So, the first quality, a generosity of spirit, is a kind of, "We can do this, I can do this, we'll try it again." Going beyond any self-centred, self-involved, self-conscious stigmatising something. Doing it right for her self wasn't as important as doing something to help the class move forward. She was wanting to do her part as an adult learner who becomes also a teacher.

*B She took the first step again, later on in improvising.*

**M** Yes, clearly proving that she didn't have a wounding in her stepping the first time, so she stepped forward again. Seeing that was really important. She bounced back really well. There was no big wounding there at all.

*B When I mentioned you were brilliant last night that was because of this process of following a kind of trust that a person has when she goes through the valley of embarrassment, of being embarrassed. And not intervening in this very vulnerable situation.*

**M** Absolutely. And that, you know, is in so many learning traditions. In a Buddhist tradition...I don't know a lot about it, but I know something about it...they say "The last thing before enlightenment is embarrassment." The reason is that when you are enlightened and you are naked, you don't care, but when you are almost enlightened and you are naked, you are embarrassed. Yet you are willing; you are willing to be naked. "May everybody see my mistake." You are embarrassed and going to be naked, but when you are fully liberated you are not embarrassed; you can laugh and say, "Oh here I am, jumping right in and I don't know what I'm doing. Isn't that lovely?" I knew that she was so close to it.... and she could sense me not only giving her time, but enjoying, genuinely enjoying, just being with her in whatever she was doing. Enjoying the "No, that's not it. Let's see, let's just stay with this."

So in that sense there is almost a spiritual sensibility that says, "Let kindness lead the way." But that could just be profoundly human, not necessarily spiritual. The other thing to that is just a very expressive arts sensibility that comes very much out of my 20 years of working with Paolo, and particularly in music work: just stay with it until it arrives. You just stay with it, and when it doesn't, it doesn't, but you stay as long as you can; don't give up too soon. With Andrea, it was way, way too soon to even suggest that somebody else try it. I would have stayed quite a long time with her.

To put together kindness and skill, maybe that's brilliance; to just be so kindly present and so aware of the skill involved in order to help a person to stay in the kindness themselves. Kindly try again. I can say kindly, "Try again," but for her to actually "kindly" try again, if she wasn't "kindly" trying again, she wouldn't be able to relax. So the unspoken invitation was "Kindly try it again" or "Try it again kindly." I then could feel myself opening up to space for her which took off the pressure for her to perform, so some of the performance anxiety went. She was able to hear herself. It's very common that people can't hear themselves if there is performance anxiety...and I saw it really clearly that that was what it was.

*B To me it was in a way miraculous because there was a supportive beat from the group going on. Even when she broke down, the beat went on and gave a carrying ground for her to step into it again. She wasn't lost.*

*M Yes, and I did exaggerate. Somebody once mentioned how I would exaggerate as my leadership style. That was one of the times. I exaggerated with, "Stay with the beat everyone" so that people wouldn't get thrown and pulled into a syncopation off the beat. "Stay with it, people" is such a tangible, audible support...it is a way of saying that by just keeping the beat, she'll get with us, and you are taking care of your part really well...as well as in my voice, the way I was speaking to everyone in 'staying in there.'*

*B In a way it was metaphorical to me because it is what our body is doing all the time. The pulse of the heart is going on, the breath as well. The breath maybe can break down a little bit more, but the pulse is a supporting ground that never stops. The vibration of the sound of the voice was in a way the rhythm that can play on this beat you have with the pulse of the heart or the beat you have within the pulse of the breath. So to me it was a very strong metaphor of a living system that was established in this process.*

*M And I wonder if you would agree that this is not only a metaphor of the living system, but it is a kind of a ripple out of the reality of our existence ... the constant beat...so at that moment it was just a ripple of what we first are, which is that beat, and it just strengthened the reality that was happening. It wasn't even a metaphor. It was just an expression of it or a ripple of it or an extension of it. It was it in form on the outside, and we were doing what we always do, which is to orchestrate our lives through that pulse.*

So to really move from art as metaphor to art as an extension of our first nature, then, really gets to what we want to do here, which is for our everyday lives to be an ongoing creative extension of what we first are; that the impulse to create comes from the original pulse, not from making up a story in our heads for wanting to do something creative, but rather that the impulse comes from something very intrinsic to our nature, and our enjoying how we can change our rhythm all the time, but that our basic pulse within ourselves is very constant. The expressive arts can teach us how to enjoy that balance of what it is that's constant, and to enjoy that we can always change; to enjoy the inherent balance that is us and not try to balance our lives through the expressive arts or any psychotherapy; not to try to create balance, but just to recognize that it is already

inherently what we are.

If our heart is doing that (M claps a beat with his hands), our speech may be doing this (M claps a faster beat), and our feet may be doing this (M claps another beat), and all the different systems in our body (M claps very fast) are doing something different or the organs are doing something slightly different, we don't have to consciously orchestrate those systems. Rather than taking them as a metaphor of us in the world, actually living the life of the artist's sensibility, really going back to a primal culture's sensibility of what an artist is. They didn't even use the word artist; it was usually much more the word shaman. It is just being able to give form to our original power, to our original nature, and to celebrate it with image and movement and sound. The reality of the beauty and power we are really is different from metaphor. It is about just giving form to the reality of this incredible complexity and richness, and at the same time to the very, very simple truth (M claps a heart beat) of the constancy of the human presence.

*B Another aspect that was interesting to me was that with music, with sound, with voice, the audible sense is the dominant sense at this very moment...this audible sense that is able to follow vibrations. On the external part you were producing vibrations in the first part of the evening...more on the outside, external, by using instruments, following vibrations coming to the ear, coming to the body through external vibrations. And after the break, you went on more to the internal vibrations by using the voice, which is to me a very inside-aspect of being aware of oneself. It is a much more vulnerable place to be. So that was the other aspect that I saw was brilliant: to build up a certain safeness, a certain security through following vibrations, firstly by using instruments, then instruments and voice, and then going to the voice alone and being with it.*

*M The image for me, even more than building-up, is a falling away; that their concerns of "I cannot do this" would fall away. Rather than a building toward, it was a falling away of all the layers of concern, of habit, habitual thinking, of armour...so that in the process of playing, all of the armour that comes with fear and stories we make up in our heads about "I cannot do this" just slowly started to fall off or became softer. In a way it was the opposite of building toward. It was a gently becoming softer and softer, and more and more able to just relax and enjoy.*

When I was inside of it, it wasn't a going toward something more difficult, but rather a getting to the heart of the beauty and delicacy of making a sound, getting closer and closer to the heart of it, and starting more on the surface, starting more in the area of what I was talking about earlier, that of profound impersonal intimacy, with the emphasis more on the impersonal. By the end of the evening the emphasis was more on intimacy, but it was still profound, impersonal intimacy...or maybe, at the beginning, not as profound and then working our way toward profound, impersonal intimacy. That also just comes with "stay with it, stay with it, stay with it." There is a kind of inherent evolving into ease that happens, that will come easier when you stay with it, although not necessarily every time.

*B Although there is much more we could discuss, this seems to be a good place to stop. Thank you very much for the interview.*

M You are so welcome. Thanks for your intelligent questions. They were interesting to respond to. It felt like a good use of our time.

Bern, 20.10.06, Bernhard Müller