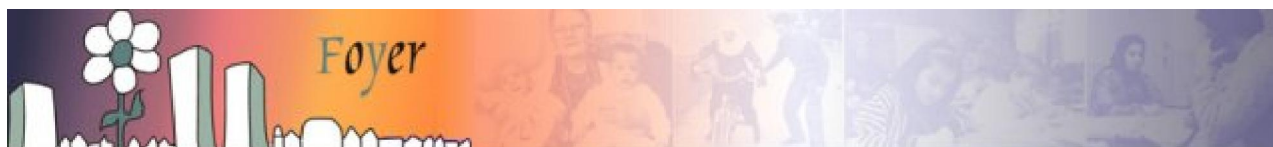


Veerle Solia

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Foyer International Newsletter: Brussels in Dialogue Special

Eight people around a table. Not one of them knows their neighbour. A traditional Puglian ceramic bowl makes its way around the circle, while everyone recalls and describes their favourite childhood dish. It is the start of a dialogue table, which is the central concept of Brussels in Dialogue.

This year, Brussels in Dialogue ran from 14 to 20 October, bringing together people from various backgrounds for dialogue events all around the city. It is a Foyer initiative, co-organized by a platform of dozens of Brussels organizations. Six to ten people gather to talk, sharing experiences and ideas, while also reflecting on the future, and resolving to take small actions that can make significant changes. They do not enter into a debate; they listen to one another and thus get to know one another in a unique way. Through promoting the dialogue method, Brussels in Dialogue wants to stimulate active citizenship and meetings between a wide variety of people in a superdiverse city.

Yet people do not just chat away: a trained dialogue facilitator breaks the ice, helps the conversation run smoothly and also ensures that everyone gets the chance to speak. Below, three dialogue facilitators share their story.

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Brussels in Dialogue at the Belgian Senate

On 16 October Prime minister Elio Di Rupo gave his “state of the union” speech at the Belgian Senate. He mentioned that Belgium had held out well at times of deep economic crisis and that he felt “proud” of the decision that his government made two years ago to bring an end to a very

long political crisis: “It was a choice between acting or criticizing [...] A choice to tackle problems, build bridges and find concrete solutions for citizens and companies.”

Yet while the senators and the journalists sat waiting in the semicircle for the PM to arrive, just a few corridors away, something far more interesting, we daresay, was going on. In the Red Room, normally used for receptions, two groups of about ten people sat on chic chairs, watched over by the ceremonial portraits of King Leopold I and Queen Louise-Marie.

The annual theme “on the way” elicited many memories of past travels, from stolen suitcases to chance encounters, but also made participants think of the future: where are we going, or, where would we like to go? It was perhaps an unusual setting to speak of personal matters, since the surroundings seemed to be made to resound with grand words. At the same time, though, it was probably one of the most appropriate places to have a dialogue table: at the house of the people.

After the dialogue, participants had the opportunity to attend the PM’s speech and to take a tour of the building. Toward the end of his speech, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of Turkish and Moroccan migration to Belgium in 2014, Di Rupo thanked the many immigrant communities of Belgium for the contribution they had made to the country, which many Brussels in Dialogue participants appreciated.

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Brussels in Dialogue at the Finance Tower

Wednesday morning. The building of the Federal Public Service Finance rises high above the city. Here it is: the place where I will conduct a dialogue table. Impressive entrance. I was told to wait for the manager who would take us to the 26th floor. Twenty-sixth... In the waiting seats a veiled woman stared at the high ceiling. She had never been there before either but she told me she would participate in the dialogue. So we were two. Some more people arrived and the manager took us all up to the panoramic floor. Great view. Coffee, tea and biscuits added to the welcoming atmosphere. Three local employees joined our table. We were nine all together, a mix of nationalities, languages, religions, ages, backgrounds,... A promising start to the dialogue!

The theme of this year’s Brussels in Dialogue week being ‘on the way’ I provided several pictures expressing this idea in different possible contexts and meanings. Every participant was to choose a picture and explain what it meant to him or her. An interesting exchange of thoughts followed. Some asked questions to others they probably never had the chance to ask before. It was good to be ‘on the way’ together and to get to know each other. Time was passing (too) fast, but it was great to see how people spontaneously exchanged email addresses at the end. The dialogue will go on...

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Turning darkness into light: Brussels in Dialogue in the woods

For ten years I have been organizing night walks in various Belgian forests. The aim of the walks is fairly simple: make people live a unique nocturnal experience in a setting that is by definition extraordinary, as forests are. To many this would seem a frightening idea, but just a tiny fraction of our fears turn out to be founded. Interestingly enough, the fears that are founded, are not culturally defined, but are primal fears that we all share...

This year I organized one of my night walks for Brussels in Dialogue participants who wanted to experience dialogue in a new way. We met two hours before sunrise at the Sonian Forest, a 4,400-hectare forest just south of Brussels. I had traced the walk and put lights at strategic points all along the path, so that people would not get lost. Then, one by one and with an interval of several minutes, participants set out into the darkness. The forest initially becomes a symbol of our fears, and as we continue walking, we notice that we are in a way walking through

our own fears. We notice that we have to let go of our fear of the unknown and as we do so, we become open to new impressions. The senses are stimulated and we regain confidence in our feelings.

After a two-hour solo walk, participants gathered again for a dialogue in which they talked about the way in which they had experienced the walk. It was striking how calm and quiet people were as they shared their experiences. The dialogue at sunrise was a great exchange and an apt way to round off a memorable nightly experience.

Brussels in Dialogue will be back in 2014. And meanwhile, of course, we keep talking. And walking.

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