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## Waldzell: thinking and baking strudel On the True Meaning of Life

On September 11 and 12, some of the smartest people in the world and about 180 participants met for a "Global Dialog for Inspiration"

*By Ines Glatz-Deuretzbacher*

We are still confused, but on a higher level. That must have been the conclusion drawn by many a participant in the Waldzell Meeting on the true meaning of life, held in Melk Abbey. The meeting was the first in a series of yearly meetings on this topic to be held with some of the most interesting people from all disciplines in the fields of art, sciences and religion.

This year, a dozen speakers came from all over the world to contribute, free of charge, to this intellectual discussion. For a stiff 2000 Euro, 180 participants were given the opportunity to hear their lectures, participate in the workshops and also to ask their own personal questions in the intimate discussion groups. For the organizers Andreas Salcher, co-founder of the Sir Karl Popper School for the gifted, and Gundula Schatz, biotechnologist, the most important aim of the meeting was met: "People were confronted on an emotional level with their most fundamental questions."

The two organizers are also planning less elite events for a larger audience- for instance a platform to stimulate worldwide discussions.

### **The world's smartest people in Melk Abbey**

The event was opened by Provincial Governor Erich Pröll. Following a very personal introduction by Gundula Schatz, the first star of the event had the opportunity to deliver his statement. Shirin Ebadi, the current Nobel Peace Prize Laureate from Iran, delivered a moving speech for more acceptance and freedom encompassing all religions worldwide.

Immediately thereafter, the Austrian experimental physicist Anton Zeilinger and the London Chief Rabbi David J. Goldberg were called to the podium. They, too, captivated the participants, moderated by Andreas Salcher, with amusing and interesting statements, which by and large, however, concerned the content of their work and only marginally touched upon the larger question of the meaning of life.

This trend continued in the further course of the conference. Carl Djerassi, father of the pill and author of novels and theatre pieces, came closest to connecting with the deeper meaning of life. He spoke about his own transformation from a chemist to an author, triggered by a serious illness, among other factors. He stated that many things remained to be tried out in order to approach the meaning of life. And that for him it was a question of time: "For that, I would need to live to be at least 120".

The two Nobel Prize laureates Günter Blobel (Medicine) and Kary M. Mullis (Chemistry) captivated the audience above all with the conviction and fascination they feel for their own work. Blobel found himself confronting the US psychologist Helen Palmer (inventor of the Enneagram), avowing that he had difficulty ascribing any kind of sense to her

discipline: "I have learned to deconstruct things and then reconstruct them on the basis of my own mental faculty. When I do that with psychological models, I come to the conclusion that it's all humbug."

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the world famous researcher on happiness, was able to relate his theories to scientific research results and therefore aroused less irritation.

The American baritone Thomas Hampson spoke about the joy of life experienced in art, and the Abbot Burkhardt F. Ellegast spoke convincingly about the support he had found in religion.

Coming from a totally different field, journalism, Alan M. Webber, the founder of "Fast Company" spoke about motivation, innovation and the capacity for enthusiasm.

### **Delicious Strudel, pathetic singing**

To lighten the highly intellectual program, which grew even more intense on the second day with workshops and intimate discussions, farmers' wives of the Melk region offered the Nobel Laureates and seminar participants some practical work. Together, they prepared various fruit strudels. Slices of the delicious finished product were given to each participant at the end of the meeting, as a small snack for the journey home.

Participants were also given an opportunity to exercise their vocal chords. Not during the podium discussions, which always turned out to be very short due to time constraints, but rather with the conductor of the Schoenberg Choir, Prof. Erwin Ortner. The participants gave a baroque canon a try. The star baritone Hampson participated with gusto, but could not suppress a chuckle.

The participants will each have to decide for themselves if Waldzell has brought them closer to the meaning of life. At least they will now know for sure, if they have never tried it before, if it might be found in baking or singing...