Knowing in the Making

The autumn season at Förnyelselabbet kicks off with a learning retreat where we reflect on knowledge, vulnerability, and the capacity for action - looking back, but above all, considering how we move forward.

By Pia McAleenan

On knowledge, vulnerability and agency from Förnyelselabbet's Learning Retreat

There is a moment when we wake, David Whyte writes in his poem What to *Remember When Waking*, when we are still close to something that easily disappears as the demands of the day begin to make themselves known.

Something we know, sense or long for — before calendars, tasks and assumptions about what is possible take over.

Relevant links

Worldglimpsing
Exibition at ArkDes

What to Remember When Waking
poem by David Whyte

Building Reflexivity Using Service Design Methods
journal article by Josina Vink & Kaisa Koskela-Huotari

Exposing the Emotional Dynamics of Making Tensions Tangible in Systemic Design
research article by Elin Engström, Matilda Legeby, Pia McAleenan, Hanna Andersson, Manuela Aguirre & Josina Vink

Perhaps that was roughly where we tried to begin when we gathered for Förnyelselabbet's Learning Retreat at the end of August. Not with what needed to be delivered during the autumn. But with what we already sensed.

What are we longing for?

We began in the garden.

Five of us sat down for breakfast and talked about where we found ourselves as individuals, and about some of the contexts and projects in which Förnyelselabbet is currently working with societal transformation We talked about our longings in the work. What are we seeing from the different systems we are part of? And, not least, what do we need from one another to make the autumn as good as it can possibly be?

The conversation became more personal than an ordinary project kick-off. We talked about courage and uncertainty. About how difficult it can be to ask for help. About trying to do something in a new way without knowing whether it will work.

Somewhere in that conversation, our different ways of understanding the knowledge currently emerging through our work slowly began to take on a shared form.

For me, it also opened another line of inquiry: the value of showing my own uncertainty more openly, of allowing myself to be vulnerable — and how closely this is connected to making my own learning possible.

Because what if knowledge is larger than what we can say? What if it also contains dimensions of what we feel and think? What we take for granted? And what if we need one another's perspectives in order to notice it?

Throughout the day, we kept returning to one question:

What do we actually count as knowledge — and what different layers of knowing might there be?

Joseph introduced us to other traditions of knowing.

In Tyson Yunkaporta's *Sand Talk*, meaning-making is not understood as something that happens only inside our heads. Knowledge can also reside and be created in objects, places and relationships. In *Sand Talk*, the ground, symbols, patterns and objects are used to think together about complex questions — and to express things that words cannot always carry.

We then used sand ourselves as a material, giving form to different situations for ourselves and one another. We did this to help words emerge for what we were experiencing. Not to illustrate something we already knew, but to see whether we might discover something through making. This approach often allows us to see our own practice with new eyes.

At Förnyelselabbet, we have long drawn, built, staged, walked, told stories and created situations together. We have thought of these as methods. But after this day together, I began to see them as something more: a visible expression of our understanding of knowledge.

Our belief that our hands, our bodies, materials, places, relationships and imagination can sometimes help us know things that cannot yet be captured in words.

Many Layers of Knowing

When Josina Vink took over after lunch, the question of knowledge became even more personal.

Through their own story of identity and encounters with different professions and knowledge systems, they opened a conversation about different layers of knowing.

We talked about **knowing and not knowing**. About knowing oneself. About the body, gender and identity. About medical, scientific, religious and normative knowledge — and about how some ways of knowing are granted greater authority than others. At that point, the question of knowledge also became a question of **agency — our capacity to act**.

What happens to a person's agency when their experiences and ways of understanding what is happening have no language through which to be expressed, or are not recognised as valid? And what happens when they are given room to emerge?

Josina's story also brought us back to the importance of vulnerability. Being able to say: *I don't know*. Showing something that is not yet finished. Asking for help. Trying a new way, despite the risk of getting it wrong. Perhaps **not knowing is not the opposite of knowledge**. Perhaps the capacity to remain with what we do not yet know is, in fact, a prerequisite for something new to become known.

Glimpsing Other Worlds

With Josina, we continued through materials, colour and light.

We explored what our practice makes visible — and what still remains hidden.

The exploration continued at Moderna Museet, where the exhibition ***Worldglimpsing*** gave us another language for some of what we had been discussing.

Guided through the exhibition, each of us was given, for a moment, a glimpse of another possible world. Glimpses of what might also come to be. Art did something that our models and analyses cannot always do. It shifted our gaze.

Something familiar became strange, and something previously unthinkable became possible to imagine. Perhaps this, too, is part of systemic design. We need to understand systems as they are. But we also need to

create situations in which people can begin to sense that the world could be different.

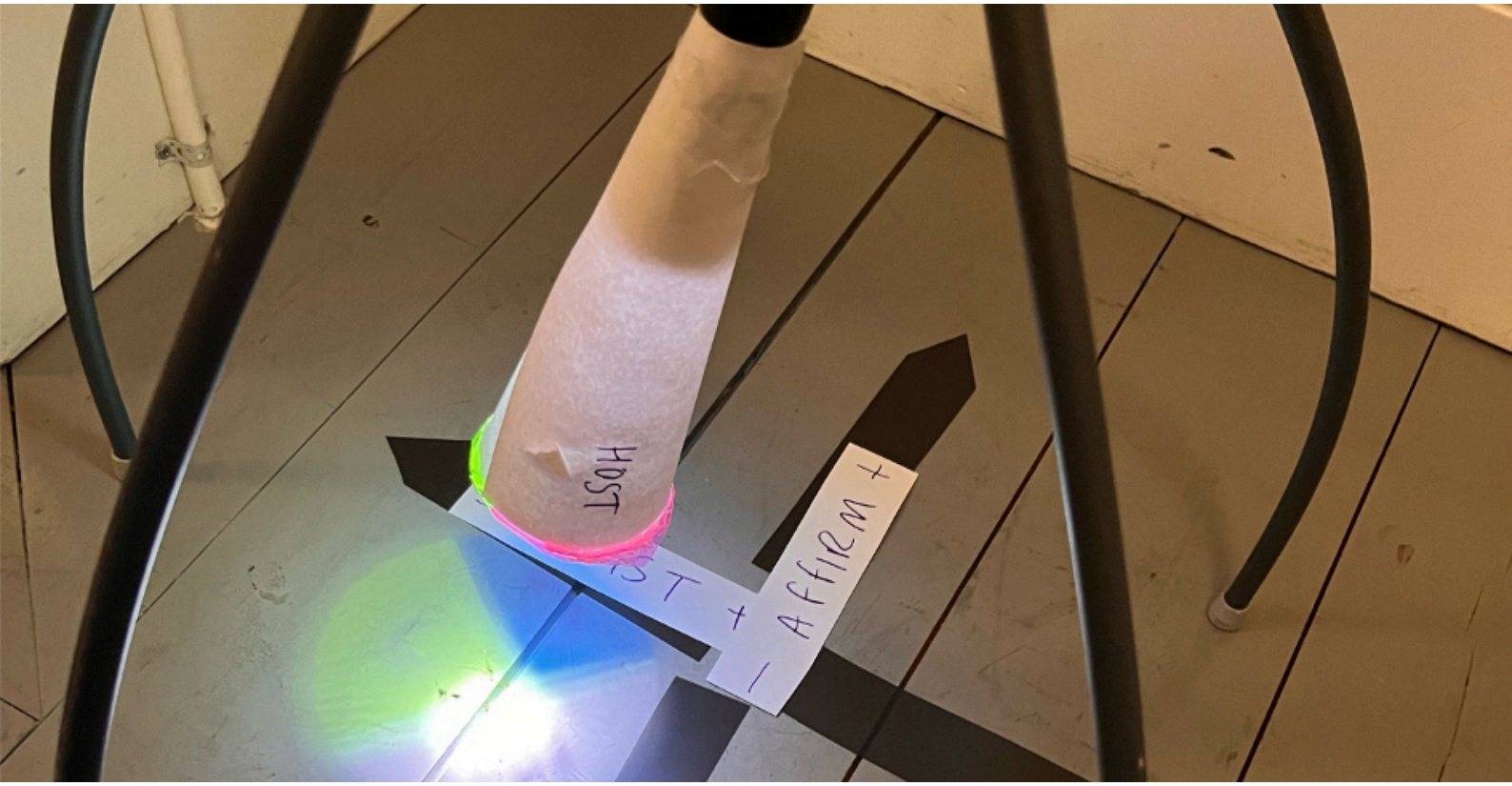
Because how can we move towards something we cannot even imagine?

Knowledge and Agency

Somewhere around here, the different parts of the day began to find one another.

In systems change, we often talk about policies, practices and resources — but also about relationships, power, narratives and the mental models that lie beneath what is visible. The question we carried with us from the day was:

Which ways of knowing need to be given space for people to be able to act?



If people's experiences, intuitions, embodied knowledge, relationships, longings and imagination are continually filtered out as less valid forms of knowledge, perhaps we are simultaneously limiting our collective capacity for change.

Making room for more ways of knowing, then, is not simply a question of knowledge. For us that day, it became something more. It became a question of agency — of our shared capacity to act differently, both individually and together.

What to Remember When Waking

In the evening, the table grew larger. More of our partners joined us for dinner, dialogue and an exchange of experiences. We ate together, shared stories from the day and invited them to continue thinking and creating with us.

Somewhere around the moment dessert was served, Hanna began reading David Whyte's *What to Remember When Waking*. For a moment, everything became quiet. Then the conversations began again — now with something slightly different in our minds and in the way we looked at one another.

After a day focused on knowing and not knowing, longing, sand, light, art and vulnerability, the poem took on a particular meaning. Perhaps part of our work is precisely this: To create spaces where what we sense but cannot yet fully articulate is allowed to remain with us a little longer. To help one another notice it. Give it form. Try it out. And, eventually, find language for it together.

Perhaps this is why we need our Learning Retreats. Not to step away from the work for a while, but to **come closer to it**. Because knowledge may not simply be something we possess.

It also emerges **between us** — through experience, relationships, place, materials and the world around us.

As Whyte's poem reminds us, sometimes we may need to create an in-between space long enough to notice what **we are already beginning to know — before the day takes over**.

Would you like to read the David Whyte poem that we all carried with us into the August night? **Follow this link**