

A MEMOIR:
A SEARCH FOR FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

Phyllis Watt Ingersoll

*“No problem can be solved from the same
consciousness that created it. We must learn to see
the world anew.”*

Albert Einstein

My Dad, Donald B. Watt, founded The Experiment in International Living. I recall so well his attempts to establish the cross-cultural experience on a set of fundamental principles as he tried each summer to enhance the learning of the participants. After a busy day of travel, making group arrangements, and attending to other details, my Dad often took time out to relax in the living room, beside the fire, and think late into the night. He often read, occasionally made notes, and always grappled with a central question: How to structure an individual’s participation while in another culture in order to further develop his intercultural understanding? From the beginning of his questing in Syracuse, New York, this seemed to be what he always wanted to achieve, but he soon discovered that finding an answer wasn’t easy. In the opinion of the three national group leaders, the 1932 summer camp of French, German, and U.S. boys was nearly a total failure in this respect. But what approach could be used to introduce an individual to another culture, while also producing a really positive experience?

At one point, the German group leader, Herr Fendrich, made Dad an offer: “Bring a group of Americans to Freiburg, and I will find families for them to live with. They will be well cared for and, speaking German, they will make friends!” Dad took him up on this offer the next summer. The students did, in fact, succeed, and soon the homestay with local families became the centerpiece of my Dad’s approach and of a whole new organization — The Experiment in International Living.

Never quite satisfied, Dad kept thinking, and he kept on evaluating these experiences with friends and participants. What other elements should be added to improve the chances of developing successful friendships abroad? Gradually, formulating and clarifying his ideas through the group leader’s handbook, the Experimenter’s handbook, and promotional materials, he identified several fundamental principles: selection, preparation, leadership, homestay, group living, discussion, and evaluation.

Right from the first, the Watt trips were taken seriously, not as a form of “school,” but as a different type of educational challenge — physically, mentally, and emotionally — and young people loved them! They had so much fun that it was surprising that the trips should also have had such a profound impact on their lives. By the late 1930s, The Experiment in International Living had become a small, successful student exchange organization. The advent of World War II made its purpose even more serious.

Modeling itself after the United Nations, The Experiment eventually developed an international structure for sending and receiving Experimenters — a Federation of national offices. Annually, when

they met, Dad led the Federation members through animated discussions to hard-won consensus, forging and reforging The Experiment's educational principles, never producing a single definitive statement or manifesto, but rather a constellation of ideas to be applied to specific situations. Three statements of these principles appear in the introduction to Watt's *Intelligence Is Not Enough* (1967, p. 3):

- People learn to live together by living together.
- The home is the greatest educational institution in the world.
- Success in living in a home abroad depends upon careful organization.

Responding to the demands of such programs as the Marshall Plan, the Peace Corps, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), The Experiment's principles, already in use for training in language and cultural sensitivity, were eventually applied to an even broader range of activities, both governmental and nongovernmental. The School for International Training was started, in part, to pursue and apply these principles, and it continues to extend the "Experiment principles" to new levels of sophistication. World Learning's Projects in International Development and Training also takes these same principles and applies them "where the need is greatest."

As we are all too well aware, the worldwide challenge of international understanding is still with us, but World Learning in its new forms continues to reflect deeply about its mission as well as the principles and approaches on which its work is based. As long as we all maintain our "experimenting" mind-set, we should all remain alive and well!

ENDNOTE

Phyllis Watt Ingersoll is the daughter of the organization's founder, Dr. Donald B. Watt. She remains active in World Learning and The Experiment to this day and is a member of its Board of Trustees.

REFERENCE

Watt, Donald B. 1967. *Intelligence Is Not Enough*. Putney, Vermont: The Experiment Press.