



### **What you can expect at your first Funding Network day; a novice's experience.**

It was a very relaxed day. That was the first surprise; I was expecting pressure, expecting to feel like a novice, unsure of what to do and how to be, not knowing where to put myself. Instead there was a kind of peaceful excitement about the day. It sounds like a contradiction, I know, so I need to say a bit more to explain it. It was peaceful partly because of the atmosphere created by the organisers; which was warm without being insistent. I could be as engaged with others or as detached from them as I chose. As I happen to be a fairly solitary sort of person, nervous of groups of people I don't know, this was a relief. But the next time I go will be easier, and I'm looking forward to the kind of re-meetings of people - some of them had clearly been together at previous TFN days - which I noticed happening all around me in the room.

And, funny as it may sound, it was also peaceful because the whole day ran exactly to time. I have had my fill of well meaning but badly run workshops and meetings, and I find them stressful too. The stress is that I don't know when I'll get a break or a meal, I don't know when I'll be able to get away, and I don't look forward to the difficulty, sometimes even the hostility, I encounter in trying to leave at the advertised time. And usually the whole thing is made more difficult because there is an implicit underlying reproach; this meeting is doing good and taking care of people so you can't really complain if it takes a little longer. The fact that the organisers kept to time did more than just ease these anxieties; because they did exactly what they said they were going to do in this respect I became confident that they would in other respects too. For example, I started to believe that it really would be alright for me to donate only a small sum of money, or none at all, if I chose.

But there was a deeper reason for the relaxed quality of the day. There was no time or place, in the way it was structured, for those going as potential donors to stand out, to look good (or bad), or to be special. Essentially, we were an audience, listening to some stories: stories told by those seeking funding about what they were doing, why they were doing it and what difference their work was making. I'll have more to say about the stories in a moment but for now I want to describe what happens after all the stories have been told. For each project in turn, the audience is invited to offer donations. You call out a sum of money or you don't. With ten projects, one after the other, no-one notices if you've contributed to any particular one or not and no-one could notice how much you've contributed overall. It's not quite anonymous but it's close. Why not then make it entirely anonymous, with each person writing down a donation on a sheet of paper? Well, there is a good reason, I realised, and that brings me to the exciting part.

The most exciting thing was the content of the stories. Only one of the ten stories was, for me, a bit dull, and, like all the others, it only lasted ten minutes. The others were one or more of the following; gripping, inspiring, eye-opening, moving, funny, impressive, challenging, dramatic. Some appealed more to the intellect than the heart; others were the opposite. All of them made me feel glad to be learning something I didn't know. Most of all, it was a privilege to be listening to them. They were stories which told of the very best of us humans; people using their ingenuity, time and skills to make things better for others.

And the last part, calling out the donations, was exciting too. Would the projects I favoured get the money they needed? It was quite tense. Then, as sums were shouted out, and I saw the total build up, I was elated to see that they would. One was just a bit short; someone called out an additional sum. It felt good, and it felt very good to be a part of it. My small contribution was a contribution. I had done something really useful with my day and I'd enjoyed doing it.

**John Hamwee, March 2004.**