

Conversation as a Co-Evolutionary Force

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The World Café: Living Knowledge Through Conversations that Matter

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Beneath all structures and behaviors lies the real creator—dynamic processes.

—Margaret Wheatley & Myron Kellner-Rogers (1996, p. 81)

We co-evolve our worlds through the networks of conversation in which we participate.—

—Humberto Maturana, *Evolutionary Biologist*

My original awareness of conversation as a fundamental and generative force in our collective lives came from a source and a setting that I could never have anticipated. It was the innocent curiosity of two corporate leaders that helped me remember what I already knew.

CONVERSATION, COMMUNITY, AND COMMITMENT

The year was 1993. I hadn't yet joined the MIT Dialogue Project and the World Café had not yet appeared in our lives. I was sitting in the living room of our home in Mill Valley, California, with John Browning and Frank Gonzalez*, leaders of a regional Sales organization within a major U.S. corporation. With the support of the senior vice president for sales, we'd undertaken a participatory action research project around the question "what happens if we shift the metaphor of organization from traditional images of the organization as a machine or a battlefield or a sports arena to the image of the organization as a community? What might be possible if we begin to think about work community development in contrast to traditional ideas of organization development or team performance?"

John and Frank asked me a lot of questions. What are the methods community organizers use? What's different about building a community versus

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building teams? How did you do it in the farm workers' movement? What really is at the heart of community development, anyway?" Is there something different about community development processes that can contribute to corporate life?

Our conversation lasted through the afternoon and into the evening. We got hungry. We ordered pizzas. I shared with them the "axioms for organizers" we learned from Fred Ross, Cesar Chavez's mentor. Fred trained a generation of us as young organizers, just as he had Cesar. Fred's axioms are etched in my brain. I shared them from memory. "Focus on the real work; honor everyone's contributions; seek what unifies; find connections; build personal relationships; appreciate what's working; pay attention to the details; share what you're learning; and celebrate!" I talked with John and Frank about each axiom, giving examples of how each worked in practice.

Something was missing. What was it?, I asked myself. Of course, the house meetings! The house meetings were the basic unit for building community in the farm workers' movement. I shared with John and Frank why house meetings were so critical to the organizing effort, and how the process worked.

Cesar or another farm worker organizer would ask a local family to host and convene a conversation among their friends. Sitting in circles on tattered couches, often in trailers or ramshackle cabins, small miracles occurred. Through authentic conversation about their own real life questions, the underlying assumptions that had kept farm workers stuck for generations began to shift, slowly at first, tentatively. As workers shared tortillas and bean suppers, they shared the "if only's" about their lives and imagined the impossible. They began, through dialogue, to ask the "what if" questions. And from the "what if's" came the "why not's!"

Two or three members of the first house meeting would decide to host another house meeting with a small circle of friends in their own homes. The ideas from one conversation would seed several others. One of our roles as organizers was to convene and to participate in multiple house meetings. A key job was helping people understand that their seemingly insignificant little house meeting was connected to other conversations happening elsewhere in other communities, first locally, then in California, then throughout the nation.

I was sharing the story of the house meeting conversations with John and Frank. All of a sudden I felt as if I'd been hit over the head. All these years I'd somehow believed it was the phone calls, the lists, the disciplined follow up, and the mass meetings that got people mobilized for action. Of course these activities were important to success. But was there something else, something underneath all of that?

As I stopped to think about it, the light bulb went on. *It was the conversations themselves in those thousands of house meetings that actually did the organizing.* It was not us, the organizers, that did it. It was the power of the

conversations themselves and the meanings that people took from them that did the organizing. When those conversations were really alive, people couldn't help but act. In concert with others, they discovered the capacity to transform their lives. Only recently, I read a remembrance of Cesar Chavez contributed by Jessie de la Cruz, one of the early women members of the United Farm Workers. She spoke of the house meetings in those days:

I first met Cesar Chavez in the early 1960s. He came to our house in Parlier, California. ... Cesar was a very quiet man. At the meetings he didn't tell us what to do. He would talk with us and explain many of the things that were happening and that it was up to us to decide for ourselves...I did not know who I was—only a housewife, mother and farm worker. Now I can identify myself as a woman proud of my heritage and know what I can do to help myself and others. (McGregor, Wathen, & Ballis, 2000, p. 15)

As I sat in our living room eating pizza with these two curious corporate leaders, I could still recall those house meeting conversations vividly. The farm workers in those house meetings and in the larger gatherings stemming from those small circles, knew that their conversations and their ideas were part of a larger whole. They knew that each person was making a special contribution to the collective. They were aware that they were learning together into their common future, participating in a larger and larger conversation that mattered, not only to them, but to the entire nation.

Those conversations along with the collective learning and coordinated actions that emerged from them not only built strong local farm worker support in agricultural communities. Farm labor families and volunteers like myself spread throughout the world convening a global network of conversations and committed action that changed the face of American agriculture forever. A growing wave of committed action arose from that network of conversations. It resulted in the first union elections in the history of American agriculture, the first collective bargaining agreements, the first workers cooperatives, the first farm worker led social service centers and other social innovations.

I heard myself saying to these two corporate executives, "It's conversation that's the heart of it. Conversations that matter are the core of community development. We can attribute it to all kinds of techniques, but it's actually the dialogue, reflection, and shared meaning, along with the seeding and linking of the conversations that's the core process for large-scale social change. Conversation lies beneath organizing and strategizing!" And I asked them, "Is a large corporation that much different from a community?"

With the benefit of almost a decade of hindsight, I can now say "Oh, that's so obvious!" But is it? I know that neither Fred Ross nor Cesar Chavez ever framed it that

way, nor did I in my early organizing days. It never even occurred to me. What might we have done differently if this perspective had been at the heart of our role as community organizers? What if Cesar had held this as a core organizing image? Might we have been even more effective more rapidly had we consciously seen a networked process of conversations and shared meaning as the heart of how an organization or community creates life-affirming futures?

I do know that this insight about conversation as a core process changed my thinking about how to approach that large-scale corporate work community development project and all of my work since then. My learning conversation with John Browning about his discoveries from the project highlights the conscious shift of organizing image that underpinned that work.

The dialogue among the groups built confidence—it brought a sense of our own responsibility. As we broadened the conversation, then we said, how can we go out and plant this seed, how do we frame that as we bring others in. People began to do their own research about their own issues, their own situation collectively in order to choose to make a difference in it in some way. And now, I've witnessed individuals who were part of it and gone out into leadership roles in the country. They've taken these ideas with them. (John Browning, Learning Conversation, June 1999)

The idea of conversation as a core process continued to bubble in my awareness as I went about my daily life and work. Then I ran into the work of Harlene Anderson and Harold Goolishian. It was a strange meeting. I was at an Institute for the Future seminar where I serve as a Research Affiliate. If I remember correctly, this particular gathering was about organic images of organization. We were on lunch break. I was sharing my private musings about the relationship between expanding webs of conversation, the evolution of new shared meanings, and the emergence of social innovation with the man next to me. He asked for my card. I gave it to him, although I

neglected to ask for his in return. Two weeks later, a plain brown envelope with no return address appeared in my mailbox. It contained a package of articles from the field of family therapy. For some reason, the enclosed note was also unsigned and had no return address. It said simply, “given our lunch conversation at Institute for the Future, I thought you’d enjoy these.”

Family therapy? What could I “enjoy” from family therapy? I’ve never had even a glimmer of interest in family therapy. What’s the meaning of this? I felt like the character in the Griffin and Sabine novels. Griffin receives strangely evocative postcards from someone he doesn’t know and never finds. These messages profoundly affect the course of his life.

I was curious and a little anxious. As soon as I had a few extra minutes I began to leaf through the pile. The first couple of articles seemed quite abstract, with names like “Strategy and Intervention; versus Nonintervention: A Matter of Theory?” (Goolishian & Anderson, 1992) and “Beyond Homeostasis: Toward a Concept of Coherence” (Dell, 1982).

Then I saw one that caught my attention. It was co-authored by Harlene Anderson and Harold Goolishian of the Galveston Family Institute and was entitled “Human Systems as Linguistic Systems” (1988). By the time I got to the second page I was mesmerized. Although the focus was on clinical practice in family therapy, their reflections resonated with my own experience in large-scale systems change. I was delighted to realize that there seemed to be a whole community of scholars who were already articulating what for me were still inchoate images of the ways that conversation

can serve as a systemic force for change and renewal in human systems (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, pp. 391-393).

In contrast to a world view that assumes an objective reality of “structures and systems” to which human beings must adapt (Parsons, 1960), Anderson and Goolishian saw organization and structure, as well as the other “realities” we experience, as the evolving result of the dynamic and emergent process of conversation by which we as humans make meaning together. We live, take action, and co-evolve the future in a world created through conversational interaction with others. Calling on evocative and poetic insights from Hans Lipps (1938) and Hans Gadamer (1975), they pointed out that the capacity for change and the evolution of knowledge in human systems lies in the “circle of the unexpressed” and in the “infinity of the unsaid.”

However, it was their reflections on the *systemic* importance of these insights that most influenced my own later thinking about the World Café and its potential as a metaphor for large-scale renewal in human systems. They pointed out that the capacity for systemic change in our lives resides in:

The ability we have “to be in language” with each other and, in language, always to develop new themes, new narratives, and new stories. Through this process, we co-create and co-develop the systemic realities...through which we continually reorganize our mutual living. (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, p. 381)

Anderson and Goolishian added that their thinking regarding conversation as a fundamental process for constructive change in our lives, “rests squarely on the proposition that the quintessence of what we are, and what we will be, is dialogical ... Humans are understood as meaning-generating systems, as a flowing network of interacting ideas and correlated actions” (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, p. 390).

From this perspective, the realities we experience are social creations that we temporarily share as common meanings created in language. The primary way new futures emerge is if people, in the dynamic process of conversation, literally change their meanings and change their minds. If this is so, I mused, then meaning-making and shifting our collective mindsets through conversational exchange opens vast new possibilities for generative action on behalf of positive futures.

This point of view would suggest that if you change the conversation you change the future. I began to think of large-scale social movements and wondered how they evolved. In addition to my own experience with the farm workers' movement, I thought back again to the salons that birthed the French Revolution. I thought about the sewing circles and the committees of correspondence that helped nurture the American republic and our democratic system of government. I thought about the Scandinavian study circles that helped stimulate the economic and social renaissance in Northern Europe earlier in this century. I thought about the Mondragon Cooperatives, now among the largest industrial centers in Spain, born in the Basque drinking clubs.

All of these large-scale changes evolved from small groups who saw different images of potential emerging from their conversations together. These images created new collective interpretations of what was possible. Members of these initial conversations pollinated larger constituencies with these new meanings and images, carrying the seed ideas for larger webs of conversation, creative possibilities and collective action. I wondered what the nature of the conversations had been in the living rooms and cafés throughout the Soviet Union and East Germany in the years prior to the

fall of the Berlin Wall. And, although Anderson and Goolishian were talking about family systems, I found their thinking quite consistent with my own lived experience both in the farm workers' movement and in my corporate life.

Anderson and Goolishian's essay on human systems as linguistic systems later informed my musings about the way the World Café, as a metaphor, might reflect this same core process for generating large-scale organizational and social innovation. They said that, "this is all part of developing new connectedness. It is the process of carrying on multiple conversations simultaneously such that, over time, new ideas will begin to evolve and make contact with each other" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, p. 383). When I looked at their article again several years later, I realized they could have been describing the World Café!

As I contemplated their provocative synthesis, I could finally see conceptually what I had understood intuitively from my experience with the farm workers and had shared with my corporate colleagues over pizza in my living room. If I accepted the view that conversation was a core process for individual, family, organizational, community, and societal renewal, then I needed to re-think my whole approach to collective learning and change. Emerging insights from the new sciences helped deepen my understanding of how this occurred and the possible role of the World Café as a guiding metaphor for this core process.

Accessing Collective Insight

Although it is difficult to describe, we know when it is present. It is as if we are part of and can draw on a wisdom that already exists. The wisdom is held collectively and it takes both listening and conversation to bring it forth.

—Finn Voldtofte, Danish Café host

It was not long after this rather disconcerting but exciting epiphany about conversation as a core systemic process underlying community development that I was asked to collaborate with the MIT Dialogue Project. I was in the middle of my collaboration with the Dialogue Project when we first experienced the World Café in our living room.

A number of members who were in that first Café described the unusual qualities of energy and the emergence of collective thought that they noticed as the initial small group conversations began to connect and cross-pollinate among Café tables. Tom Johnson, Retzlaff professor of quality management at Portland State University, recalls his experience vividly:

I don't know how it happened, but once the idea of the moving among the tables and writing on the paper and so forth developed, I think people began to realize an energy was developing, an awareness of deep underlying points of view and how all this affected the issues we were working on. And I thought to myself, whoa! and I felt it myself. And I thought to myself, I know what it is and I know what I've been seeking. I've been involved in dialogue many times with people and I never felt it so strongly. Here it came across in a very positive and meaningful way. So that all happened in that first Café session for me, and I've had it reinforced a few times since. (Tom Johnson/Peter Senge, Learning Conversation, April 1999)

As Finn Voldtofte and I began our own reflections on the morning after the first Café to try to understand what had occurred there, Finn commented:

I had the feeling, something important is going on here, and we are right in the middle of it. I'm part of something larger. I was sitting with a feeling that I was not missing one sentence said in that room. I had them all. I knew them all. It was the collective, that was it. (Finn Voldtofte, Learning Conversation, January 1995)

Since that that first Café in our living room, we've talked with Café hosts who have participated in or facilitated Café conversations of many types. They describe Café conversations as including:

- Weaving threads back into coherence.
- Seeing the connections that are already there.
- A better sense of the wholeness of the topic.
- Ideas and energy moving through.
- Reverberation of thought.
- Currents of thought.
- An accelerated evolutionary development of ideas.
- Harmonizing of a collective energy through the power of the question.
- Purposeful coherence.
- An invisible structure of relatedness.
- A different experience between the I and the we.
- Letting go of the ego into a larger identity.
- Community, even communion.
- Spiraling deepness.
- A subjective consciousness of wholeness.
- Collective consciousness evolving.
- Collective or group intuition.
- A collection of intelligences becoming a collective intelligence.
- Accessing a larger wisdom not available to anyone alone.
- Lighting up the system in the room.
- Entering the “field.”
- A collective mind field.
- The “field” becoming the host for the conversation.
- The pure magic of what can happen when conditions are right.

(Learning Conversations, Café hosts, January 1995-February 2000)

What are we to make of these reflections by highly reputable professionals around the world? They seem to be such an integral part of many people's experiences of Café

learning or the meaning they ascribe as they observe Café conversations that we cannot simply dismiss them as fanciful flights of imagination.

The current exploration is purposely narrative and interpretive. It is not an empirical study. However, it is my sense that the experiences these Café hosts describe has occurred more and more frequently in our Café conversations, and in other dialogue processes, as we become more practiced at designing for coherence in a variety of settings. They occur more consistently when the way time is structured in each Café round enables a satisfactory exploration of the questions posed. Of course, the “magic in the middle” or the special qualities that Café hosts describe does not occur in every Café conversation. However, our experience is showing that that even when the “magic” is less alive, Café groups seem to quite consistently experience a sense of connectedness of thought, a heightened sense of community, a feeling of unity in diversity, and an enhanced experience of collective insight around core questions that they care about. These outcomes seem most likely to occur in the presence of the carefully designed initiating conditions for dialogic learning afforded by integrating the Café operating principles. This is especially noticeable in large group settings.

I continued to try to understand conceptually what I and other Café hosts were discovering experientially. In our early explorations with the MIT Dialogue Project, we discovered that David Bohm, the physicist, described a subtle type of intelligence that can arise as a special relationship between the individual and the collective in dialogue. He described the “participatory consciousness” (Bohm, 1996, p. 26) experienced in dialogue as:

Something *between* the individual and the collective. (italics in original) It can move between them. It’s a harmony of the individual and the

collective, in which the whole constantly moves toward coherence. So there is a collective mind and an individual mind, and like a stream, the flow moves between them. (Bohm, 1996, p. 27)

Given his theories about wholeness and the implicate order, Bohm believed that “thought is all one, manifesting in all sorts of places and with all sorts of specific content” (1996, p. 89). He suggested that accessing this underlying order and wholeness of thought creates the “possibility for a transformation of the nature of consciousness, both individually and collectively, and that whether this can be solved culturally and socially depends on dialogue.” (1996, p. 46).

The next few years began to reveal additional interpretations from multiple disciplines that complemented Bohm’s insights on the large-scale transformative power of dialogue. They also seemed to confirm our own experiential learning with Café conversation. Like looking at light through a prism, there were a number of complementary lenses through which I began to see the relationship between conversation, collective intelligence, and the co-evolution of the futures in human systems. Weaving these threads together helped me imagine the ways in which Café learning as a *methodology* and the World Café as a *metaphor* may reflect a larger-scale process of social co-evolution and change.

Mirroring Living Systems

As I was beginning to explore the Café work in earnest, Margaret Wheatley and Fritjof Capra asked me to join them in one of their Self-Organizing Systems seminars sponsored by the Berkana Institute. Frankly, I was nervous. What did I know about self-organizing systems? I wasn’t an academic or a theorist. But Meg assured me it would be

fine. She was sure I could make a relevant contribution. She reminded me that I understood strategy and large-scale change and I understood how to support constructive dialogue around key questions.

The workshop itself used Café conversations as one method for exploring issues raised in the program. On the first day, Fritjof was laying out key elements of self-organizing systems which he'd articulated in his soon to be published book, *The Web of Life* (Capra, 1996). In the formal style of a European professor, he talked about the underlying dynamics of living systems. He pointed to the way that living systems embody a network pattern composed of fractals in which every part of the system embodies the fundamental pattern of the whole. He also showed how very simple initiating conditions can lead, over time, to the emergence of surprising richness, complexity, and coherence. Fritjof also showed the ways in which apparently chaotic and messy initial behavior in networks can give rise to coherent patterns as the behavior of the whole system self-organizes and co-evolves. Our own experience of watching coherent patterns of meaning evolve through multiple iterations and cross-pollination in the network of conversations represented in a Café seemed to fit Fritjof's observations about the underlying dynamics of many other living systems.

Fritjof then began to draw analogies between the principles of living systems and the biology of cognition explored by two eminent Chilean scientists, Humberto Maturana, an evolutionary biologist, and Francisco Varela, a neuroscientist (Maturana & Varela, 1992; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). Fritjof pointed out that living systems, including human systems, engage in autopoiesis or "self-making." This process of self-making or co-evolution occurs through what Maturana and Varela describe as the

structural coupling of the components of that system. I know that I am not doing justice to the subtleties of their research. However, what I understood from Fritjof was that the history of structural coupling (including reproductive coupling in the biological arena) of the components in a system enables it to bring forth its world. In other words, the system itself, through its own internal processes, brings forth its unique reality through the accumulated history of the way it chooses to engage with inputs from its internal and external environment.

If we translate these ideas to human systems as living systems, Fritjof continued, our unique capacity for language enables what we understand as human consciousness to evolve—our capacity for abstract thought, ideas, mental images, and intention as well as individual and collective self-awareness. Our languaging together is a form of social structural coupling. It is this capacity to be in language together that supports learning, development, and co-evolution in human systems. Fritjof pointed to the root of the word consciousness, from the Latin root *con-scire* meaning “knowing together” (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 232).

Fritjof also pointed to the possibility that consciousness itself operates according to the principles of living systems. In this interpretation, rather than being the attribute of an individual mind, consciousness is a social phenomenon, the product of relationships and connections both within and among people. Maturana and Varela describe consciousness as being generated through “the social coupling through language in the network of conversations which language generates... Consciousness and mind belong to the realm of social coupling. That is the locus of their dynamics” (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 232). This capacity for “knowing together” occurs through the history of our

participation in webs of conversations in which shared meanings co-evolve and are embodied in coordinated action. It is through this fundamental process that we “bring forth a world” with others.

Now I began to see the scientific underpinnings for the social constructionist interpretations of Anderson and Goolishian (1987). It is the dynamic living system process of structural coupling through language and the emergence of new narratives that enables human systems to collectively co-evolve the social and material world as we know it—to bring forth our systemic realities.

Almost casually, or so it so it seemed to me, Fritjof then put up a slide by a German sociologist, Niklas Luhman. While he acknowledged that the question of how this process of social co-evolution through linguistic structural coupling in human systems had not yet been fully resolved, even by Maturana and Varela, Fritjof thought it was relevant to consider how leading edge social scientists were interpreting these ideas.

Social autopoiesis

*A network of conversations
that give rise to further conversations
so that self-amplifying feedback loops are formed.*

*The closure of the network results
in a shared system of beliefs, explanations, and values,
continually sustained by further conversations.*

(Self-Organizing System seminar materials, Berkana Institute, July 1996)

Suddenly I began to cry. What was the matter with me? Here I was in the middle of a very formal theoretical presentation by a noted European physicist and I was crying my eyes out! In my minds eye, I saw the house meeting conversations in the farm

workers' movement. I saw how each conversation, just like Luhman said, gave rise to further conversations so that self-amplifying feedback loops were formed. I remembered my reflections on the way in which other large-scale social movements had evolved from cross-pollinating ideas into larger and larger networks of conversation and coordinated action. I could also easily see organizations as embodying the same underlying dynamics.

Then I looked around the room at the 50 of us sitting at Café tables. We were preparing to engage in what seemed to be a similar process on a smaller scale—a scale that made leading edge insights from evolutionary biology and abstract scientific jargon easily accessible as an immediate lived experience for non-scientists.

Aha! Maybe *that* was what had made the first Intellectual Capital (IC) Pioneers Café experience so alive for us. Although we only sensed it partially at the time, perhaps we were having an embodied experience of nature's self-organizing process of co-evolving the future. We were creating the “knowing together” that enabled us to bring forth new meanings and in that instance, helped bring the new field of Intellectual Capital into being. Leif Edvinsson, the co-convenor of the original IC dialogues and a world leader in the burgeoning field of knowledge work in the new economy describes his personal experience of how this occurred.

The Café created a collective energy field—extremely high. We were so into it that we were unaware of it, we were just into it, being in a flow. Being on that level creates wisdom in your body. It was a knowledge in your body, which was then shared outside. It was not just individual, but probably collective, even though we didn't focus on that at that time.

That experience together created some kind of “aha's” that we then began sharing outside which led to many practical dimensions of the Intellectual Capital movement and the whole IC field. (Leif Edvinsson, Learning Conversation, October 1999)

I'll never forget Fritjof's presentation at the Self-Organizing Systems program in Utah with Meg Wheatley. It was another moment of seeing the dynamics of how consciousness, collective intelligence, collaborative learning, and social innovation might work. Although Fritjof probably didn't know the impact he was having on my life, those few minutes of his presentation contributed greatly to both my conceptual and emotional understanding of Café experiences. If leading edge scientists were thinking this way, then we had solid conceptual ground to stand on!

When I got back home, I began to read Varela and his colleagues' work on the biology of cognition. I didn't understand all of the science, and their work was not primarily focused on social systems. Even so, when I began to play out the implications of their insights, I became even more excited about how the World Café might serve as a popular metaphor for co-evolving collective intelligence in the service of positive futures.

For example, Varela, Thompson, and Rosch pointed to the dynamics of cognition in the brain as existing in the same kind of network relationships that exist in other living systems, all of which exhibit self-organizing, emergent properties when "there are simple components that...dynamically connect to each other in dense ways" (Varela et al., 1991, p. 88). They added that "because of the system's network configuration, there is a global cooperation that spontaneously emerges when the states of all the participating 'neurons' reach a mutually satisfactory state" (1991, p. 88). And, they shared that when an "attractor" is present, "it is remarkable to observe that even a simple, almost minimal network has rich self-organizing capacities" (1991, p. 89).

What if the World Café as a metaphor reflects the dynamics of a "social brain" with each individual member operating as a metaphorical neuron in the network by which

systemic intelligence can evolve? What if catalytic questions can serve as the “attractors,” now at a larger scale, that Varela describes? Varela’s reflections also recalled Peter Russell’s evocative exploration of the idea of a “global brain” that had the capacity to function as a collective learning system with the support of enabling information technology or other learning infrastructures (Russell, 1995, p. 131).

Varela and his colleagues continued their exploration by pointing to a finding from experiments in visual pattern recognition in the brain. They show that “during the self-organizing phase, ‘attentional’ mechanisms are critical for learning” (1991, p. 96). They pointed out that in human beings “intention directs consciousness and the other mental factors toward some general area, at which point attention moves them toward specific features” (1991, p. 120).

If these pattern recognition processes are also at play in social learning situations, then other pieces of the World Café puzzle make more sense. Perhaps catalytic questions can serve as one type of systemic “attractor” to focus the group’s or the entire system’s *intention* toward a general area of inquiry. By simultaneously encouraging gathered *attention* and listening together, as well as weaving patterns, themes, and deeper questions, aren’t we also activating what Varela called “attentional mechanisms” at a collective level? Can this gathered attention accelerate the emergent properties and intelligence of the system as a whole? In a beautiful and evocative summary, Varela states that in human beings intelligence becomes “the capacity to enter into a world of shared significance” (1991, p. 207). Isn’t that also basic for developing systemic intelligence on a larger scale? And, wasn’t conversation the core process for enabling this to occur?

Of course, the biology of cognition based on theories of self-organization, emergence, and co-evolution did not stem from the investigations in quantum physics that had informed David Bohm's insights about collective intelligence and shared meaning, nor did they assume an implicate order as the generative ground of collective thought. However, as a leading edge neuroscientist, Varela seemed to come to similar conclusions about intelligence being the capacity to enter into a world of shared significance through language. He also suggests that networks of conversation are the core process for entering this world of shared significance at a collective level.

What if in the process of structural coupling through conversation we are simultaneously accessing the deeper wholeness and generative order that Bohm described? Might these be complementary doorways into interpreting the leaps of collective insight that occur in our most effective Café events? What if Café conversations, and other generative forms of dialogue, provide an embodied experience of co-emergence, social coherence, and co-intelligence in ways that non-scientists can easily grasp? How can we use these fundamental understandings of conversation as a co-evolutionary force at a larger scale in our work with organizations and communities?