

These are initial working notes for conversation and further exploration. Please feel free to copy or quote with appropriate acknowledgment. We'd welcome your thoughts and feedback.

Juanita Brown, 415/381-3368, juanitabr@aol.com

## **The World Cafe: Creating the Future, One Conversation at a Time**

*Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, and Nancy Margulies*

**Creating a positive future begins in human conversation. The simplest and most powerful investment any member of a community or an organization may make in renewal is to begin talking with other people as though the answers mattered.**

Adapted from *Who Will Tell the People*  
By William Greider

*(These working notes were developed for the Pathfinders Scenario Project. Pathfinders was founded by Willis Harman, and is sponsored by the Institute of Noetic Sciences and the Fetzer Institute. This material is framed in societal terms, but could as easily be framed in organizational language in terms of the end of the industrial age and the advent of the knowledge era with its requirement for the evolution of self-management, knowledge sharing and intellectual capital.)*

### **What in the World is Going On?**

As we approach the 21st century, Western society's ways of attempting to satisfy fundamental human concerns is being questioned by growing numbers of thoughtful citizens. Material progress and economic enterprise as "central projects" for modern society brought unparalleled opportunity to many. However, in the latter half of the 20th century, the increasing severity and intractability of numerous social and global issues have begun to pose a profound challenge to the modern world view and to the world order it spawned.

The challenges that face us are widespread and complex. They are being recognized by business, government, and community leaders as well as by respected scientists around the globe. These include environmental degradation; underemployment and the lack of truly meaningful work for growing numbers of people; homelessness, urban violence, and a host of other problems associated with lack of opportunity; dissolution of the social contract between society and citizen as well as between employer and employee; and the growing schism between rich and poor, both within and between nations. These and other related dilemmas are exacerbated by a host of regional military conflagrations, and by excesses on the battlefield of global economic competition.

These systemic dilemmas are compounded by a crisis of meaning that weakens the fabric of community life even further. There is a growing awareness that important spiritual, ethical, and ecological dimensions of life have been sorely neglected.

All of these issues and dilemmas appear to be unsolvable with the "problem and policy focused" approaches that have been tried. In spite of our best intentions, predictions about global sustainability given current trends are not encouraging. All past assumptions about the future of the planet are being challenged by the present reality. No crisis in the history of civilized humanity compares with the challenge that the entire way of life of the modern world is not sustainable on a finite planet in the long term. It makes little difference whether by "long term" we mean half a century or two centuries. Once we become aware of this conclusion based on the growing body of scientific evidence now available to us, the crisis is the same. Nothing short of a fundamental transformation in the way we think about our common future will alter the ultimate reckoning

A growing number of caring and committed people throughout the world are beginning to explore what dimensions of the modern world view still hold the possibility of leading to an environmentally sustainable, political stable, and economically equitable future. They are also asking what emerging world view holds greater promise as we enter the 21st century, and what transformation in our collective beliefs and assumptions may be required.

In board rooms, living rooms, conference rooms, learning centers, cafes, salons, indigenous councils, family dinners, and on the Internet—the conversation is being joined. *What are the questions that really matter to us here? How can we nurture the collective intelligence and wisdom to create the conditions which will give rise to the futures we want rather than being forced to live with the futures we get?*

People are talking!

### **Great Conversations about Things That Matter**

Conversation is the crucible for social invention. For as long as we have lived in human community, great conversations have been the birthing place of new ideas, new ways of being and new ways of doing. Conversation is the primary vehicle through which we as individuals conceive our world and embrace relationships with others. Conversation is our human way of discovering the new meanings that shape our common future. Conversation is the medium through which breakthrough thinking and collective action emerge in the service of our best hopes.

Circles of small groups in real conversation about things that matter to their collective future have always been the locus of social and institutional renewal. The American Revolution, which birthed our nation, was nurtured in sewing circles and "committees of correspondence." Key principles of American democracy were fashioned after the indigenous Iroquois approaches to small group participatory decision-making. The core ideas of the French Revolution were conceived and spread in conversations in cafes and salons. The Scandinavian "study circles" created learning societies and an economic and social renaissance in Northern Europe in the earlier part of the century.

The Farmworkers movement and the civil rights movements in the U.S. were born and sustained through house meetings at the local level.

Reaching out in ever widening circles, members of these small groups pollinate larger constituencies, carrying the seed ideas for new conversations, creative possibilities and collective action. As Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that small groups of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

### **Large -Scale System Change: Is there a Simpler Way?**

*NOTE: While the ideas that follow are framed as "The **World Cafe**" the core concepts regarding the deeper process principles involved in building collective intelligence and co-evolving common futures are relevant, as a fractal image, (the principles of the whole exist in any part) to any level of system in any organization.*

*The World Cafe framework is also relevant to those working in the areas of intellectual capital, strategic futuring, scenario development and other areas relevant to organizational learning.*

In its essence, the process may be simpler than we think. Imagine a scenario like the one below.

What if each of us (whether we were a corporate CEO, a bank teller, or a rural villager) knew that we were part of an important conversation that was happening simultaneously in many parts of the globe? What if we knew that our concerns were but mirror images of the deeper concerns of many others who were also inquiring together into the art of the possible? What if we were all part of a common community of commitment, even though we had never met?

What if we believed that by being open to changing our minds in real learning conversations about things that mattered we could create a positive future that worked for everyone? What if we believed that, in dialogue about important questions that were core to the renewal of our lives, our work, and our major institutions, we could create new levels of collective intelligence, breakthrough thinking, and effective action?

What if we knew that other key leaders and ordinary citizens around the globe believed that too? And what if *they* were in real conversation about questions that mattered in the same way that *we* were?

How might the future be different?

Peter Russell, scientist and author, has spoken of the rise of global information technology and the possibility that, for the first time in history, we may be experiencing the evolution of a "global brain." The explosive growth of the Internet

and global communications technology makes this a plausible hypothesis. For the first time in history we are, in fact, able to imagine a global conversation focused around questions at the heart of our common future. The speed with which financial transactions move around the globe is but a forerunner of the speed with which organizational and societal learning also have the opportunity to spread.

Danah Zohar, in her landmark work, *The Quantum Society* has argued cogently that if there were only one "covenant" we shared across cultures and across the great divide of our apparent differences it would be a commitment to the conversation itself arising from the quantum vacuum, the Source, from which the new possibilities that we cannot now imagine will emerge. She adds that "keeping that conversation going, creating the multi-layered and multi-centered structures that make it possible, should perhaps be our highest priority. Our willingness to engage in dialogue, the emerging pattern of the dialogue itself, is our common ground." (p. 293 and 330)

Meg Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers who have pioneered new thinking in management circles about the implications of self-organizing systems and the new sciences for the life or organizations suggest that identity, relationships, and information are the fundamental requirements for self-organization to occur. If their hypothesis is correct, then great conversations about questions that matter seem to be a core process by which we in human systems: a) create a common sense of identity/purpose; b) build relationships and connections both among people and among ideas; and c) create a richer web of information than existed previously (or at least make it visible).

Perhaps there is a simpler way.

Perhaps the simple metaphor of The World Cafe provides one path forward for our mutual exploration.

### **The World Cafe: Organizational and Societal Learning in Action**

*What is embodied in the core image of the Cafe that draws us and may be relevant to our thinking about process principles for organizational learning and large scale change? (Themes from conversations regarding The World Cafe with Finn Voldtofte and David Isaacs)*

- A Cafe is informal and relaxing We don't have to be on our best behavior to be in a Cafe.
- A Cafe is a space/a place—a safe place—where we meet with friends to talk, to visit, and to share our latest news and/or thinking or just to make connections and build relationships.

- A Cafe is a neutral space—"a third place"—where anything can be said or explored—where there are often paper tablecloths and/or paper napkins for sketching out new ideas that emerge from the conversation.
- Cafes are associated with creativity, community, and great conversation. You go to a Cafe specifically to have conversations—to talk together and to share food and/or drink together. This has been the tradition for many hundreds of years across many different cultures.
- You travel to a Cafe. Even though it's not too far away, it does involve a commitment on your part to be a part of the conversation that will be happening there. The metaphor here is that you leave home (comfortable habits of thought, your ego, etc.) to travel to the Cafe—that's just far enough from home to give the space for a new conversation to happen and new insights to emerge.
- In addition to the regular conversations that go on there, a Cafe may have multiple evocative ways of engaging your interest and attention—art on the walls, poetry readings, music, storytelling. But rarely, if ever, are there lectures, overheads, teaching or speeches in a Cafe.
- You usually don't feel alone or lonely in a Cafe since you know others are sitting at nearby tables. You may even be able to hear their conversations if you listen in. You know you are part of something that's alive and that it's not just about you when you are in a Cafe.
- In a Cafe, sometimes strangers may be seated at your table and there is the opportunity to include them as well if you like. There's often a diverse mix of people in a Cafe.
- In a Cafe some people at the table may arrive early and the conversation begins. Others may arrive a bit later and they are "folded in" to the ongoing dialogue. Some have to leave early for other appointments, but the conversation at the table continues with whomever is there. The conversation starts whenever two have arrived and the red thread continues as new people arrive or others need to leave.
- A Cafe is people-centered and human scale. People *participate* in a cafe. Even if you are a people watcher and are alone you are participating in the life of the Cafe experience as a whole.
- The institution of the Cafe implies a level of social complexity that indicates the presence (or the possibility) of community. It implies a certain level of connection and relatedness among people that is beyond that of the family. It's a product of a societal development process that is complex enough and connected enough to foster things like Cafes.

- There's not much design needed for a Cafe to serve its purpose—that of fostering/being a context or vessel for real conversation at a people to people level. All that's required is an informal setting, a bit of food and/or drink, a warm enough environment to sit comfortably inside or out, and paper tablecloths or paper napkins to write and scribble on.
- When people are at a Cafe and in real conversation they often feel "something important is going on and I'm right in the middle of it."
- People generally go to a Cafe with good intentions, even if they are going to have a meeting where the conversation may be difficult. People don't usually enter a Cafe with fear or disaster as the primary motivate. There's usually an expectation that something good will happen there—visiting, gathering, being together for whatever purpose you have come.
- You don't normally think "there's a great disaster awaiting the world. I have to go to a Cafe" or "the world's ecosystem is out of balance, I have to go to a Cafe." However, once you're in the Cafe, you may explore creative ideas related to important issues and questions. This happens not from fear or weariness but from creativity and connection with others at the Cafe table who may also share your questions or concerns.
- The idea of discussing philosophy/deep subjects is not foreign to the idea of what happens in a Cafe. The literary set and political types and all types of people meet in a Cafe.
- A Cafe is a more natural image than dialogue with a big D. The Cafe contains the potential for dialogue in a more natural and self-organizing way than the typical "D"ialogue settings that are currently being used. The few initiating conditions described in the section that follows move the Cafe image from being a place of small talk to a place of dialogue and breakthrough thinking on a large scale.
- The Cafe image implies diversity. Anyone is welcome in most Cafes and the diverse clientele in many Cafes is seen as an attraction.
- As you leave the Cafe there is usually an expectation that you will return to the action of your life refreshed and more relaxed than you went in. You enter the world of action in a renewed way with whatever you gained from the conversation that is interesting or useful.

**What are the Process Principles that would transform an ordinary Cafe experience into one that was “The World Cafe” (as a process scenario)? Key initiating conditions that encourage the possibility for organizational and societal learning might include:**

- **Discovering question(s) that matter AND travel well.** Questions worth asking and that travel well serve as the red thread in any local conversation and are the link to other conversations happening in the system (or at other "tables" of the Cafe). This assumes creating a sense of *context* (the big WHY and the big HOW) within which the question worth asking (the big WHAT) rests and finds a home. The question(s) have to be open and broad enough for people to tap into "the source" within a focused enough context to be meaningful to their real life situation. It's this combination that carries the possibility that any individual conversation will be a fractal of the larger whole. The questions that travel well and the context that holds them move the Cafe from being a place of small talk to a place of dialogue. This raises the whole issue of the art and architecture of powerful questions—questions worth asking as "attractors" that combine and recombine in new patterns of meaning and value for the future.
- **Coming to safe place (or space).** It's important that the conversation space is perceived as neutral, as a "third place" by everyone in the conversation. This can be an actual place like a real or imaginary Cafe, or an actual living room, meeting place, or conference space. It can also happen "on-line" in virtual meeting spaces and on-line communities, chat rooms etc.
- **Engaging the spirit of collective discovery / adventure / inquiry / curiosity / learning.** The World Cafe scenario embodies the idea that I/we are part of something important that's bigger than just me/us. It should encourage the idea that we are explorers in new territory and new ways of thinking and that we're not the only ones. It's happening at the same time in other places as well. Our group is part of the larger conversation and our members will be going out and carrying what they learn to other conversations they are a part of in our own organization, community, policy discussion, etc.
- **Encouraging shared listening.** This is the encouragement to really listen and be listened to. It happens in a spirit of learning and discovery that what is emerging none of us can know by ourselves but that each of us has an important contribution to make. None of us is smarter than all of us.
- **Initiating with at least one who "knows."** For this to spread it needs at least one person (who might or might not be the convener) who understands the organizing principle and image of the World Cafe. This person can help set the larger context as well as The Big Why in a way that is relevant to the local concerns/conversation of any given group.
- **Framing the Larger Context.** The Cafe embodies the image of the fundamental organizing principle of great conversations as a core process for learning, knowledge creation, and large scale change as well as the self-organizing seeding process that is at the heart of it. Setting the context in a way that people feel that their conversation is both local *and* more than local at the same time—that they

are part of something important that is larger than just their individual conversation—is key. (It's a both/and!)

- **Knowing the conversation may have a beginning but it has no end.** The conversation starts as the questions begin to get framed. It includes others along the way as appropriate. Whoever's in the conversation goes out to seed other conversations they are in from the insights gained. The thread is not lost even though some people are always coming and going.
- **Holding the deeper intention.** It's the intention held while entering the conversation that is, in large measure, responsible for whatever comes out. We could think of the Cafe as a kind of doorway. We enter. We set the initial conditions. We don't know what goes on, but some people describe it as dialogue. Then on the other side of the doorway we meet social invention, connections to something larger than self, community, intellectual capital, commitment to action, and practical results.
- **Designing for Cross-Pollination.** What is important is people coming back and sharing "Here's what I learned and here's what I have passion for." It is nurtured by cross pollination. In small group conversations, people then seed other conversations with what they are taking from the conversation they had. And those people are then recombining it and going somewhere else like DNA cells reproducing. Not reproducing exactly, but seeding. The dialogue begins, but it never ends. Then the principle is that it continues to mutate and transform and change its shape. But as long as the intention is held, the deeper intention is held steady, then it can take many different shapes in that kind of self-organizing way. (\*From a conversation with J. Brown and F. Voldtofte)

Invite, catalyze, design for cross-pollination of learnings among conversations, where possible, on the assumption that any part of the larger conversation will reproduce the essence of the whole in the next conversation. From small conversations, one person from one conversation goes to the next one and they are a fractal of the conversation they've just been in and the people talking to them are a fractal of a conversation *they* had just been in, sharing their learnings and what they have a passion for. When they recombine, they become a fractal of that larger whole and when they recombine each learning conversation becomes a fractal of the larger and larger whole, leading to organizational/societal learning and large-scale change.

- **Noticing the learning.** It's not solely that the learning has taken place from the conversation because that already happens naturally. It's that by noticing the learning that the next emergence in terms of order, coherence or possibility is made manifest, able to be seen, more actionable. It changes the energetic of the whole and raises the collective intelligence in the "field" as a whole—which is

why new members then find it easier to pick up wherever the group happens to be in the conversation when they enter.

- **Discovering and spreading natural groupings of kindreds—letting kindreds find each other—cultivating the grapevine.** This is already happening on the Internet in a massive and interesting way. So let's imagine that we allowed each person in a conversation to pick several friends. They extend the conversation to several friends and so on. If you had questions that traveled well, with a common deeper intention of "remembering the connections" and the "deeper wisdom" that's already there, you would, over time, get a reinforcing feedback loop. The conversations might be very different in form but they would carry a common essence, a common field for the emerging collective intelligence about a more vital and nourishing future in any system within which they were occurring.
- **Using Symbols and Visual Imagery.** A picture is worth a thousand words. Symbols, metaphors, and images give access to deeper knowledge. When you transport only the words, the deeper meaning is obscured by the construction of our object-oriented languages (especially in the West). We need symbols to express the process principles embodied by the World Cafe and to embody the key learnings as they travel well and broadly.

The core image of the World Cafe (or its fractal equivalent at the organizational or community level of system), could, if refined, become a process scenario and a systemic infrastructure for organizational and societal learning toward positive and nourishing futures. Cafe learning approaches are one way of putting the principles of self-organization explored in Meg Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers' *A Simpler Way*, into practice in organizational and community life.