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Multi-Generational Collaboration | Shaping Tomorrow, Together

by Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, and Samantha Tan

Discovering One Another

In the summer of 2004, the World Café, the Berkana Institute, and the Shambhala Institute for Authentic Leadership convened an innovative inquiry into intergenerational wisdom and collaboration for the common good. A multi-generational team that ranged in age from 23 to 81 hosted the gathering. What we thought would be a small 'learning laboratory' of 20-30 people took off like wildfire. The meeting, held in Nova Scotia, Canada, rapidly mushroomed to more than 80 participants from 18 different countries whose life experience spanned eight full decades. We were amazed and delighted! From that powerful encounter, we began to realize that if we and others could create spaces for authentic dialogue and effective collaboration across the generations, a tremendous force for social change and innovation across the globe might be ignited.

The demographics alone reveal this exciting opportunity. In the U.S., for example, members of the 'Boomer Generation' (now in their 50's and 60's) are entering their elder years with a much longer lifespan than earlier generations. Members of this generation helped to launch the civil rights, environmental, women's and social justice movements. Many still want to make a difference, and have the time, health and wealth to actively contribute. Those in the Millennial Generation (in their teens to late 20's) are just discovering their own passion for creating more life affirming futures. "At the center of our new consciousness of connectedness and change is a dynamic form of transformational activism," Joshua Gorman, founder of Generation Waking Up, noted in the Fall 2007 issue of *Kosmos Journal*. "We are taking up our world's two most urgent needs—spirituality and social change—fusing them together, and unleashing powerful pathways to personal and planetary transformation." These two generations alone are estimated to be 163 million strong and make up more

than 50% of the current U.S population. If even a small percentage of the people who really care and want to make a difference from these two groups had opportunities to 'find' each other and learn to use each others' gifts in the service of a better world what might we be able to create together?

Just at the time we most need all of our unique contributions and perspectives to discover innovative paths forward, we suffer in cultures around the world from the rapidly escalating tendency to separate 'us' from 'them'—to create barriers rather than bridges in the face of differences in religious or political beliefs, cultural values, personal lifestyles and relationships between the generations. Yet it is painfully clear that none of us in this vulnerable and interconnected world can go it alone. How can we honor and use each other's unique contributions and gifts to access the collective wisdom and co-creativity that resides in us, *as a single generation, alive and awake together—whatever our chronological age or stage of life*.

What Are We Learning?

At the Shambhala Institute and in subsequent gatherings exploring multi-generational partnership, we have experienced a similar outpouring of excitement and engagement. Key multi-generational dialogues aimed at building bridges between the generations have now been sponsored by Pegasus Communications at their international Systems Thinking in Action conferences, by the Institute for Noetic Sciences, the Bali Institute for Global Renewal, Meditation Mount and the Ojai Foundation, the World Café, and others. In 2005, for example, the international Girl Scouts hosted 'Strategy Cafes' with more than 3000 multi-generational participants—the first time ever—exploring the future of their work with young women's leadership.

These gatherings have at times involved exploring family dynamics with compassion,

dealing with elders' traditional mental models of mentoring and teaching, learning new cross-generational terminology, discovering intergenerational synergies, fostering collaborative leadership opportunities and much more. Several key learnings have emerged that may hold promise for co-evolving a movement of true multi-generational partnership on issues of passionate common concern.

- Psychological safety, basic respect and mutual trust, as in all human relationships, lie at the heart of engaging courageous conversation, healthy community, and committed action across generational differences.
- Each generation alive in the 'circle of life' today has unique contributions for our common future based on the special cultural and historical factors that have shaped our lives.
- Sharing our stories together across the traditional boundaries of age and stage of life can make these practical contributions more visible, synergistic, and actionable.
- Framing the right questions together across generational boundaries is becoming a critical skill for accessing our collective intelligence and discovering partnering opportunities.
- 'Co-mentoring' is a more useful construct than traditional mentoring, eldering or teaching. Each generation has important skills and wisdom emanating from their own life experiences, which need to be honored and utilized.
- When used wisely, new technologies and new media, a unique competence of the younger generations, can be a transformational force. Elders need to put aside their fears and partner as 'mentees' with younger leaders so that we can actively participate together using these powerful modes of engagement.
- We are convening a new reality when we invite the generations to sit down and talk together. By engaging the power of conversation as a core process for conscious

evolution, we have the opportunity to explore innovative approaches to social change that can help us act wisely—beyond ‘us’ and ‘them.’

As these dialogues continue, emerging leaders are asking potent questions. Yuliya Filipovska, a pioneering change agent from the Ukraine, recently observed that “during life we are given different names: child, youth, teen, adult, elder, senior, sister/brother, daughter/son, parent, or grandparent.” She went on to ask: “How do we get prepared for our next role? How do we embrace different roles within ourselves and within the world? What is the beauty of every role? Intergenerational dialogue is an infinite process—a process of maturity. How do we live in it consciously? How do we talk with each other? How do we listen to each other? How do we accept each other? What are the needs and aspirations of every generation?”

Sofia Bustamante, a young leader living in England, responded: “Your points about maturity, roles, and transitions made me think about ritual. What new rituals or stories do we need today? How can we re-understand it all—including the old traditions—and allow them to rebirth into something that speaks to the lost generations...lost from each other!”

Together for Tomorrow

Exciting multi-generational collaborations are emerging as we continue to explore this rich terrain. One outcome of the Ojai InterGen dialogues at Meditation Mount will be a series of intergenerational programs in Ashland, Oregon that will be aired on-line and distributed globally. Multi-generational Global Cooling Cafes are being organized in other local communities. The 10th anniversary celebration of the Pioneers of Change, with young change makers in 70 countries, will include a focus on ways to ignite greater multi-generational partnering. Planning is also underway for a large-scale multi-generational Global Passageways event, hosted by Joshua Gorman, founder of Generation Waking Up, and Melissa Michael. The Bali Institute for Global Renewal in Indonesia seeks to become a multi-generational center for global healing and inspired activism across traditional divides. The World Café, along with the Art of Hosting and others, is co-evolving a global dialogue movement on six continents—



1. Dharma Drum Meditation Center, Taiwan. 2. Mother and Child at World Café. 3. Girl Scouts at MultiGen Strategy Café. 4. Future of Education Café CA. 5. MultiGen Dialogue Graphics. 6. Taiwan Children’s Café. 7. World Café Latin America MultiGen.

bringing multi-generational and multi-stakeholder voices to bear on critical issues using powerful architectures of engagement that can enable people of all ages and stages of life to foster both collective wisdom and compassionate action for the common good.

In all these efforts, deeply personal life reflections and conversations about societal transformation are intertwining to create new pathways for co-creating positive futures. Samantha Tan, co-author of this article and co-host of several key multi-generational gatherings, discovered through dialogue with elders outside of her family how working through her conflicts with her own father might be of service to the larger movement. “I realized that neither my father nor I are ‘right,’ that each of us holds different pieces to the puzzle of creating a beautiful sustainable shared future,” she said. “The challenge then, is to make space for each other, to be loving and patient with each other, and to be in conversations with each other about questions that matter to both of us and our generations. Will it be easy? Not always. Is it worth it? Yes. And perhaps it’s the most powerful and promising way toward the future that we all want.”

Please be in touch with the authors at inquiry@theworldcafe.com to be a part of future multi-generational activities or have ones of your own to share.

Welcome to Multi-Gen!

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Juanita Brown and David Isaacs are co-founders of the World Café, an innovative approach to large group dialogue being used across sectors on six continents. Their award winning book, *The World Café: Shaping our Futures Through Conversations that Matter* is a key resource for fostering conversational leadership across the globe. Samantha Tan, a dynamic young leader from Singapore, is a former Research Fellow at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. She is a founding partner of the Meristem Group which nurtures leadership skills for change agents who are creating inspired futures in multi-stakeholder environments.

