THE WORLD CAFÉ
Living Knowledge Through Conversations That Matter

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JUANITA BROWN

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The World Café

Abstract

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The real voyage of discovery lies not
in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.
—Marcel Proust

The World Café is an innovative *methodology* for dialogic inquiry, collaborative learning, and knowledge creation. It is also an evocative *metaphor* enabling us to notice the generative power of conversation in human systems at increasing levels of scale. The World Café illuminates the ways in which dynamic networks of conversation and social learning enable us to create "living knowledge," particularly in large group settings. It describes the underlying principles that allow leaders to engage and focus these living networks in the service of institutional and societal renewal. The study calls on the lived experience of a global community of World Café practitioners including line executives, educators, and organizational strategy specialists who are using Café learning in a wide

variety of cross-cultural community, government, and business contexts. It also calls on interdisciplinary insights from living systems and the new sciences, community development, strategy innovation, consciousness studies, dialogue, and organizational learning.

Using "conversational inquiry," a research method grounded in narrative, heuristic, and hermeneutic traditions, the author joins with other collaborators as storytellers on a mutual journey of discovery. Through including and connecting creative modes of expression as well as diverse voices and multi-disciplinary insights, the author illuminates Café learning as a method for collaborative inquiry and, at the same tine, engages the World Café as a provocative organizing image for large-scale change. The collaborative research process itself reflects the living systems principles that are embodied in Café learning, thus making a substantive contribution to both generative theory as well as to "new ways of knowing" in the social sciences.

The study's findings articulate four simple operating principles that, when used in combination, support a "system thinking together" in order to access collective intelligence, discover shared meaning, and bring forth desired futures. Seeing organizations as dynamic networks of conversation and meaning-making provides the opportunity to re-conceive organizational learning, strategy innovation, technology design, and leadership development based on the ways living systems co-evolve the systemic intelligence they need to learn, adapt, and thrive.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of

Dr. Philip Rovner
" Mi tío Felipe"

who helped me discover my love of learning
and
conversations that matter

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Some of your voices speak directly on these pages. Others are being heard as conversations that matter spread over the globe and people everywhere lead the way.

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Chapter 1: Beginning the Conversation

I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child … that Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling: like that singular organic jewel of our seas, which grows brighter as one woman wears it and, worn by another, dulls and goes to dust. Facts are no more solid, coherent, round, and real than pearls are. But both are sensitive.

The story is not all mine, nor told by me alone. Indeed I am not sure whose story it is; you can judge better. But it is all one, and if at moments the facts seem to alter with an altered voice, why then you can choose the fact you like best; yet none of them are false, and it is all one story.

—Ursula K. LeGuin
(1969, p. 7)

Introducing Myself

I am a child of the sixties. During that time of social and political fervor, we were determined to "tell it like it is." We wanted to take off the masks, to remove the facades that had made the social realities of the 1950s seem so "nice and neat." That emancipatory spirit is now infused with a compassion born of more than 30 years of working with the dilemmas and paradoxes of personal and institutional renewal. That sense of self-righteousness and "noble certainty" has slowly given way to somewhat more humility, a humility born of a growing sense that there are many ways to "tell it like it is"—that any story worth telling can be experienced from multiple perspectives. It is

with this awareness that I share with you the story of the "learning journey" that is culminating in this dissertation.

This dissertation is a personal story and it is a collective story. It is an unfolding story in which I have been an active participant. It is also an unfolding story to which I have born witness. It is a story born of powerful memories from my earliest years. It is also a story born of sustained and disciplined inquiry fueled by the possibility of shedding light on deep human processes that may, with intention and attention, contribute in some small way to life-affirming futures for our children and our grandchildren.

I remember that as a child in suburban South Miami, Florida, our home was always alive with conversations. They weren't just any kind of conversations. They were conversations about the "big questions." They were questions of justice, democracy, and civil rights. They were conversations about ideas. They were conversations about questions that mattered to those gathered. I remember that from those conversations and questions the civil liberties movement in Florida was nurtured and grew into a force for decency and fairness at a time of great turmoil in the South.

I remember my adopted grandmother who was exiled from Europe to Mexico during World War II. There, in the remote state of Chiapas, she founded a global Center for dialogue and action on environmental issues, long before it was fashionable to talk about sustainability. As a teenager, I remember the lively conversations at her long dining room table in southern Mexico where anthropologists, writers, scientists, and local travelers joined together for delicious meals at the same table with Lacandon Maya rainforest people and Chamula highland Indian guests. The diversity of members present

always contributed to learning, discoveries, and connections that never could have been anticipated in advance. Today, half a century later, the Na-Bolom Center still serves as a place where the worlds meet in dialogue at the dining room table.

And I remember my early years as a community organizer with Cesar Chavez and the farm workers' movement. It was in the thousands of house meetings—in conversations among those seated on tattered couches in ramshackle homes and labor camps that small miracles occurred. Through dialogue and reflection, the underlying assumptions that had kept farm workers stuck for generations began to shift, slowly at first. As workers shared tortillas and bean suppers, they shared the "if onlys" about their lives and imagined the impossible. With practice, they began, through dialogue, to ask the "what if" questions. And from the "what ifs" came the "why nots!"

The last quarter century, my life has taken me to large corporations as a strategist and thinking partner with senior executives as they struggle to embrace the challenges of unprecedented uncertainty and the coming of the Knowledge Era. In this world, my language and descriptions have changed to that of "strategic dialogue," and "conversation as a core business process." My community organizing emphasis has evolved to focus on and embrace the informal "communities of practice" which are the home for social processes of new learning and knowledge creation.

Nonetheless, as I look back I find the essential threads of my life remain unbroken. It is still my deepest belief that in "conversations around questions that matter" powerful capacities for evolving caring community, collaborative learning, and committed action are engaged—at work, in communities, and at home.

It is in a spirit of service to this larger possibility that I share the still emerging story of learning and discovery which I and a growing global community of inquiry and practice have been engaged in over the last several years. This is an ongoing conversation and a work in progress. I welcome you to join in. Make notes in the margins. Notice what is stimulated in you by the story and the ideas shared. Give me a call or arrange to come visit. Add your voice.

I realize that my contribution to this exploration must begin with the tone and the texture of real life. The story (at least one version of the story as I have lived it) begins with the birth of the World Café as a metaphor and Café conversations as a methodology. It is embodied in words and images that touch that experience as best as I am able.

THE STORY OF THE HOMESTEAD CAFÉ

It is Friday, January 27th, 1995—a very rainy dawn at our home in Mill Valley, California. A thick mist hangs over Mt. Tamalpais as I look out beyond the massive oak tree which rings the patio outside our living room.

We have 20 people arriving in half an hour for the second day of a strategic dialogue on Intellectual Capital which my partner, David, and I are hosting in collaboration with Leif Edvinsson, the director of intellectual capital of the Skandia Corporation in Sweden. This is the second in a series of conversations among "intellectual capital pioneers"—corporate executives, researchers, and consultants from seven countries who are at the leading edge of this inquiry.

The field of intellectual capital is still in its infancy. No books have yet been written and we are still trying to scope out the territory. No maps exist. We're making them as we go. Last evening we were in the midst of exploring the questions: "What is the essential relationship between intellectual capital and leadership? What is the role of leadership in maximizing the value of IC?"

I'm worried.

As I set out the breakfast and prepare the coffee I wonder how we will manage if the pouring rain continues and no one can go outside on the patio to "hang out" and visit when they arrive. David suggests, "Why don't we put up our TV tables in the living room and just have people get their coffee and hang out around the tables while we're waiting for everyone to arrive and then we can do our formal start up and check in?"

That sounds great to me. I breathe a sigh of relief. As David is putting out the small tables and white vinyl chairs, our interactive graphics recorder, Tomi Nagai Rothe, arrives and adds "Gee, those look like café tables. I think they need some tablecloths." She puts white easel sheets over each of the paired TV tables. Now it's getting kind of playful. I've stopped worrying about the rain, which is coming down in sheets. I decide we need flowers on the café tables, and go for the small vases downstairs. In the meantime, Tomi adds colored crayolas on each of the tables, just like those in many neighborhood cafés. She makes a lovely sign for our front door—"Welcome to the Homestead Café." I find that amusing because we live on Homestead Boulevard which is actually a narrow dirt road up the side of a mountain.

Just as I get the flowers on the tables, folks begin to arrive. They are delighted and amused. As people get their coffee and croissants they gather in informal groups around the café tables. People are really engaged. They begin to scribble on the tablecloths. David and I have a quick huddle and decide that, rather than have a formal opening to the gathering, we will simply encourage people to continue to share "what's bubbling up" from their conversations the day before that they think could shed light on the essence of the relationship between leadership and intellectual capital.

Forty-five minutes pass and the conversation is still going strong. Charles Savage, one of our members, calls out, "I'd love to have a feel for what's happening in the other conversations in the room. Why don't we leave one host at the table and have our other members 'travel' to different tables, carrying the seed ideas from our conversation and connecting and linking with the threads that are being woven at other tables." There's consensus that the suggestion seems like fun. After a few minutes of wrap-up, folks begin to move around the room. One host remains. Their table mates each go to a different café table to continue the conversations.

This round lasts another hour. Now the room is alive!! People are excited and engaged, almost breathless. Another person speaks up. "Why don't we experiment by leaving a new host at the table, with the others traveling, continuing to share and link what we're discovering."

And so it was. The rain falling, hard. People huddling around the TV tables, learning together, testing ideas and assumptions together, building new

knowledge together, adding to each others' diagrams and pictures and noting key words and ideas on the tablecloths.

I look up and realize that it is close to lunch time. I have been participating in the café conversations myself and the hours passed for me as if they were only a moment. The energy field in the room is palpable. It is as if the very air is shimmering. I ask the group to slowly wrap up their conversations and gather around a large rolled out piece of mural paper that Tomi placed on the rug in the middle of the living room floor.

We gathered around the "magic carpet" of paper on the floor. David asked, "what have we learned?" As I watched our collective discoveries and insights unfold visually on the magic carpet in the center of the group, I knew something quite unusual had happened that morning. I was bearing witness to something for which I had no language. Yet intuitively I knew that we had accidentally "tapped into" something very basic, something that felt familiar but that I had never actually experienced in this way. Something very simple, but potentially very powerful.

This was not the Bohmian dialogue that I had as a part of the core research team of the MIT Dialogue Project. It was not the Alinsky-style community organizing I had learned in the farm workers' movement, although there was something in that living room that harkened back to my early years of house meetings with Cesar Chavez. It certainly wasn't interpersonal group process in any of the myriad ways that I had learned during my days as a process consultant and T-Group trainer at the NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Sciences. It was something different. It was almost as if the intelligence of a larger Self than the individual selves in the room had made itself visible to us through the café conversations. The Café process had somehow enabled us to become more aware of our "collective knowing" at increasing levels of scale.

The most skeptical member of the group early on was the president of a company dealing with issues of intellectual property rights and patents. At the end of the café day he wrote the following rather whimsical poem and shared it with the group:

The group met in January
to talk of IC for two days
Of leadership stuff
they didn't talk fluff
They found lots of things they could say.
They worked from morn until 'een
defining and keeping things clean
Not only just talk
They drew pictures with chalk

They honed ideas down to the lean.
And now that the two days are thru
all sit back and breathe a great "phew,"
At what they have wrought
they seeked and they sought
They go forth a newly linked crew.
A new sense of community
defines this group to a "T"
Great ideas to tend
a new set of friends
And lots of grand things yet to be.

As the day draws to a close I say to Finn Voldtofte, a close colleague from Denmark who was staying with us for another couple of days, "Finn, we have to spend some time understanding and working more deeply with what happened here."

Discovering "The World Café"

The next day it was still raining. Finn, David, and I curled up on the couch in the family room downstairs with a fire in the fireplace and a tape recorder on a small table in front of us. We began to talk together of what we had experienced. We quieted ourselves and listened. We allowed the Café day to "speak to us," to tell us what had happened.

We explored what had occurred when people entered the room and saw the Homestead Café. Was there something about the change of environment, the physical context, that contributed to the richness of the exchange?

We asked ourselves what it was about Café as a metaphor that evoked the immediate intimacy and collective engagement that we experienced. Did the café metaphor itself in some ways hold properties and energy within which the quality of conversation we had experienced could simply emerge in a natural way?

We wondered about the role of individual and collective intention, and its relationship to the collective energy field that seemed to surround and envelop us. Was it significant that all the members saw themselves as "pioneers" seeking new insight around questions we cared deeply about?

We considered the role of questions in catalyzing collaborative thinking. What is the role of powerful questions that "travel well" throughout a system?

We hypothesized about the power of the cross-pollination and weaving of ideas that had occurred. What was important about the fact that people from small groups carried "seeds of life" from one conversation to the next—noticing connections within and between conversations at increasing levels of scale?

And I said:

> Perhaps the power of what happened in the café upstairs was that we were actually experiencing the world's natural self-organizing process where there are small group conversations happening all over. People are then seeding other conversations with what they are taking from the conversation they had. And those people recombine it. It continues to transform and change its shape, but as long as the intention to learn is held steady and the questions matter, then it can take many different shapes in a self-organizing way. They (the conversations) recombine, each becoming a sort of fractal of the larger whole, and when they recombine again, they all become fractals of a larger and larger whole. (Learning Conversation, Jan. 1995)

Finn added:

> Cross fertilization of learnings and insights and ideas—that was really at work here. And it can't be predicted how that will travel to other parts of the World Café. The only thing we can do is set the initiating conditions based on our understanding of how self-organizing systems work. Something real, something important is going on here. And it's so simple. (Finn Voldtofte, Learning Conversation, Jan. 1995)

That afternoon the metaphor of **World Café** evolved as a core image to our emerging exploration. We felt that our living room had, in fact, been a small microcosm of the world with members from seven nationalities and diverse life experiences. The metaphor of the Café recalled for us the importance of people and relationships as a key to seeking and seeing new connections. It also implied to us a participatory ethic and a natural, comfortable social process of being and learning together. Writing on the tablecloths reminded us of how many new ideas and social innovations have historically been born through informal conversations in cafés, salons, sewing circles, and living rooms.

We decided to begin to use Café conversation approaches in our own work. We agreed to come back together periodically to share our discoveries and insights. At the time, I wasn't thinking about this material becoming a dissertation. I was, however, fascinated by the patterns that we were noticing and was committed to supporting a disciplined inquiry into the phenomenon we had experienced in our living room.

It was only later that we began to explore the difference between an individual Café conversation as a learning event and a more refined conception of the larger metaphor or guiding image of the World Café.

We are now coming to see the World Café as a guiding image that can enable people to become increasingly aware of the importance and connectedness of the networks of conversation and social learning through which we discover shared meaning, access collective intelligence, and bring forth the future. We believe that the World Café may have the potential to serve as a catalyzing metaphor pointing toward the

deeper dynamics of social co-evolution and learning in human systems. The World Café may reflect a core process in human systems through which collective intelligence can become aware of itself as a generative force at increasing levels of scale.

We are coming to distinguish Café conversations as a dialogic methodology for collaborative learning and discovery from the World Café as a metaphor for a core systemic process of co-evolution in human systems.

As Peter Reason points out in his article, "Experience, Action and Metaphor as Dimensions of Post-Positivist Inquiry,"

> We can play with the metaphors of our inquiry … As we live and work within a metaphor we can ask: Is it fruitful? Is it illuminating and creative? Does it show the phenomena in new ways? … In a world of multiple realities, fruitfulness will often be more important than accuracy … we can begin to establish dialogue between our metaphor and those used by other people. From such a dialogue, new world views may emerge. (1988, p.224)

Since that rainy day almost five years ago when the World Café was born, a great deal has happened in our lives and work. Café learning conversations have been hosted in many places including Mexico, Israel, Denmark, Sweden, England, Scotland, New Zealand, Fiji, and throughout the U.S.

Groups as small as 12 and as large as 1,200 have engaged in explorations of issues as varied as developing a shared knowledge base among R & D specialists at a global telecommunications company, fostering regional treaty negotiations among Maori indigenous leaders in New Zealand, catalyzing scenario planning in Mexico, creating multi-racial Commons Café dialogues in Oregon, and hosting Knowledge Cafés among Pacific Rim executives in Fiji.

My partners, David Isaacs, Nancy Margulies, and I have hosted a Café gathering for over 1,000 people from 27 countries as a keynote experience entitled *The World Café: Catalyzing Large-Scale Collective Learning* for the national Systems Thinking in Action Conference. And in a global consumer products corportation, Café conversations were at the heart of a three-day global strategic dialogue among key marketing representatives from more than 30 nations.

Virtual on-line Knowledge Cafés are now being organized based on World Café learning processes originally introduced to the Kaos Pilots University in Denmark where a group of more than 80 Café hosts are working with the deeper living systems principles that we are currently exploring. In Sweden, Café methodologies are being used to host strategic dialogues of corporate leaders from the Infocom world to explore the question: *How can information technology contribute to a sustainable future?*

A global World Café learning community is evolving as we and colleagues from around the world experiment, document our work, share ideas, and learn from each other about the theory and practice embodied in the "Café conversations" approach to accessing collective intelligence and creating generative futures.

It is now time for me to pause and to reflect. It is time to begin to weave the threads of my own and our colleagues' experiences into a disciplined tapestry of meaning and contribution to both theory and practice. It is time to add our voices to the emerging discourse within our field. I hope for my doctoral dissertation to provide that opportunity.

Focusing the Inquiry

As long as I can remember, I've been drawn to tales about the dynamics of social movements and large-scale change. When I was seven, my mother took me to see a creative theater presentation about Jesus' last days on earth as a man. It told of how he was imprisoned, how he was sentenced to die, and how he died. It told of the social, political, and historical context in which Jesus' life (and death) mobilized the energies of early Christianity. I was so taken with the power and the haunting images of the story that I hounded my mom until she got me a copy of the script, which I have to this very day. It still gives me chills when I read it.

In my mid-teens, I saw the film *Spartacus* starring Kirk Douglas. Again, I had the same feeling of identification and fascination with the process by which this movement for dignity and liberation was born.

During my first sojourns to southern Mexico as a college student at Antioch, I listened for hours as my adopted grandmother, Gertrude Blom, combing the fur of her huge afghan hounds, told me stories of the great European labor leaders. Her participation in the Resistance movement resulted in her exile to Mexico during the early years of World War II. I was fascinated by what had happened in Spain and in other parts of Europe during the period leading up to that war. I did my undergraduate thesis at Antioch College on Stephen Spender and the other poets who had joined International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War as a way of expressing their solidarity with the Republican movement there.

After receiving a prestigious social science fellowship from Cornell University, I left the doctoral program to work full time with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers movement. My time with them was my true graduate education. It was there that the deeper sources of my current inquiry were born and nurtured.

Vivid images come to mind from my days in the grape fields and dusty towns of California's San Joaquin Valley. Images of farm workers gathering first in small circles at house meetings, then in larger groups, then by the hundreds and thousands with a focused energy that was palpable. The effort attracted millions who joined in common conversation and committed action around the simple question, *"Can life be better for the least among us and if so, how?"* The farm workers' movement and the conversations it catalyzed engaged the heart, hope, and help of diverse groups all over the globe. How did that happen? What were the underlying principles that enabled transformational change in the lives of those considered forever mired in the "culture of poverty?" (Brown, 1972). What catalyzed the best efforts and contribution of those of us who participated as volunteers?

At the time, I thought that the successes we achieved were the sole result of community organizing efforts to mobilize the people and take a stand against injustice. I believed that it was the creative, adversarial organizing tactics espoused by Saul Alinksy (1969; 1971) and the patient, disciplined, non-violent methods that we learned from Cesar's mentor, Fred Ross.

It wasn't until the mid-1990s, more than 30 years later, when I facilitated a participatory action research project on the use of the community metaphor as a catalyst

for large-scale corporate renewal (Landau, & Brown, 1995) that I began to see underlying principles of the farm workers' movement in a different light. During this same we also were beginning to reflect in a more disciplined way on the experiments we had been doing with Café conversations in increasingly larger groups in both the non-profit and corporate sectors.

Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers gave me a copy of their new book on self-organizing systems, *A Simpler Way,* soon after it was published in 1996. In it, Meg and Myron share their belief that "beneath all structures and behaviors lies the real creator—dynamic processes" (p.81). Even though the outward forms were very different, I began to wonder if there might be something in common in the underlying dynamics of the farm workers' movement, our corporate action-research on community at work, and our Café learning experiments.

In fact, perhaps the origin and spread of many social innovations, including the Scandinavian study circles, (Oliver, 1987) the French revolution (N'Ha Sandra & Reader, 1997), and the American movement for independence (Foner, 1976) were sourced by a common core process that was only partially illuminated by my early focus on community organizing. Perhaps the community organizing lens based on core images of mobilization and "taking a stand against was only one possible vantage point from which to base understandings and action choices in the domain of large-scale systems change.

Rather than focusing on specific organizing tactics, perhaps there was something about our experiences of conversation as a core process in these diverse settings that was important to explore. In contrast to other approaches to dialogue in organizations, our

own work had not focused on conversation as a process of *intrapersonal* discovery about the nature and fragmentation of collective thought (Bohm, 1996; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1999) or on *interpersonal* skills development (Ross, 1998; Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999; Zimmerman, 1996). Rather, our experiences were leading us to experiment with conversation as a core process at a *transpersonal* or larger networked level of system.

At the transpersonal level, the architecture of engagement and attention seems to be such that one conversation sparks others that move through a web of connections and relationships, simultaneously creating new connections which are, themselves, alive with energy. There seems to be something fundamentally different about the dynamics of working with conversation in this more systemic way that I did not yet understand.

It raised several questions for me that have informed and focused the current inquiry:

- What are the multi-disciplinary threads of inquiry and practice that point to the role of dialogue and networks of conversation as fundamental to our human capacity, in Humberto Maturana's words, to "bring forth a world."
- What is the relationship between the micro processes for creating "conversations that matter" in group settings and the macro processes of social learning and co-evolution in human systems at increasing levels of scale? How might conversation operate as a systemic force for shared meaning, learning, co-evolution and renewal?
- What are the simplest operating principles or initiating conditions that enable "conversations that matter" to flourish and spread?
- What core images and metaphors can most simply and powerfully capture and communicate these dynamics and principles?
- How can we articulate our thinking about this leading edge area of inquiry in ways that are simple, creative, fun, and evocative?

- What are the next steps and questions in this inquiry and how might they be undertaken by other scholar/practitioners? For example, what might be the implications of this emerging theory and practice for the skills, knowledge and capabilities of leaders in both organizational and community life?

More specifically, this dissertation is focused on exploring the following question:

How can our lived experience with the World Café both as a dialogic learning methodology and as a living systems metaphor deepen our understanding of conversation as a core process for discovering shared meaning, accessing collective intelligence, and bringing forth the future at increasing levels of scale?

The purpose of the dissertation is not to empirically test or prove a particular hypothesis about the relationship between the World Café and large-scale change, or even about the conditions required to foster and spread "conversations that matter." Rather, in keeping with the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, I wish to engage, as Van Manen points out, in a "reflective grasping of what it is that renders … that particular experience its special significance" (1990, p. 32).

I will use stories from the World Café to suggest different ways of seeing larger-scale patterns and dynamics in ways that support and enable coherent and effective action choices by leaders and others interested in institutional and societal renewal.

I also want this work to contribute to the development of "generative theory" which Kenneth Gergen encourages as he considers the "generative capacity " of the behavioral sciences, that is, their capacity to "foster reconsideration of that which is 'taken for granted' and thereby furnish new alternatives for social actions" (1978, p. 1346).

Chapter 2: Living Into A Methodology

> *As civilized human beings, we are the inheritors neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation begun in the primeval forest and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries.*
>
> *—Michael Oakeshoot*
> *(as cited in Czarniawska, 1998, p. 51)*

Storytelling as Inquiry

Several years ago my partner, David Isaacs, and I wrote a lead article for *The Systems Thinker,* entitled "Conversation as a Core Business Process" (1996). The article received a lot of play within the organizational learning and systems thinking communities. I spent a good deal of time crafting the article, making sure that it was well researched, well documented, and professional in both tone and content.

Pleased with myself, I sent the article to a number of my colleagues, including one of my mentors, Roger Harrison. Roger had been a professor at Yale, and was one of the early pioneers in experiential learning at the NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science. He is a stickler for quality. I have great respect for his professionalism. His academic credentials are impeccable.

I was stunned at his response. He sent an e-mail, and although I am paraphrasing from memory, his comments went something like this:

> Juanita, I've read your recent *Systems Thinker* article with great interest and care. You have done an excellent job of crafting this material and I am sure it will be well received. However, I was saddened by what I read. You and I have known each other for 25 years. I know you are passionate

> about this work—both about the ideas and about the practice and its potential for making a difference in the world.
>
> And yet, I neither saw nor felt the knowledge that YOU embody because of your love for (yes, Juanita, not only passion, but love for) this work.
>
> I look forward to the day when you will give yourself permission to speak from that voice and from the living knowledge that comes from the kind of intimate relationship you have experienced with both the people and the processes that are central to our emerging understandings about dialogue as a systemic force for large-scale change. I invite you to take up that challenge.

I was upset and confused, and I was hooked! Roger had touched something very deep in me. I thought about his comments for days—in fact I'm still thinking about them.

I recalled the years that I had served as a Spanish-English translator for the United Farm Workers. During that time, I created a bridge of understanding for labor leaders as they gave ponderous speeches to non-English speaking farm worker crowds at major rallies. I served as the translator for Cesar Chavez, as he spoke in his soft Spanish to workers gathered at hot Friday night meetings along with Anglo volunteers who spoke no Spanish but cared for "La Causa" and wanted to help. Under the watchful eyes and ears of attorneys from both sides, I translated for workers at labor hearings who had been subjected to unfair labor practices by growers.

Oh, did I know how to translate! But as I look back on it, I never actually spoke in my own voice. My job was always to translate someone else's voice in a way that some defined "other" could understand and find useful.

After Roger wrote to me, I spent time looking at the other articles I had written during my professional career—all with high sounding titles like, "Mindshift: Strategic Dialogue for Breakthrough Thinking," (Bennett & Brown, 1995) and "Building

Corporations as Communities: The Best of Both Worlds" (Brown & Isaacs, 1995). All of these were crafted primarily as an explanation or a conceptual translation rather than as a direct creative expression of my own or even others' relationship to the material I was exploring.

I had written, however, an evocative piece for MIT as part of my ongoing conversation with Peter Senge about the difference between community development and organizational development as two complementary approaches to institutional renewal. Entitled, "Si Se Puede: Yes It Can Be Done" (Brown, 1995), this was the personal story of my lived experience with the farm workers' movement and my reflections on the deeper organizing principles embedded in that work. That paper, which has been widely circulated, consistently evoked a richer, more engaged response from readers than any other work I have done.

I didn't have language to describe the difference at the time. More recently, Peter Reason and Peter Hawkins in their reflections on storytelling as a hermeneutic method of inquiry have helped me understand this important distinction and its implications for my choice of methodology, voice, and style in this dissertation. They share that:

> We see *explanation* and *expression* as two basic modes of reflecting on and processing experience. *Explanation* is the mode of classifying, conceptualizing and building theories from experience. Here the inquirer stands back, analyzes, discovers or invents concepts, and relates these in a theoretical model. Orthodox science is an exercise in explanation.
>
> *Expression* is the mode of allowing the meaning of experience to become manifest. It requires the inquirer to partake deeply of the experience, rather than stand back in order to analyze … We work with the meaning of experience when we tell stories, write and act in plays, write poems, meditate, create pictures.

> We are arguing that the expression of experience, and this inquiry into meaning, is an important part of research which has been almost ignored by orthodox science. … So what is needed is a *methodology of meaning making as part of human inquiry*. (1988, pp. 80-81)

They go on to comment on Ken Wilber's notion of hermeneutics as "the science of interpretation," and continue with Wilber's reflections that hermeneutics is a "transempirical discipline, for no amount of analytic-empirical-scientific data, no matter how complete, can totally establish meaning … Rather, meaning is established, not by sensory data, but by unrestrained communicative inquiry and interpretation" (as cited in Reason & Hawkins, 1988).

In a continuing conversation with the ideas of other authors who have influenced their thinking regarding storytelling as inquiry, Reason and Hawkins refer to Ian Mitroff's reflections (1978) on varieties of social scientific investigation. Mitroff honors the influence of C. West Churchman (1971) who emphasized Hegel's idea that the most useful inquiry is the inquiry that produces stories. (Isn't it interesting how the flow of conversation continues to weave among a community of scholars?). Mitroff then adds his own conclusions on an emerging style of inquiry he calls that of the conceptual humanist (CH).

> But is storytelling science? Does a system designed to tell stories well also produce knowledge? … For the CH the answer is "yes". This does not mean that any story qualifies as science but that science consists of taking stories seriously. In this sense stories form an essential ingredient of the CH's method because they provide the "hardest" body of evidence and the best method of problem definition.
>
> The best stories are those which stir people's minds, hearts and souls and by doing so give them new insights into themselves … and their human condition. The challenge is to develop a human science that more

> fully serves this aim. The question then is not "Is storytelling science" but "Can science learn to tell good stories?" (1978, pp. 92-3)

Reason and Hawkins (1988) see a dialogue emerging between explanatory and expressive modes of inquiry as complementary ways to gain perspective and achieve validity in the human sciences. They see the explanatory mode going from experience through explanation to general theory and the expressive mode going from experience through expression to deep patterns, metaphors, or archetypes.

In my own writing for this dissertation, I experiment with an interplay between these two modalities as the "conversational inquiry" unfolds. I will speak more specifically to this interplay as we continue to explore together the approaches I am using in this dissertation. My purpose here is simply to signal that I plan to situate my work, in part, within a rich tradition of narrative approaches which include storytelling and evocative writing as credible modes of social science inquiry (Bertaux, 1981; Braud & Anderson, 1998; Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988a; Richardson, 1997; Van Manen, 1990).

Voices and Choices

Not long after I received Roger Harrison's challenge, David and I were invited to New Zealand to help facilitate a two week Institute of Noetic Sciences study and dialogue trip as well as to co-host a strategic conversation among Maori indigenous and Pakeha (Anglo) leaders searching together to discover common "threads to the future." At the end of each day we gathered in a dialogue circle to reflect on the meaning of the events we had experienced. One evening, a sandy-haired, clean cut young man in his late

twenties spoke into the silence in the center of the room. He began to read quietly, with intensity, from a single page he had laid in front of him on the floor:

I Want a Voice

I want a voice
I want a deep, resonant, effortless voice
A big voice, bigger than me alone
I want to speak so that people hear me first with their
    bodies and only then with their ears
A voice strong like an ax to cut through the silence
A voice to quicken the heart like drums in the night
I want a voice that is the voice of many
The voice of a people
The voice of a nation
And with this voice I would cry Freedom
    and I would speak Peace

I began to weep. I was deeply moved by his words and by the quiet passion of his expression. I realized in that moment that I, too, was searching for my own voice, searching for a form of natural and creative expression that could reveal not only my own lived experience of the dialogue work over more than a quarter of a century, but also the excitement and adventure of the intellectual journey I and others have been on over these last years—the road we are making by walking on it.

I sensed that one of the reasons it had taken me so long to move toward doing my dissertation or other major writing projects which publishers had encouraged me to do was that I didn't feel I could write in the disembodied, dispassionate voice that I

imagined was required for those publications. I couldn't take steps to alleviate my concerns, since I couldn't fully articulate the source of my "dis-ease."

I was asked by Pegasus Communications, the publisher of our original *Systems Thinker* article, to do a piece on our systemic approach to conversation as part of their *Innovations in Management* series. I tried for several months to write that piece. Every time I began, the writing felt stilted and unreal. In addition, it felt (and *I* felt) downright bored. Perhaps I was being haunted by Roger Harrison's voice challenging me to give myself permission to speak from the deeper relational knowing which comes from the intimate connection I had experienced with both people and processes that form part of our emerging understandings about dialogue as a systemic force for large-scale change.

A breakthrough came in early 1999 when I was deciding, finally, to use our World Café research in action as core material for my dissertation and other writing. At first, I was even hesitant to use the language of "World Café." I worried about opening our World Café website with *juanita@theworldcafe.com* because I was concerned that colleagues in our field would think I was unprofessional.

I shared my initial Fielding concept paper material with Libby Douvan, chair of my doctoral committee, including the story which opens this dissertation. She asked me if I had ever read anything by Laurel Richardson, a feminist sociologist whom she respected. Libby suggested that I read Richardson's recent book, *Fields of Play*.

It was love at first read. Here was a respected academic speaking in language I could understand! Richardson states that,

> In scientific writing … neither "I" nor "we" are used. With no apparent narrator, an illusion of objectivity is created. The implied narrator is

> godlike, an all-knowing voice from afar and above, stripped of all human subjectivity and fallibility. But, in fact, science does have a human narrator, the camouflaged first person, hiding in the bramble of the passive voice. … By objectifying ourselves out of existence, we void our own experiences. We separate our humanity from our work. (1997, pp. 18-19)

Richardson seemed to be speaking directly to my own "dis-ease" when she pointed out that in her own field, sociology,

> Even when the topic was ostensibly riveting, the writing style and reporting conventions were deadening … passive voice; absent narrator; long, inelegant, authorial statements and quotations … hoards of references … and most disheartening, the suppression of narrativity ("plot", character, event). (p. 149)

In an evocative image which made me smile with recognition, she continues by sharing that, " I found myself clutching at my own throat at the thought of writing 'straight' sociological prose" (p. 149).

Richardson raises a powerful and haunting question, "How then do we write ourselves into our texts with intellectual and spiritual integrity? How do we nurture our own voices, our own individualities, and at the same time lay claim to 'knowing' something?" (p. 3).

It was about this time that I was introduced to Max Van Manen's reflections on hermeneutic phenomenology, which focused on writing as a method of human sciences research. Van Manen points out that:

> For the human sciences, and specifically for hermeneutic phenomenological work, writing is closely fused into the research activity and reflection itself. … Writing creates the reflective cognitive stance that generally characterizes the theoretic attitude in the social sciences. (1990, p. 125)

He continues with an observation that for me shed light on Richardson's provocative question:

> The writer produces text, and he or she produces more than text. The writer produces himself or herself. … Writing is a kind of self-making or forming. To write is to measure the depth of things, as well as to come to a sense of one's own depth. (pp. 126-27)

I was also influenced in my choice of narrative voice and style by an exchange I had with Art Kleiner. Art wrote *The Age of Heretics* (1996) about early pioneers in the field of organizational renewal. He collaborated with Peter Senge in writing *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) and has been an active editorial advisor to a number of us in the MIT community. He had read and loved my "Si Se Puede" paper where I used the story of my experiences with the farm workers' movement to suggest new ways to consider principles for institutional change.

Art encouraged me to find books in my field that I enjoyed and to notice how they were written. He said that they would give me clues to my own natural style of writing. I followed his advice. Two books immediately leapt out as candidates. The first was Mitchell Waldrop's *Complexity* (1992). Waldrop tells the story of the evolution of the Santa Fe Institute and the conversations among the scientists at the leading edge of the inquiry into complex adaptive systems. *The Washington Post*, reviewing the book, commented, "Waldrop creates the most exciting intellectual adventure story of the year." On the book jacket, *The New York Times Book Review* noted that Waldrop "lucidly shows physicists, biologists, computer scientists, and economists swapping metaphors and reveling in the sense that epochal discoveries are just around the corner. Waldrop has a special talent for relaying the exhilaration of moments of intellectual insight."

As a non-scientist reading the story, I was enthralled. The story is based on extensive conversations with key players as well as ongoing visits to the Santa Fe Institute. Written in an informal, layperson's style, it unfolds dialogues and discoveries in rich, evocative prose. It illuminates complex ideas in simple (but not simplistic) ways.

Waldrop himself is not even mentioned in the story other than in three lines of description on the back cover. However, it is clear that he is present as the active narrator of the tale. The evolution of complexity theory is framed as a work in progress—a lively and continuously emerging story embodied in the voices and reflections of the actual community of scientists who are participating in the work.

The second book that struck me was Joe Jaworski's *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership* (1996). Joe and I have known each other for several years through our mutual collaboration with the MIT Organizational Learning Center (now called the Society for Organizational Learning).

Synchronicity is seemingly the exact opposite of Waldrop's *Complexity*. It is an intensely personal book, focusing on Joe's own richly textured "hero's journey" as he searches for revealing insights about the inner path of leadership. A key part of the story lies in his deep conversations with several leading thinkers including David Bohm and Francisco Varela, who influenced his evolving understandings about leadership and working with emerging futures.

Synchronicity is a profoundly relational book. In contrast to Waldrop's story, it is written completely in the first person. Its style reveals Joe's intimate personal relationship to himself, to other people, and to ideas which have shaped his deeper knowing.

Francisco Varela, director of research at The National Center for Scientific Research in Paris, writes:

> Jaworski's book is unique and remarkable. Unique because he has the courage to lay bare the inner working of his life-long learning. … Remarkable because his journey is universal in its quest for uncovering the possibilities inherent in human collective action which are sorely needed in our troubled times. (from galley proofs 1996)

Both books use references and footnotes very judiciously, with Waldrop's being included unobtrusively in the body of the text as part of the flow of the story, and Joe's noted only in brief chapter notes at the end of the book. Yet neither work seems to lose legitimacy or credibility in its knowledge claims by virtue of these stylistic choices.

As I look at these two books and the powerful ways they create a sense of coherence and validity, I find myself going back to Laurel Richardson's wry comments on how references are often used in academic writing. "References," she says, "are authority moves; disruptions; inviting the reader to disengage from the text, like answering the doorbell in the middle of a lively conversation" (1997, p. 187).

In the following sections, I'll be sharing the ways I am planning to work with the material I've gathered as a key part of the methodology for the dissertation.

Personal and Collective Voice

I think of this dissertation as weaving the story of a collective and highly interactive journey of inquiry and practice with an autobiographical narrative thread, situated in the context of my own family, socio-political, and conceptual history. I develop the thesis in a narrative style that can be made available to multiple audiences,

rather than being restricted to the limitations of formal academic discourse. Part of the unique contribution of this dissertation project to new knowledge in our field lays precisely in its capacity for making key ideas accessible to non-academic audiences. Frankly, I feel saddened that ideas and practices which may have broad relevance remain for too long in a community of discourse that is not accessible to a larger public.

While my voice will provide the "red thread" for the story, as in Jaworski's *Synchronicity*, it will also include the voices of many who have contributed to our collective learning, in the style of Waldrop. Similar to Turner, the anthropologist, I locate myself as a witness, writing my own story, sharing other people's accounts of theirs, and "following the arabesque of interpersonal memories, action, and conversation" (Turner, 1993, p. 35).

Dialogue vs. Dialectic

Richardson points out that in traditional academic discourse "knowledge is metaphored as possessions or battlefields. Greed and conflict. Have/have not; win/lose; position/resistance/counter-resistance" (1997, p. 78). In contrast, I choose to engage in a dialogic relationship both with the material I have gathered and in relation to other contributors who may ascribe to alternative frames of reference. I am not interested in my work serving to win an argument against others in the field. I'm more interested in creating a type of "conversational relation that the researcher develops with the notion he or she wishes to explore and understand" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 98). I do not want this work to be judged by its tightness or rightness. Rather, as David Cooperrider suggests, I want this work to be judged by its generative capacity—its ability to contribute to

"normative dialogue that is conducive to self-directed experimentation in social innovation" (1987, p. 165). Frankly, I want to create an invitation rather than a dissertation.

Appreciative Stance

David Kolb (1984) points out that appreciation as a process of affirmation is unlike criticism which is based on skepticism and doubt. He notes that "appreciative apprehension and critical comprehension are thus fundamentally different processes of knowing" (1984, pp.104-5). I choose to use an appreciative stance toward the living knowledge explored in this dissertation, focusing on those multi-disciplinary ideas, people, and experiences which have been life-giving and generative and that have enhanced and enriched my understanding and perspective.

Multi-disciplinary Weaving

Rather than the traditional literature review which is often narrowly focused in a single domain of inquiry, I have chosen to "play the fields." The value of this way of exploring the intellectual contributions of others to my thinking lies precisely in the fact that it has been a search for insights across disciplinary boundaries.

I include in the flow of the story key ideas and insights from my multi-disciplinary inquiry as I shed light on the patterns that connect to my exploration of conversation as a generative force in human systems at increasing levels of scale. Think of the narrative in this dissertation as revealing an ongoing flow of stimulating conversations with key ideas and people rather than as a separately constructed and

narrowly defined review of the literature where the primary goal is to find holes rather than to find wholes.

References and APA Style

Laurel Richardson has reflected that by "using the standard conventions and procedures … we conceal the lived, interactional context in which a text was co-produced" (1997, p. 140). As noted earlier, I am purposely not using the APA third person, objectified writing conventions in this dissertation since they would obscure rather than illuminate both the phenomena I am trying to understand and the relational process used in our collective exploration.

I use APA conventions in providing bibliographic citations throughout the text. However, this is a narrative describing an intellectual journey which has included colleagues who are also friends and members of an active community of inquiry and practice. Where I reference published authors as part of the ongoing storytelling, I use their formal names where their works are first referenced. These and other bibliographic references are cited in APA style. However, I have chosen to use colloquial names (i.e. Bill vs. William, Meg vs. Margaret) where I reference these authors as part of the ongoing storytelling in order to maintain the integrity of the informal conversational style I have chosen for this work.

Because I include multiple voices and varied modes of expression, including Café case stories, composite dialogues, personal vignettes, poetry and graphic illustration, I have utilized a variety of visual formats to facilitate the readers ease in

reviewing the document. My doctoral committee has approved these departures from APA style.

In contrast to much academic writing, I do not plan to engineer long lists of references and quotations from experts as "authority moves" (Richardson, 1997, p. 187) to prove my legitimacy as a "knower." Rather, I will provide a more in-depth focus on those key multi-disciplinary contributions of people and ideas that have been turning or epiphanies in my personal and/or our collective learning journey. My engagement with the ideas of Reason and Hawkins (1988, pp. 78-101) on storytelling as inquiry, with Laurel Richardson (1997) regarding find my voice and writing style, and with Mitchell Waldrop's exploration of complexity theory (1992) are examples of that approach.

Use of Combination Genres

Richardson points out that combination genres are illuminating forms of social science writing. "In combination genres, fictional stories, field notes, analysis, reflexivity all can coexist … Each part takes meaning and depth in the context of the whole text" (1997, p. 67). In addition to thematic content from the documentation I have gathered, I plan to use multiple lenses to illuminate key points and principles, as suggested by Richardson. These include Café case stories, composite dialogues, personal vignettes, poetry, and graphic illustration that have been developed as part of this work.

This is what Richardson refers to as "crystallization" (1997) in contrast to "triangulation" (Denzin, 1989). The image of the crystal, Richardson suggests, "combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances … and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous" (1997, p. 92). My intent

is to provide a variety of lenses into the World Café and the deeper principles it may point toward so that the reader can choose his or her own interpretation and perspective.

Integrating Conversational Inquiry as a Methodology

It was in Douglass's and Moustakas's (1985) and Moustakas's (1990) elucidation of the underlying principles and research stance of heuristic inquiry that I finally found another signpost on my research journey. I discovered what I had actually been doing in my process of discovery over these last several years!

Even though Moustakas focuses primarily on individual human emotional experience (i.e. loneliness, love), I believe his thinking is equally relevant to heuristic inquiry regarding collective human experiences like the World Café. Moustakas outlines the key dimensions of heuristic inquiry:

> The root meaning of *heuristic* comes from the Greek work *heuriskein,* meaning to discover or find. It refers to a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis. … The process of discovery leads investigators to new images and meanings regarding human phenomena, but also to realizations relevant to their own experiences and lives. …
>
> The heuristic process is a way of being informed, a way of knowing. Whatever presents itself in the consciousness of the investigator as perception, sense, intuition, or knowledge represents an invitation for further elucidation. What appears, what shows itself as itself, casts a light that enables one to come to know more fully what something is and means. In such a process not only is knowledge extended but the self of the researcher is illuminated.
>
> I begin the heuristic investigation with my own self-awareness and explicate that awareness with reference to a question or problem until an essential insight is achieved, one that will throw a beginning light onto a critical human experience.

> In the heuristic process, I am personally involved. I am searching for qualities, conditions, and relationships that underlie a fundamental question, issue, or concern. … I am reaching into deeper and deeper regions of a human problem or experience and coming to know and understand its underlying dynamics and constituents more and more fully. (1990, pp. 11-13)

In bold contrast to the positivist epistemology, Moustakas admonishes that in order to be able to truly "know" and be able to validate the knowledge one is sharing:

> The investigator must have had a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated. There must have been actual autobiographical connections … the heuristic researcher has undergone the experience in a vital, intense, and full way (p.14).

In reflecting on the methodology associated with hueristic inquiry, Douglass and Moustakas point out that:

> Learning that proceeds heuristically has a path of its own. It is self-directed, self-motivated, and open to spontaneous shift … It permits a high degree of flexibility in the design of the investigation … heuristic inquiry challenges the scientist to follow a direction that will most effectively reveal the descriptive and analogical nature of the theme or problem … Openness in searching into a problem eventually may lead to literature, to other people, to institutions and to nature, in near or faraway places; most importantly, it permits shifts in method … as one vigorously pursues heuristic knowledge.
>
> The steps of heuristic inquiry unfold spontaneously, yet they are guided by a desire to illuminate the phenomenon. In the spirit of this flow, it is appropriate to change methods or procedures in midstream, according to the requirements of explicating the levels of meaning connected with the investigation. (1985, pp.44-45)

I have chosen to call the methodology I am using in this dissertation, "conversational inquiry." Conversational inquiry as I am using the term here rests at the intersection of narrative inquiry and storytelling (Polkinghorne, 1988a; Reason, 1988); writing as method (Richardson, 1997; Van Manen, 1990); hueristic inquiry (Douglass &

Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990); collaborative forms of hermeneutic inquiry (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Gadamer, 1991; Morgan, 1983; Van Manen, 1990); and reflexive research (Steier, 1991). Each of these involves the researcher as an engaged participant in collaboration with other "storytellers" as conversation partners who participate in sharing their interpretations of the lived experience under consideration. While my methodology of conversational inquiry rests squarely in the narrative traditions mentioned above, it is not narrative analysis. For example, this study does not focus on detailed textual assessments. Nor does it assess the explicit structure of any individual's narrative contribution to this study. I am seeking broad patterns of collective meaning rather than formal narrative analyses of individual texts (Riessman, 1993).

However, this study does reflect what Peter Park calls "action-oriented research" which he describes as "knowledge generating activities … where action figures as an integral feature of the core research activity" (1999, p. 2). I also call on appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, 1987) as a philosophical stance which incorporates a social constructionist foundation and evolved in the tradition of innovative action research as a vehicle for developing generative theory. Conversational inquiry embodies and reflects both the *process* of how my research actually occurred as well as my *personal relationship* with the assessment and interpretation of the data I have gathered.

At the intersection of these social science research traditions, I found the "pattern that connects" (Bateson, 1972). I was finally able to "locate myself" in terms of my own presence, methodology, voice, and style of working with the material for this dissertation.

Van Manen (1990) in his book *Researching Lived Experience* provides a rich description of what he calls "collaborative hermeneutic conversations." He clearly describes the methodological stance I have taken in the dissertation, particularly in relationship to reviewing the data I have gathered and developing relevant themes from the learning conversations I have hosted with key World Café practitioners. He says that in this research method there is:

> A kind of conversational relationship that the researcher develops with the notion he or she wishes to explore and understand. In fact, every conversation that we share in with another person has this structure as well. A conversation is not just a personal relation between two or more people … the speakers become in a sense animated by the notion to which they are both oriented … So a conversation is structured as a triad …
>
> The conversation has a hermeneutic thrust: it is oriented toward sense-making and interpreting of the notion that drives or stimulates the conversation … The interviewee becomes the co-investigator of the study … It is talking together like friends … in order to determine the deeper meanings or themes of these experiences. (1990, pp. 97-99)

Bentz and Shapiro point out that hermeneutic inquiry, including what I am calling my method of conversational inquiry, has an:

> openly dialogical nature—the returning to the object of inquiry again and again, each time with an increased understanding and a more complete interpretive account. An initial understanding becomes refined and corrected by the work of interpretation; fresh questions are raised that can be answered only by returning to the events studied and revising the interpretation … The hermeneutic route to understanding is through the iterative use of patterns, metaphors, stories, and models to amplify understanding. We "dialogue" with the phenomenon to be understood, asking what it means to those who create it, and attempt to integrate that with its meaning to us. (1998, pp. 110-111)

Gareth Morgan (1983) uses the term "reflective conversation" to describe a useful way of approaching research strategies and knowledge claims. I identify my own

research experience and intentions with this orientation. Like Van Manen, Morgan encourages researchers to, "recognize the research process itself as a form of social interaction in which the researcher 'converses' with, and learns about, the phenomenon being studied" (1983, p.374). Morgan also suggests that we can look at different research strategies and methods:

> as but different "voices" in a conversation about the nature and status of knowledge … In so doing, we render knowledge claims tentative rather than absolute, and render them open to critical discussion from many different points of view (e.g., with regard to their action consequences, ethical implications … or any other theme of interest to those engaged by the particular kinds of claims being made) …
>
> The conversation generated may take various turns, leading at different times to synthesis, compromise, consensus, transformation, polarization, or simply clarification and improved understanding of differences … the point is to learn from the process itself, and to encourage the conversation to continue … In creating the opportunity for such conversation in their professional lives, social scientists have the opportunity of confronting their professional "selves" and their role in making and re-making social science as we know it today" (pp. 374-5).

My research methodology of conversational inquiry includes my inner conversations with the multi-disciplinary ideas of authors as well as dialogues with conversation partners from our World Café community of inquiry and practice . I have immersed myself fully in the range of data I have gathered. I have read transcripts, watched videotapes, reviewed my learning journals, and reflected on material I have both read and written over these last several years. I have allowed patterns of meaning to emerge and crystallize both from the data I have collected in collaboration with others as well as from the expressive and explanatory modes through which I have explored my evolving insights.

I am playing with ways of integrating the three forms of knowing which Peter Park, in his work on participatory research (1999) describes as relational, reflective, and representational. Peter Reason has proposed a complementary framework which includes:

> *experiential* knowledge gained through direct encounter face to face with persons, places, or things; *practical* knowledge gained through knowing 'how to' do something; and *propositional* knowledge, knowledge 'about' something, expressed in statements or theories. (1994, p. 42)

Reason notes that Heron (1992) added a fourth type of knowledge to his typology. *Presentational* knowledge orders tacit experiential knowledge and expresses it in creative forms such as movement, sound, poetry, drama, and story. I feel fortunate as a researcher to have participated in generating all four of these types of knowledge as part of my immersion with the World Café over these last few years. The dissertation will include the fruits of this exploration emerging from these multiple sources of knowledge creation.

Noticing the "Intelligence" I'd Gathered

As we began to experiment with Café conversations in multiple settings, and as I continued my intensive interdisciplinary reading, I began to notice the power and potential of what was emerging in our midst. My deep curiosity for learning everything that I could about conversation as a co-evolutionary force in human systems became the center of my life. I began to gather data about our Café experiences in a more systematic fashion. More recently, I realized that the next phase of my life and work will be dedicated to this arena of inquiry and practice. It was then that I decided to use the archival material I had collected over the last several years for writing my doctoral

dissertation. As part of my evolving conversational inquiry I have gathered the following data.

Learning Conversations with Café Hosts

Café hosts are key members who have contributed to the mutual process of discovery about the larger implications of our Café experiences. They form part of a growing informal community of inquiry and practice related to dialogue, Café learning, intellectual capital, and strategic futuring. Each has been both a participant in and a designer of Café experiences in their own settings. These Café practitioners come from the U.S., Mexico, Denmark, Sweden, New Zealand, India and other places where Café learning is spreading. We have been conversational learning partners, exploring the conceptual foundations and systemic operating principles embodied in the Café work.

These storytelling and meaning-making sessions were often audio-taped. Where audio-taping was not feasible, I kept a "learning journal" of our discoveries and insights. The learning conversations have included both individuals as well as groups of up to 12 participants. They lasted from 45 minutes to 2 days in length.

For example, in Denmark, I co-convened a day long exploration among 10 experienced and thoughtful Café hosts selected by our colleague, Finn Voldtofte, from a group of more than 80 who have now participated in "café host training" in order to expand this work in Scandinavia. At the 1999 national Systems Thinking Conference I conducted a two day learning session on strategic conversation. As part of this, I hosted an exploratory "Café on Cafés" in which those who had hosted Cafés served as resources to the larger learning community regarding the purpose, principles, and practices of Café

learning. Our graphics specialist took detailed notes on key insights and issues raised. Participation in these learning conversations has been voluntary, based on our common caring for this work, and on our caring for each other, as people and as professionals.

The format for these conversations was initially unstructured, exploratory, and open-ended, focusing on discovering the deeper design principles and themes underlying the Café work. After a number of conversations, I developed a list of questions to explore, but these were simply "points of departure" rather than a formal interview guide. I've included these in Appendix I.

Theory Development Sessions

I have hosted theory development sessions regarding the larger systemic implications of the World Café (including several reflexive cycles with our closest collaborators). These have involved key colleagues, including Finn Voldtofte, David Isaacs, Peter Senge, Anne Dosher, Nancy Margulies, and Fritjof Capra, among others. The audio-taped transcripts and/or journal notes are part of my archives.

Study Group Reports and Journals

The documentation includes notes and reports from specialized study groups in which I have been a member, including an exploration with Peter Senge, Joe Jaworski, and Fritjof Capra on the nature of organizational "fields" and another convened by Margaret Wheatley on living systems principles applied to organizational and community life. Both of these efforts were supported by the Fetzer Institute and included issues relevant to my research. In addition, the documentation from my work as part of the core

research team at the MIT Dialogue Project provides context for the World Café exploration.

Video Tapes of Café Sessions and Participant Interviews

I have gathered video footage of key Café events and participant interviews, including our hosting of a World Café gathering for 1200 participants at the national Systems Thinking Conference in 1998 and Café conversations with senior leaders co-hosted with Peter Senge.

Think Papers

Over the last several years I have written several unpublished "think papers," including an extended exchange with Peter Senge related to the transpersonal domain of large-scale change. I also created a piece entitled "Coming Home" in which I explore the development of my feminine presence as a person and a professional through my varied Women's Dialogue experiences. These provided opportunities for ongoing reflection and synthesis as I explored emerging insights and discoveries based on our early learnings from the Café work.

Creative Expressions and Intuitive Inquiry

I have gathered creative expressions developed by myself and others, including poetry, evocative painting and colorful World Café maps, children's fairy tales, and other forms which evoke and illuminate World Café principles and practices. In addition, my learning journals contain notes from intuitive inquiry sessions in which a small group of

our close colleagues came together and allowed the voice of the World Café to tell us its own story and needs for further development.

As mentioned earlier, I have immersed myself in the data, sensing into patterns, themes, "aha's," and things that moved me and/or others who have been part of our learning conversations. This has been an ongoing discovery process embodying both *reflection*—intentional collective meaning making (Freire, 1992) and *reflexivity* –cycling back between the meanings I am making as a researcher, contextually anchoring the varied Café situations, acknowledging my own unique life context and its influence on my interpretations, and checking back with key research participants in several reflexive cycles over the life of this project (Steier, 1991). This approach has early roots in the pioneering work *Women's Ways of Knowing* in which Mary Belenky and her colleagues used reflexivity and collaboration as an integral part of their research (Belenky, 1997).

Fred Steier points out that this type of reflexivity as part of methodology in social science research can be seen as an ecology in which there evolves a sense of "context constituted by a fitting together of ideas, ideas here that include a researcher co-constructing (with reciprocators) a world" (Steier, 1991, p. 181). It is this type of contextual coherence that I am seeking to explore through the my method of conversational inquiry and the narrative style of this dissertation.

Searching for Validity

In their book *Transpersonal Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, Braud and Anderson provide an intriguing lens on the question of validity when they look at the origins of the word. They say that:

> Both validity and value have their source in the Latin *valere*—to have worth or be strong. Suggestions of value, importance, and the ability to impel or compel are implicit in its meaning. … Validity can be not only a measure of objective consistency and fidelity but also a feature that is able to convey a strong subjective impression of significance. (1998, p. 224)

Braud and Anderson call on the perspective of John Polkinghorne who has expertise in both mathematical physics and theology. Polkinghorne points out that "The test of the validity of (an) exercise … will lie in its ability to discern pattern, to offer coherent understanding of human experience" (1988b, p. 96).

I am clear that this organic and emergent approach to crystallizing a coherent interpretation of the data and its implications for both theory and practice will reveal but one set of possible interpretations. As Laurel Richardson points out,

> Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional notion of "validity" (we feel how there is no single truth); … and crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. (1997, p. 92)

The conversational inquiry method I am using in this dissertation is designed to seek coherence, insight, and understanding rather than validity from the positivist paradigm of traditional empirical science. The intent of my and our colleagues' research

in action has *not* been to collect or analyze data about the ongoing outcomes of any individual Café conversation or series of Café learning events.

Rather, the intent of the dissertation is to point toward the larger implications of the World Café as a metaphor and of Café learning as a methodology. My larger purpose is to engage with both the theory and practice of Café conversations as an example of "integrated praxis."

Ferrarotti explores the inclusion of the personal experiences of the researcher as a key source of relational knowledge (Park, 1999) that contributes to the validity of the research effort in the social sciences. She states that valid knowledge should embody "inextricable and absolutely reciprocal interaction between the observer and the observed. It will thus become a mutually shared knowledge rooted in the intersubjectivity of the interaction, a knowledge all the more profound and objective as it becomes integrally and intimately subjective" (1981, p. 20).

Richardson is even more pointed in her reflections on the criteria for "validity" in social science research. She says that:

> We are professionally socialized into the "logic of inquiry" model of science, which views science as an objective and impersonal system of observation and inference governed by a set of universal rules. Regardless of the substantive problem, logic of inquiry holds that all sciences follow the same set of procedures. "Rational" consequently has become identified with being "methodical", following pre-established rules of procedure and having pre-established criteria for success, such as the prediction of outcomes. (1997, p. 40)

Richardson acknowledges that even in research in the physical sciences it is impossible to specify in advance all the rules and procedures. She adds that discovery, surprise, people and data acting in unexpected ways require contextual research

decisions. She recognizes that these issues are not just a dilemma for social science, but rest with a broadened definition of what is meant by "rational" as part of our understanding of validity. Richardson suggests that:

> There is another possibility. We could simply appropriate for the social sciences another commonsense meaning of rational, sane and reasonable … Rationality construed this way does not divide the arts from the sciences nor qualitative from quantitative research. Rather, to be rational is to look at a topic in a reasoned, open, non defensive way." (1997, p. 41)

It is this meaning of "rational" that I'd like to become one of the criteria I use as I develop the story embodied in this dissertation. Clark Moustakas helps illuminate the issue of validity when he says that in hueristic inquiry, which is the foundational approach for his work:

> The question of validity is one of meaning. … The primary investigator has collected and analyzed all of the material—reflecting, sifting, exploring, judging its relevance or meaning, and ultimately elucidating the themes and essences … that depict the experience. The synthesis of essences and meanings … is a reflection and outcome of the researcher's pursuit of knowledge. (1990, pp. 32-33)

Gareth Morgan, in his engaging exploration of the foundational assumptions of different research stances, *Beyond Method,* offers another lens on the question of validity which I think applies to my own research endeavor:

> The interpretive researcher is more concerned with identifying generalized processes that … cannot be characterized in terms of measured relations between networks of fact verified through predictions of outcome. However, there is a contribution to knowledge if the researcher can identify generic processes or patterns … illustrated through the evidence of exemplars or archetypes, rather than through systematic bodies of data in positivist tradition. The evidence generated by interpretive research is much more likely to be of an evocative rather than a comprehensive kind, to be sustained, rejected, or refined through future studies. The conclusions of one study merely provides a starting point in a continuing cycle of inquiry, which may over time serve to generate persuasive

> patterns of data from which further conclusions can be drawn. (1983, p. 398)

It is in this spirit that I illuminate the meaning of our Café experiences as it relates to opening innovative possibilities for leadership, learning, and renewal in complex systems. Any researcher's choices about where to place primary attention are necessarily partial and interpretive. I am hopeful that the exploration that follows can contribute to the ongoing dialogue in our field about "questions that matter." My goal is not to develop empirical proof but to develop provocative propositions which can stimulate thoughtful conversation and further exploration.

Chapter 3: Discovering My Stance vs. Taking My Stand

The real voyage of discovery lies not in
seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.
—Marcel Proust

In this chapter, I share the story of my journey into the field of dialogue as a vehicle for accessing collective intelligence, as a possibility for fostering societal transformation, and as a methodology for engaging collaborative learning. It has been illuminating and deeply rewarding to retrace the steps that influenced my path, from the work of David Bohm who inspired our research at the MIT Dialogue Project, to a re-discovery of the intellectual roots of my own emerging theories-in-use regarding "conversations that matter." I have not framed this intellectual journey as a literature review. Rather, I have focused on the ideas that shaped my early conceptual thinking regarding dialogue. As discussed in the methodology section, I will weave additional threads of the story throughout the dissertation.

Reflecting on this journey of discovery has provided me with a much deeper understanding of the historical and personal contexts within which both theory and practice evolve in any emerging discipline. I am deeply grateful to Peter Senge, Bill Isaacs, and my colleagues at the MIT Dialogue Project for having hung in there as we all explored the multiple and diverse threads of both theory and practice that inform the field of dialogue and dialogue facilitation. At times, the journey felt quite lonely as I searched for insight in quiet conversations with the ideas of authors whose work I encountered

along the path. At times, it was a chance encounter with a colleague or a book that counted. At critical moments, it was spirited exchanges with my partners, David Isaacs and Nancy Margulies, as well as with our Danish colleague, Finn Voldtofte, and my dear friend and mentor, Anne Dosher, that helped clarify the way forward.

I know that the story of this journey of discovery reflects a personal interpretation based on the particular historical and personal contexts which have shaped my own life and thinking. I lay no claim to "truth." I offer these reflections in the hope that they will evoke further conversation and exploration among those who see the promise of dialogue as a vehicle for individual and societal renewal.

The Journey Begins

In the Fall of 1991 I received a call from Peter Senge at MIT asking me if I'd like to attend a seminar on dialogue he was co-facilitating with Barbara Coffman and another colleague of his, Bill Isaacs, who had recently come to MIT from Oxford, England. Bill had been collaborating with David Bohm, the renowned theoretical physicist who was exploring the field of dialogue.

Peter knew of my interest in using what I had termed "strategic dialogue" in corporate and community settings (Bennett & Brown, 1995). He thought I'd find the MIT exploration of dialogue useful. In addition, he said the MIT group at the Organizational Learning Center was hoping to receive a large grant to do pioneering research on the process of dialogue. Would I be interested in collaborating on that effort?

I was thrilled. Peter and I had been friends and colleagues since the early 1980s. At Peter's request, I had participated in the some of the early systems dynamics executive programs where he and others experimented with ways to introduce senior managers to systems dynamics modeling. Peter and I had both worked with Procter & Gamble in the mid 1980s. Peter was doing executive development programs with key leaders throughout the company. I was collaborating with Shoshana Zuboff using community development principles to help workers and leaders in a local plant to embrace new computer mediated manufacturing technologies and process disciplines (Zuboff, 1988). The use of community development ideas to integrate technology, strategy, and people extended the tradition of the advanced manufacturing experiments that Procter & Gamble had been pioneering for many years (Kleiner, 1996).

I found the initial MIT dialogue gathering to be both engaging and intellectually challenging. It was exciting to see the growing interest in an area that was so dear to my heart. However, the methodology being used at MIT to explore dialogue, based on Bohm's work, was quite different from the transformative living room conversations and large group conversations that we convened when I was working closely with Cesar Chavez and the farm workers' movement. Also, the MIT gathering had a different focus than the strategic conversations that my partner, David Isaacs, and I hosted with corporate leaders. It also seemed to have a different intent from either the interpersonal T-Groups from my days as a facilitator with the NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Sciences, or from the intrapersonal encounter groups I had been exposed to during the 1970s and 1980s at The Esalen Institute. I wanted to learn more.

Over the next few months I began to read Bohm's work (Bohm, 1980; Bohm, 1985; Bohm & Edwards, 1991; Bohm & Peat, 1987). I was deeply moved by Bohm's theories of consciousness as well as by his vision of dialogue as a vehicle for societal transformation. I was also intrigued by the methodological conclusions he drew for the practice of dialogue in group settings.

Bohm clarified his ideas in various writings ranging from short essays published by the Krishnamurti Foundation in the early 1970s to taped seminars and small group meetings at the Ojai Foundation between 1977 and 1992 where his booklet "On Dialogue" was first published in 1989. A later book by the same name (1996) made Bohm's thinking accessible to a wider audience and I will use it here as a principal source of his ideas. This later work, *On Dialogue*, contains an amplified version of the original Ojai booklet as well as other key essays and transcripts of Bohm's reflections on the nature of participatory thought, the process of self-reflective awareness, and the fragmentation characterizing modern society.

Bohm's seminal theoretical work *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (1980) laid out the conceptual foundation on which his theories of consciousness and collective intelligence rests. In conversation with the Indian philosopher and spiritual teacher, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Bohm explored the nature of mind and the roots of conflict in collective life (1985). Krishnamurti's perspectives on mind and thought (1993), on conflict (1994a), and on learning and knowledge (1994b) made a significant contribution to Bohm's development.

An extended conversation with photographer Mark Edwards entitled *Changing Consciousness* (Bohm & Edwards, 1991) connected Bohm's exploration of consciousness and the nature of thought to dialogue as well as to societal transformation. A later work*, Science, Order and Creativity*, co-authored with David Peat (Bohm & Peat, 1987), clarified the relationship of Bohm's thinking about the implicate order to a more primary "generative order" that he posited was the deeper Source of individual and collective creative insight.

My internal dialogue with Bohm's ideas was crucial to the discovery of my own stance and theories in use in this emerging field. His thinking, particularly about methodological choices for accessing collective intelligence, have been key to my being able to clarify the practice principles embodied in the development of the World Café . While the subtleties of Bohm's theories are complex, I am hopeful that the following initial reflections will serve to stimulate further conversation and exploration.

Bohm's Conceptual Foundation

Participatory Thought

Bohm's images of participatory thought and the nature of consciousness felt extremely familiar to me, especially as they related to my experiences with the farm workers' movement. Both at house meetings and in large farm worker gatherings, I had experienced groups taking part in the energy of Source that Bohm so beautifully described as characterizing human cultures for the first 99% of our collective history.

> Now what does this word "participation" mean? It really has two meanings. The earliest meaning was "to partake *of*" as you partake of food—people all eating from the common bowl. … Symbolically, or even actually to these early people it meant partaking of the *source* ... they themselves partook of this energy … In western culture, this meaning persisted until the Middle Ages. The second meaning is "to partake *in,"* to make your contribution. … It means that you are accepted, you are being taken into the whole. (Bohm, 1996, p. 86)

Bohm believed that the experience of dialogue enabled individuals to both partake *of* and to partake *in* this collective field of energy that could reveal new and creative solutions to intractable dilemmas. Although an idea might be expressed by one individual, it emerged from a deeper ground of collective intelligence and flow of meaning among and between those participating in the conversation.

I remember the first time I experienced this phenomenon. I remember it as vividly as if it were happening today.

A Single Voice

> The year is 1966. The grape fields of California are ablaze with conflict and tension. Cesar Chavez and his fledgling United Farm Workers are seeking negotiations through collective bargaining elections with the DiGiorgio Corporation—the largest table grape grower in the nation. Many new workers are frightened, already indentured by the company having paid their way from Mexico and now living in DiGiorgio's labor camp. They support their brothers and sisters in the United Farm Workers who are seeking a better life but they have children to feed and have no passage home.
>
> The farm labor camps, row on row of cinder block housing, are located on company property. There are watchtowers overlooking the camps, silent reminders of earlier days when the Japanese were interred in these same buildings during World War II. There are no longer guards in the towers but there are guards at the gates. Because the camps are on private property, United Farm Worker organizers have been barred from entry—barred from engaging in conversation with the workers inside—barred from discussing the workers' democratic right under the law to vote for the United Farm Workers to represent

them in conversations with the growers. A paradox—workers have the right to vote in the first election in agricultural history but not the means to share in the conversation needed to make an informed choice on behalf of a better life for themselves and their families.

What to do? Cesar Chavez and farm worker organizers are on the roadside at 5 a.m. as the trucks leave for the fields, passing small informational leaflets through the slats of the trucks. The growers have permitted informational leafleting, but no access to the labor camps.

Even Cesar is beginning to lose hope. He calls a meeting of the whole community. Men, women, children. The farm worker meeting hall is full. The mood is somber. Cesar explains the situation realistically, honestly, without artifice, to those gathered.

Cesar says he has no answer to the dilemma. If there is no way to engage the conversation with the workers in the camps, it will be hard to change our future, he says. He asks for their honest assessment, for ideas, for help. All bearing witness know that some unforeseen breakthrough is the only way.

People share ideas, many ideas. None are rejected. Everyone is asked to refrain from debate because no decision is going to be made tonight. We are trying to listen, he says, listen to every voice that wants to be heard.

Many voices enter the conversation. The meeting is nearly done. Way in the back of the hall sits an old woman wrapped in a rebozo, a Mexican shawl. She stands and speaks quietly in Spanish.

> *Well, I know I am not qualified, but there is something I want to say. I have an idea, maybe just a small idea, but maybe it can help. If we can't go in to visit the workers, maybe there is a way they could come to us. I believe only God can help us now. Why don't we build an altar, a small church on the public roadway across the street from the camps. We can hold Mass and a prayer vigil every night. I know there are priests who will help us. The workers can come across the street to the Mass and the prayer vigil, can't they? The growers can't stop them from coming to a prayer vigil, can they? And they can't stop us from holding one, can they? And as we pray together with the workers from the camps, we can talk together. They will come to know who we are and what we stand for and then they can vote in a better way for their future.*

I translate the old woman's words into English. The room suddenly falls silent. It is as if a third presence has entered the meeting and spoken on behalf of those gathered. A collective silent sigh of "Yes!" fills the room and will remain forever etched in my being.

> And so it was. The decision and the path forward was clear, although there had been no formal decision-making process or vote taken. Cesar's old station wagon got parked across the road. An altar was erected on the back of the wagon and the workers came, first a few, and then many. The DiGiorgio election was held and the United Farm Workers gained the right to have a voice in creating their future as part of a democratic society, all because of the individual voice of the old woman—or was it?

This was my first experience of sensing a larger collective intelligence and wisdom flowing through the voice of an individual member. Even though I didn't have language to describe it back then, I understood the power of participatory thought as a living presence and a potent possibility for collective change.

Bohm emphasized, however, that the evocative experience I described in the story of the old woman is increasingly rare in modern society. This is because a different type of thought, "literal thought," has been taken up by the modern mind as our primary way of relating to each other and to our experience of the world we live in. Literal thought tries to describe reality as if it actually existed, rather than being a reflection of distinctions that we create in our own consciousness. Bohm and others, including Ken Wilber (1981), have pointed out that while these distinctions have been useful for practical activities and technical matters, we have created separations and boundaries where none actually exist. We then treat them as if they represented a physical reality—for example the boundaries that have defined nation states. Bohm emphasized that "literal thought tends to fragment, while participatory thought tends to bring things together" (1996, p. 87).

Bohm acknowledged that "cultures that used a great deal of participatory thought probably also used literal thought for practical activities, but the things that deeply

mattered to them mostly involved participatory thought" (1996, p. 85). He emphasized that when this type of participation was engaged, "a common mind would arise, which nonetheless would not exclude the individual. … It is something between the individual and the collective. It can move between them. It's a harmony of the individual and the collective, in which the whole constantly moves toward coherence" (1996, p. 27).

Bohm's description of participatory thought resonated with my own experience of consciously designing environments for conversation about things that mattered in ways that enabled the emergence of increasing levels of coherence without control. Our own experiences with the best of the corporate strategic dialogue work had this quality. Bohm was naming things that were part of my own tacit knowing. It was Bohm's exploration of the generative order, however, that really caught my attention.

The Generative Order and Human Consciousness

Bohm's thinking about the implicate and explicate order (1980) was already widely known by the early 1990s (Briggs, 1989; Capra, 1982; Wilber, 1982). However, the implications of his thinking for the practice of dialogue and its relation to consciousness was just emerging. Bohm asserted:

> I will say: ultimately the nature of the world is that it is all mutual participation—everything is everything. That is what was meant in my book *Wholeness and the Implicate Order.* It's another way of looking at things—to say everything "enfolds" everything. Ultimately, the ground of everything is the *en-folded,* and the *un-folded* is just a display, or a show of the enfolded.
>
> I think one of the fundamental mistakes of the human race has been to say that when you have finished with a thought, it's gone. But it hasn't gone—it has "folded back" into the rest of consciousness. … it may unfold again, or unfold in another form. So there is a constant process of

> unfolding from the background of consciousness into the foreground and then back again. … Perhaps we could say that it never "began" and will never end, because it goes back into nature, all the way back, as far as you can go. (1996, pp. 89-90)

In *Science, Order, and Creativity*, Bohm and his colleague, David Peat, had gone so far as to point toward a "generative order," an even deeper Source of individual and collective creativity, that they hypothesized was more primary than the implicate order explained by quantum physics (1987, p. 151). They associated this generative order with a "superfield" which holds the energy and information from which even the implicate order described in Bohm's work emerges (1987, p. 183). They summarized their thinking by saying that current scientific research, including Bohm's research on the implicate order, had only "scratched the surface of this order so far" (1987, p. 197). They hypothesized that the inner vision experienced by scientists and artists was nourished by this generative Source and they believed that people engaged in true dialogue also had the capacity to access this generative order—the ultimate ground of deep creativity that brings new ideas and forms into being.

When my uncle, Philip Rovner, a philosophy professor, was dying of cancer, we had a beautiful conversation that touched my soul and connected my own inner knowing to my conceptual understanding of this ineffable generative realm. I wrote the following brief story as a homage to Phil's intellectual and spiritual legacy in my life.

AND THEN WE SPOKE TOGETHER

I am visiting with my Uncle Phil. He is dying of cancer. Phil always said he preferred the horizontal life. My Uncle Phil is a retired university professor. He is eccentric. He is a gregarious recluse. His small home, across the street from the Methodist Church, is cluttered. Books fill every nook and cranny—the kitchen, the bathrooms, the basement. Books of Spanish literature and philosophy. Rare art books. Books of home remedies and 1960s pocket novels.

We sit on his bed together, as we did when I was a child. It is late at night. Beside the bed is a big plastic bag of candies—butterscotch, my favorites. Phil reaches into the bag. I smile and accept his offer.

We begin to talk together as we have for almost half a century. I was a small child when we first started these conversations and my mom let me stay up late with "El Profesor". We went on magical mystery tours together into the forests of the unknown—he posing questions that neither of us could answer—both of us enthralled by the journey.

Tonight we are traveling together into the land of the "Vacuum." He looks up from the pillow, puts his finger to his mouth with a quizzical smile, pauses, and then asks, "What is the Nothing? What can come from Nothing and where does Nothing go?"

"Ahh," I say. The light in the room shifts as the lamp beside his bed flickers. My eye goes toward the old Remington typewriter on his desk. The layer of dust on the desk seems alive, glimmering in the dim light.

"Ahh," I say again, for this is a question el profesor and I, his favorite niece, have been exploring for many years. My uncle, the philosopher, has always been haunted by wonderings about life's meaning and the theme of the Vacuum has been central to our conversation.

But now my Uncle Phil is dying and we have not yet spoken of death.

I am excited now just as I was on our magical journeys together as a child. "Well, Uncle Phil, I finally think I know. The Nothing is the generative Vacuum, the Vacuum that is not empty at all but which holds all, as potential, in its embrace. The everything emerges from the Nothing, I say. It is the deeper Source, the Nothing that life comes from and where life returns—to the generative, nurturing Vacuum. That's what the Vacuum means to me. I used to be afraid of the Vacuum but I'm not anymore," I say.

> The room is silent. The light flickers again. Phil is dying and we have not yet spoken of death.
>
> He looks at me, then closes his eyes. I wait. I touch his arm, gently. He opens his eyes. There is silence. I ask, "How did I do, Uncle Phil? I've been working on this question since I was a child. Have I been a good student?"
>
> The room is quiet. We have not yet spoken of death.
>
> Uncle Phil smiles to himself. He purses his lips and puts his fingers again to his mouth, quizzically, in deep thought. He looks up at me. He pauses. There is a long silence. I wait. I do not touch his arm this time. He looks up at me with a wry grin and says slowly, "My dear, you receive an A+ !"
>
> My uncle and I have spoken together of death. We look at each other and smile. I touch his arm gently, and then I go to bed.

The exploration of this deeper generative order—the Vacuum, the Nothing, the creative Source from which the manifest world emerges and to which it returns—provided a powerful set of images for my later work with the World Café. I began to ask myself, how might we more deliberately create the conditions that would enable collectives in conversation together to access this generative realm in order to bring new creative possibilities into being?

Bohm and Peat believed that the free play of thought that occurs in dialogue could help dissolve obstacles to accessing the generative order. They framed a proposition that continues to hold me in its sway to this day. Bohm and Peat suggested that "in a true dialogue there is the possibility that a new form of consensual mind, which involves a rich creative order between the individual and the social, may be a more powerful instrument than the individual mind" (1987, p. 247).

This type of awareness, from the original Latin root for the word *consciousness,* meant "what everyone knows all together" (Bohm & Peat, 1987, p. 212). Their

description had a significant influence on our later description of the metaphor of the World Café as "collective intelligence becoming aware of its Self at increasing levels of scale." This rich notion of consciousness and consensual mind, along with the idea that in conversation we could access a deeper generative order, created a conceptual foundation which enriched our learning experiment about the interplay of individual and social learning that is at the heart of Café conversations. How might we design conversations in such a way that this type of creative order between the individual and the social mind was more likely to occur?

Others, of course, had explored the new sciences (Capra, 1982; Peat, 1987; Wheatley, 1992; Wilber, 1982; Zohar, 1990). However, Bohm's linking of these ideas to dialogue as a vehicle for the renewal of society connected to my own yearning for ways to approach issues of social change at a deeper, more transformative level than organizing or mobilizing for social action.

I didn't know if David Bohm had ever met Carl Jung, but there was something about Bohm's thinking that also recalled earlier reading I had done about the collective unconscious (Jung, 1961; Progoff, 1973; van der Post, 1975). I found myself musing and wondering. What if—through our human capacity for language, symbols and images as well as our capacity for reflective awareness—what if we might access a deeper field of collective human experience on behalf of life-affirming futures? While I understood the shadow energies that Jung described, I also saw that the collective unconscious held tremendous potential for accessing our deepest sources of collective creativity and hope.

Fragmentation of Thought

Bohm's focus on how fragmentation of thought had led to our current global crises was especially intriguing to me. In *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* he pointed to a shadow side of human consciousness:

> The widespread and pervasive distinctions between people (race, nation, family, profession, etc), which are now preventing mankind from working together for the common good and indeed, even for survival, have as one of the key factors a kind of thought that treats things as inherently divided, disconnected, and "broken up" into yet smaller constituent parts … When man thinks of himself in this way, he will inevitably tend to defend the needs of his own "Ego" against those of others; or, if he identifies with a group of people of the same kind, he will defend this group in a similar way. If he thinks of his totality as constituted of independent fragments, then that is how his mind will tend to operate. (1980, p. xi)

Bohm believed our tendency to classify and make judgments, including our beliefs and assumptions about the views and intentions of others, came not only from this fragmentation of thought, but from individual and collective *histories* of fragmented thought that he broadly called "memory." The independent power and truth we ascribe to our religions, nation states, and cultural beliefs, as well as our individual opinions and values are examples of this. Bohm believed that it is acting from past thought (or memory) and from the intense emotions attached to thought rather than acting from "thinking" (expression flowing from our immediate spontaneous experience) that creates many of the conflicts in collective life (1996, pp. 52-57; Krishnamurti & Bohm, 1985).

In spite of this fragmentation, Bohm asserted that, "man has always been seeking wholeness—mental, physical, social, individual" and "has sensed always that wholeness … is an absolute necessity to make life worth living" (1980, p. 3). However, he felt it was

important that we become individually and collectively self-aware of the ways in which the process of fragmentation of thought (in contrast to the process of spontaneous *thinking)* has led us away from the natural experience of wholeness toward a dangerous state of incoherence and dissonance at every level of system. Bohm called this process of self-awareness of thought in action "proprioception" (1996, p. 79).

Bohm used the metaphor of a polluted river. If we try to solve the problem downstream at the level of results, we might never reach upstream to the source of the pollution itself. Bohm asserted that unless we practice individual and collective awareness of our very thought processes, we will continue to deal with multiple symptoms (i.e. inter-group conflict, environmental degradation, etc.) and neglect to deal with the deeper source of our contemporary difficulties (1991, pp. 146-47).

Bohm's Description of the Dialogue Experience

Bohm said that "we need a kind of intelligence that goes beyond thought, that is not based on memory. … a perceptive activity that collects and selects in new ways. And in doing this, it gives rise to new meanings. For the ways in which we put things together and keep them apart constitute a key part of what they mean. And according to what they mean is how you behave and how you are" (Bohm & Edwards, 1991, p. 148).

Bohm had a fascination with the roots of words as he believed they reveal a meaning deeper than contemporary interpretations. He described dialogue—from the root *dia-logos* or "meaning flowing through"—as "*a stream of meaning* flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole

group, out of which may emerge some new understanding. It's something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all. It's something creative" (1996, p. 6).

Dialogue provides the opportunity to access a type of subtle intelligence at a collective level that is often not accessible in normal conversation. Bohm took the original meaning of the word subtle, from the Latin *subtex,* meaning "finely woven" and connected that to the root meaning of intelligence *intelligere* which means "to gather together." I loved the image of subtle intelligence as a finely woven net in which people gather shared meaning around things they care about. Bohm was giving voice to my own experience of "conversations that matter."

Bohm made a key observation that deeply influenced my later work. He offered the reflection that "with intelligence you gather things from in between—you don't use the old categories. You could say that it is like reading between the lines. It makes new categories. … [it] has a perceptive movement. … it can perceive afresh" (1991, p. 147). He added that when groups have entered the space of dialogue:

> There can arise a common feeling in the group, and the sense of separation is not so sharp. This makes it possible for a group of people to think together; that is to say, each person can then take up and continue the thought of another as if it were his or her own. Thus, thinking is being carried out by the whole group, which constitutes a more powerful instrument of intelligence than is in general possible with the individual. (1991, p. 184)

Bohm described the relationship between the experience of the individual and the collective in the process of dialogue. When we have entered the state of dialogue he maintained that:

> We are also still functioning as individuals, although we are also partaking of the common consciousness. It is therefore not like a mindless mob, in

> which the collective consciousness overwhelms the individual. At any moment, each person may still have his or her own opinion, but as opinions are suspended and shared, they are sooner or later included in the consciousness of the group. (1991, p. 185)

He goes on to add:

> We are just having this common mind, this shared mind that can think together in a new way. … in such a context the subtle mind is not only a shared operation of subtle intelligence, but also the feeling of participation and fellowship and friendship. (1991, p. 192)

Bohm's images of the lived experience of dialogue were familiar to me. I often wondered in my own work how we might create even more evocative contexts for uncovering subtle levels of collective intelligence—the kind that is woven and gathered together in the spaces "in between." How might we foster shared meaning, especially at increasing levels of scale? How might we support collective consciousness, the capacity to "know together," in relation to key questions and critical issues? With an endangered planet whose very survival depends on new levels of collective thinking around intractable issues, and a knowledge economy requiring innovative approaches to collaborative learning, it seemed essential to explore these questions.

Bohm's Vision of Dialogue as a Path to Societal Transformation

Bohm came to feel that dialogue held the key to our common future and that small groups embodying a dialogic spirit could make a huge difference. My sense is that Bohm thought of the dialogic spirit as embodying what Christopher Alexander, the famed architect, described as "the quality that has no name" –-a quality of aliveness, wholeness, comfort, and freedom—a subtle balance and interplay of mind and spirit (1979, p. 33).

Bohm believed that it is critical to evolve a culture of dialogue, saying "that kind of culture is necessary for society to work, and ultimately, for the society to survive." (1996, p. 29). He added:

> This notion of dialogue and common consciousness suggests that there is some way out of our collective difficulties. And we have to begin at the grass roots, as it were, not to begin at the top of the heap with the United Nations or with the President. … In fact, we could say that instead of being part of the problem, we become part of the solution. … However small it is, it has the quality of the solution. … As I have said, we don't know how fast or slowly it would spread. We don't know how fast a movement in the mind—in the thought process and beyond the thought process, this sharing together—will spread. (1996 p. 36)

Bohm's hopes for dialogue seemed to mirror Alexander's reflection in *The Timeless Way of Building* that "the quality that has no name cannot be made, but only generated by a process. … It happens when it flows out from the process of creation of its own accord" (1979, p. 159). Alexander believed that when patterns which embody the quality that has no name are embraced as a "pattern language" by growing numbers of people, then even though they are expressed differently in each situation, "there is a constancy, a harmony, created … " (1979, p. 191). This is the life-affirming pattern or quality of dialogue which our Danish colleague, Finn Voldtofte, later came to describe as the "magic in the middle" (1996).

Bohm believed that if a considerable number of people could begin to access this pattern of dialogic experience, they might have an impact far beyond what any one person could have. He felt that if this type of dialogic consciousness could spread, we would "have something which can, potentially, produce a revolution" (1996, p. 94).

Bohm's vision for dialogue went beyond solving social, political and environmental ills. He felt that solving pressing problems through true dialogue was important but that:

> Ultimately that's not the entire story. That's only the beginning. I'm suggesting that there is 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. That's what we're exploring. (1996, p. 46)

Bohm's Methodological Choices

Bohm felt that in order to reach the coherence of thinking that was possible in dialogue settings, it was essential that we learn individually and collectively to become aware of our processes of thought and thinking. Through this reflective self-awareness, which he called proprioception, we can move from fragmentation toward coherence, discover shared meaning, and access the type of subtle intelligence that has the power to transform individuals and societies.

Patrick de Maré, a British psychiatrist and Freudian analyst, deeply influenced Bohm's methodological thinking about dialogue. Like us all, de Maré was a product of both his training and his times. He was an active member of the Freudian Group Analytic Society in London where he pioneered new approaches to group practice.

De Maré had moved beyond individual and small group Freudian therapies into what was called "socio-therapy" (de Maré, Piper, & Thompson, 1991). De Maré worked with larger groups of 20-40 in an unstructured context of free association with no agenda. This empty space was intended to allow the participants freedom to explore whatever

came up so that they might understand the divisive cultural and individual assumptions that separate us from the experience of "koinonia" (impersonal fellowship). Koinonia allows a freer flow of shared meaning and mutuality among groups of diverse members and interests.

De Maré was influenced by Freud's hope that "one day someone will venture to embark upon a pathology of cultural communities" (as cited in de Maré et al., 1991, p. xviii). De Maré was also inspired by E. Neumann's reflections that "the task of evolving a collective and cultural therapy adequate to cope with the mass phenomena now devastating mankind has now become the primary issue" (as cited in de Maré et al., 1991, p. 12) .

Like Bohm, de Maré was both a pioneer in his chosen field and a social visionary who wanted to promote cultural healing. From his Freudian background he drew the conclusion that:

> The culture of the group is the group equivalent of the individual mind. In so far as this culture can be inappropriate [for the culture's tasks], and even pathologically destructive, so it can be seen as the equivalent of the neurotic disturbance in the individual. (1991, p. xviii)

In 1991, de Maré and two of his associates published a book explicitly elaborating their own practice assumptions in the area of dialogue. The title is revealing: *Koinonia: From Hate, through Dialogue, to Culture in the Large Group*. Here de Maré and his colleagues clearly outlined their methodology for producing dialogue. Since Bohm embraced the key assumptions of de Maré's approach, it is essential to understand the latter's key operating principles for enabling dialogue. The following is a summary of these principles (de Maré et al., 1991, pp. 15-45):

- Face to face seating in a circle.
- Regularity of attendance over time—a continuity of practice and engagement.
- Free-floating discussion—the counterpart of individual free association.
- A facilitator who is non-directive, sets no agenda and is relatively disengaged as to his own person.
- No given task or goal.

De Maré continued by articulating the core assumptions about large groups and group development that informed his practice choices (1991). These assumptions later found pragmatic expression in what came to be known, at least in the U.S., as "Bohmian dialogue":

- Large groups (larger than 20) are, by their very size, frustrating and anxiety producing.
- Large groups often exhibit features similar to the unconscious of psychoanalysis, including splitting, projecting, introjecting, rigidity, contradicting, and distorting.
- In a large group setting it is fruitful to embrace and honor the underlying conditions believed to be characteristic of modern culture itself—anxiety, frustration, rage, anger, and hate—and to have a safe context for the expression of these instinctual and intense psychic energies at a collective level.
- Through the sustained practice of dialogue, these energies may gradually evolve, through individual and collective awareness of our common human condition of separation, trauma, and conflict, toward higher levels of cultural sensitivity, intelligence and the impersonal fellowship of koinonia.
- Dialogue is a difficult skill that has to be learned and practiced.

He summarized his belief that:

> hate constitutes the mental psychic energy which mobilizes dialogue. Hate (which in Greek also meant grief) then constitutes the basis for psychic energy, which is transformed and expressed in the form of thinking dialogue and learning, as distinct from an instinctual process. This results in the transformation of alienation into the bonding of impersonal fellowship (1991, p. 141).

De Maré outlined this stage theory of group development in the following schematic (1991, p. 45):

Frustration → hate → psychic energy → dialogue → thinking →

understanding → information → Koinonia or impersonal fellowship

Figure 1: Patrick de Maré's stage theory of group development

De Maré hoped that this group development process would evolve into what he called " new micro-cultures" (1991, p. 48). New micro-cultures, in contrast to existing micro-cultures which simply reflect dysfunctions of the larger macro-culture, are groups embodying this emerging transformative collective sensibility of koinonia. Like Bohm, de Maré believed that the spread of this type of enlightened group consciousness might influence societal transformation.

De Maré commented:

> It is only when we provide the cultural structure of a large group, engaged in dialogue, that we can safely say "we now have a medium in which the mind can be observed in operation in actual practice." We see it as offering us a structure like a discipline that enables us to examine the mind functioning as a system. (1991, p. 58)

Later he added: “The larger group offers us through dialogue the opportunity of knowing more about consciousness” (1991, p. 147).

It is my own assumption that Bohm may not have been exposed to other processes of dialogue that were based on alternative beliefs and operating principles about doorways to shared meaning, collective intelligence, and the mind functioning as a system. I wonder, for example, how the dialogue field might have evolved had Bohm chanced to meet Paulo Freire, Cesar Chavez, or David Cooperrider in addition to Patrick de Maré.

However, because of Bohm’s compelling interest in people becoming more aware of the process of thought itself, it is understandable that Bohm began to explore dialogue methodologies based on both the assumptions and operating principles suggested by de Maré. De Maré was clear that his work in dialogue was pioneering and exploratory, saying that “the actual study of dialogue itself is sparse. Its praxis, you might say, has been totally overlooked” (1991, p. 71).

In any case, Bohm himself became quite clear about his own dialogue methodology and its underlying assumptions. The following reflections are paraphrased from Bohm’s seminal essay “On Dialogue” (1996).

- Dialogue is aimed at the whole thought process and noticing the way the thought process occurs individually and collectively in our modern culture.
- It is crucial to be listening and observing in order to give attention to the actual process of thought in order to watch for its fragmentation and incoherence.

- Suspending assumptions and opinions—putting them into the center so they can be seen and explored by the group—is a key part of dialogue since it makes proprioception or self-awareness of thought possible.

- A group of 20-40 people sitting in one or two concentric circles is the optimal size and configuration for a dialogue since it is big enough to reflect the diversity of opinions and division existing in the larger culture.

- The way to start a dialogue group is usually by talking *about* dialogue. It is useful to have a discussion or a seminar about dialogue and then those who are interested can then go on to have the dialogue.

- Dialogue occurs in an empty space, which is open and free where anything may come in as grist for the mill of observing our thought processes.

- In principle, dialogue should work without any leader and without any agenda, although a facilitator is useful to help make observations on what he/she sees happening.

- Dialogue is not focused on individual therapy, but rather "socio-therapy" so if the group, or anyone, is "cured" it is the beginning of the larger cure at a societal or cultural level.

- A dialogue group must be kept going for a while—perhaps for a year or two—or else it won't work because if it is sustained, all the problems that arise in the larger culture will arise in the group.

- If the dialogue is sustained long enough, the frustration will arise, the sense of chaos, the sense that it's not worth it, but it's very important to stay with it through the frustration.

- People are generally not ready to go into the deeper issues when they first have what they consider to be a dialogue. They negotiate, and that's about as far as they get. People feel under pressure to get in, and people feel left out. People may be frightened and anxious if there is no leader and no topic. These are the problems that are going to arise—that have arisen in most all dialogue groups. You can expect that they are almost inevitable.

- The emotional charge—all this irritation, all this frustration—can actually develop into hate if very powerful and rigidly held assumptions or beliefs are present in the group.

- If people can share the frustration and share their different contradictory assumptions, if everybody is angry together and looking at it together—then you have a common consciousness. The road to dialogue is through this.

- If people stay with power, violence, hate or whatever it is all the way to the end, then it will sort of collapse—because ultimately people can see that we are all the same, sharing the same process of fragmentation and incoherence of thought. And consequently they will begin to experience mutuality, a flow of shared meaning, and true fellowship. They have already gone through the conflicts and divisive things they are afraid of. It is then that participatory consciousness becomes possible.

- When this happens each person is partaking of the whole meaning of the group and also taking part in it. We can call that a true dialogue.

Bohm, like de Maré, held that his assumptions and operating principles about dialogue were tentative, saying "of course, it's an experiment. … But that is what takes place in any new venture—you consider all the evidence, you consider what's the best idea, what to say about it, what your theories about it are, and then you go ahead and try it" (1996, pp. 15-16).

And that's exactly what the MIT Dialogue Project set out to do.

The MIT Dialogue Project

When the MIT Organizational Learning Center received the dialogue research grant from the Kellogg Foundation in 1992, I was asked to join the core team of the Dialogue Project. I was excited by the goals of the project which involved "investigating and developing the practical group learning and leadership implications of dialogue" as well as "developing a more systematic articulation of the theoretical underpinnings of dialogue" (Isaacs, 1991b, p. 9). I wanted to contribute to achieving those goals, since I

was already involved in exploring the role of conversation in community building, strategy evolution, and large-scale systems change.

In the initial request for funding to the Kellogg Foundation, *Dialogue and Leadership: The Development of Common Sense*, William Isaacs, the director of the MIT Dialogue Project, laid out the current framing of the emerging field of dialogue as well as its possibilities for learning and exploration. Based on Bohm's initial insights, he said that:

> Dialogue is a new, experimental process of social change and leadership development that involves sensitive conversation among small groups of people. Its intention and scope are very broad: to help individuals and groups to understand and transform the very nature of their thought. … Dialogue is an effort to address the ground out of which perceptions of problems arise. … to allow space for more subtle levels of intelligence and insight to emerge. … Dialogue is not merely remedial, but can allow new orders of collective creativity and intelligence to emerge in individuals and groups. (1991b, p. 1)

Bill Isaacs continued his evocative invitation to explore this emerging field of inquiry and practice by describing dialogue as a kind of improvisational "ballet for the mind and heart" which requires conscious discipline and awareness. He also described it as "jazz, where individually skilled musicians play together with their attention on the free flow of melody, rhythm and tone in the music." He emphasized that dialogue is a conscious living process of "coordinated collective movement" (1991b, p. 3).

Continuing to build on Bohm's assumptions about the operating principles for enabling dialogue to emerge in group settings, Bill followed Bohm's and de Maré's premise that "dialogue is a process that seeks gradually to surface incoherences in thought by displaying them in such a way that they no longer have the weight they once

did. … a ‘common sense’ may emerge where there was once a fragmented sense” (1991b, p. 7).

Bill had also been influenced in his thinking about dysfunctional patterns in organizational and group life by the seminal work of Chris Argyris at Harvard and Donald Schon at MIT (Argyris, 1985; Argyris, 1990; Argyris, 1994; Argyris & Schon, 1978). Bill’s doctoral dissertation, *The Perils of Shared Ideals,* used a corporate case study to explore self-defeating dynamics of organizational ideology (1991a). Ed Schein, a pioneer in small group process, was also influential in the early thinking about dialogue at MIT (1987; 1993).

Bill Isaacs pointed out that the field had evolved to:

> the stage where we are very interested in extending this work into professional and organizational settings. This would involve investigating and articulating the practical group learning and leadership implications of dialogue, and developing a more systematic articulation of the theoretical underpinnings of dialogue. … dialogue, as we define it requires a highly skilled process of facilitation and direction. There are presently few such facilitators available. … There is, as yet no extant text that lays out both the theoretical basis of dialogue, the principles underlying its conduct, and examples of its practical application. (1991b, pp. 9-10)

A Stage Theory of Dialogue.

The initial core research/facilitator team at the MIT Dialogue Project participated in developing opportunities to explore the theory and practice of dialogue with diverse populations. These included union and management leaders at a steel mill, executives from a major health care system, urban leaders from a large city, line managers

participating in training programs, and professionals in organizational development and human resources. As part of our research, I and another colleague from the Dialogue Project team organized an international dialogue of women leaders involved in large-scale systems change.

The facilitator team from the Dialogue Project participated for almost two years in extended dialogue and dialogue facilitation sessions to refine both theory and practice. The effort and commitment on the part of everyone involved was impressive. The first year progress report notes that the Dialogue Project:

> began by conducting a tentative exploration of dialogue in practical settings; it is now providing international leadership in an emerging new field of social learning. … It is redefining the requirements for leadership by showing that transforming any system requires the creation of environments in which people can confront and suspend the fragmentation and incoherence of their shared world, and learn to think together. (1993, p. 1)

The theory of intervention that evolved during this stage of the work was outlined in the same report:

> Our theory of intervention suggests that there are a variety of stages to the evolution of the dialogue container, and that the emergence of each phase involves skillful choices and the navigation of crises for both individuals and the collective. We propose that the dialogue container evolves through time in the following fashion:
>
> 1) *Instability of the container,* during which members are concerned with safety and trust in the dialogue context; we link this to an experience of an "initiatory crisis" which, when moved through leads to
> 2) *Instability in the container,* in which members struggle with polarization and conflict springing from fragmentation, or the clash of personally held beliefs and assumptions; a "crisis of suspension" results as members fail to "sign on" to each other's ideas, leading to first attempts to suspend personal assumptions publicly, leading to

3) *Inquiry in the container,* in which participants are able to inquire into polarization and foreign ideas or otherwise taking divisive action on the group's fragmented knowledge; given these new skills and collective activity, the group begins to experience a "crisis of collective pain" as the depth of disconnection is held by the group. This opens the possibility for
4) *Creativity in the container,* in which members begin to think generatively, and new understandings based on collective perception emerge. (1993, p. 9)

This stage theory of dialogue process was consistently referenced in a number of later writings that evolved from the research at the Dialogue Project (Isaacs, 1993; Isaacs, 1999; Schein, 1993).

Methodological Implications

The report from our first year of research at the Dialogue Project adds that "each of these phases in the development of the dialogue container require different kinds of moves by the facilitators and produce different and unique kinds of behaviors in the groups" (1993, p. 10).

As a facilitator and researcher with the Dialogue Project, I attempted to embrace these methodological assumptions. I wanted to participate in and apply the intervention theories that were being explored. One of these was teaching dialogue principles. While they found varied expression in different settings, learning dialogue skills involved the following common elements:

- Suspending judgment, assumptions and certainties.
- Listening internally to your own listening.
- Speaking to the center.

- Observing the thought process in yourself and others; noticing where it is fragmented or incoherent.
- Befriending polarization/following the disturbance.

I deeply believed in the generative potential of dialogue. I had already experienced what Bohm, de Maré and others (1991; Anderson, Cissna, & Arnett, 1994; Arnett, 1986; Buber, 1970; Cahill & Halpern, 1990; Oliver, 1987) had identified as the creative power that can evolve through accessing shared meaning and revealing the capacity of a group to think deeply together about intractable issues.

I tried to embrace the assertions, based on Bohm's initial reflections and often provided to participants in our training seminars, that the inherent nature of dialogue was such that there would be predictable periods of crisis and instability prior to breakthrough thinking. During this period of our inquiry, instability and crises came to be seen as a normal, even essential, part of the development of the capacity for dialogue and thinking together in group settings.

It was here that I began to run into trouble.

It was not that I wanted to avoid conflict in groups. I believed that it was important to allow conflict and polarization to be present in a system when it arose and to work with it in constructive ways. In addition, my time with the farm workers movement and in large-scale corporate change efforts, as well as my years of training at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland in organization and systems dynamics had given me an appreciation for working with the shadow side of group life.

At the same time, I had engaged in 30 years of community development work where accessing collective intelligence through discovering coherence rather than incoherence at the tacit level of thought had been a key operating and design principle (Brown, 1995). In addition, from my later experimentation with strategic dialogue for breakthrough thinking in corporations (Bennett & Brown, 1995), I began to have the disquieting feeling that the inevitability of a group experiencing predictable periods of crisis prior to breakthrough thinking "ain't necessarily so." To me, the capacity to examine and test assumptions as well as the capacity for breakthrough thinking at a collective level seemed as related to periods of playfulness and fun as to periods of frustration and crisis. In fact, I had both participated in as well as helped to design alternative pathways into this powerful and transformative space that Bohm, Buber, and so many others described as dialogue. I was beginning to get more and more uncomfortable and couldn't figure out why.

I was entering a challenging period in my life and work. What was happening here? I was bumping up against (and sometimes crashing into) my own deeply embedded theories in use.

I began to ask myself some tough and personally disturbing questions:

- How did it become a given in dialogue groups that predictable periods of crisis would occur?
- Why was instability *of* the container or instability *in* the container the necessary precursor to discovering shared meaning, coherence, and collective wisdom?
- Was there a way to intentionally design environments for inquiry which would allow us to first remember and re-connect with the 99% of our human

history of mutual participation and wholeness, and then if fragmentation showed up, choose to work with it?

- If we wanted to involve large numbers of people in discovering the transformative power of dialogue, then how could we ever train them all, group by group, to practice it as a separate discipline? Couldn't we simply find ways to help people reconnect with what they knew intuitively about real conversations from our long collective history in human community?

- Didn't Bohm himself have a task or agenda in the dialogue groups he described—the task of "thinking about thought"? Perhaps free association without any initial content was the appropriate methodology for socio-therapy and the cultural healing of past collective wounds, as it had been for the T-Group exploration of interpersonal relations. However, weren't there also ways to focus energy and attention on questions that matter to the future of the collective's life and work while still achieving Bohm's vision of dialogue as a vehicle for accessing shared meaning and collective intelligence?

- Why was highlighting incoherence of thought and dysfunctional behaviors the primary pathway to noticing our underlying assumptions and usual ways of thinking?

- If the goal was engaging generative learning, shared meaning, and collective intelligence, why not just design for that? Then by noticing coherence rather than incoherence, we could become aware that our usual ways of thinking might be less effective than the wholeness and generativity the group had just experienced in thinking together about questions that mattered?

- Was it really necessary to become proprioceptive or self-aware of the process of thinking itself to experience the authentic dialogue, deep creativity, and collective insight that brings the new into being?

- Were the salons in Europe, Scandinavian study circles, women's circles, and farm worker house meetings proprioceptive? Could the intentional process of proprioception itself separate us from the lived experience of dialogue?

- Was there really any fundamental difference between "conversations that matter" and dialogue if people experienced meaning flowing through and among them, a generative sense of deep creativity, and a feeling that they were both partaking of and contributing to something larger than themselves? Did these distinctions even matter?

Even as I raised these questions, I worried about myself. I could feel that my own still dimly articulated assumptions and my own noble certainties were coming into play. I could feel myself beginning to "take my stand." I remembered my days as a child of the 1960s. I could feel that old rebel energy once again infusing my heart and spirit.

The words of Ken Wilber in his book, *No Boundary*, which I had read more than a decade earlier, rang in my ears. He pointed out that "a *boundary line,* as any military expert will tell you is also a potential *battle line*. … As an individual draws up the boundaries of his soul, he establishes at the same time the battles of his soul" (1981, p. 10). Later Wilber added that, "growth fundamentally means … a growth of one's boundaries outwardly in perspective and inwardly in depth" (1981, p. 13).

I tried to listen to Wilber's advice as over and over again I struggled with these questions. I tried to embrace Bohm's methodological approach because I deeply believed in his scientific vision of quantum wholeness and the implicate order, his recognition of the qualities of the actual experience of dialogue, and his social vision for dialogue as a transformative force in human communities. However, as I tried to embrace the methodological and practice implications that seemed to be embodied in his thinking, my discomfort became even more profound.

Dialogue and the Particle/wave Paradox.

I began to search for additional perspectives that could shed light upon my questions. Reading about the new science helped (Capra, 1982; Capra, 1991; Waldrop, 1992; Wheatley, 1992; Zohar, 1990). It was illuminating, for example, that an electron is neither a particle nor a wave, but may show particle-like qualities in some contexts and

wave-like qualities in another. Which qualities it exhibits depends on what the observer pays attention to. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, for example, showed that the more one aspect is emphasized, the more the other aspect becomes uncertain or less visible (Heisenberg, 1962).

Neils Bohr added the notion of complementarity, considering the particle nature and wave nature of electrons as two complementary descriptions of the same reality. And the physicist John Archibald Wheeler, a major proponent of a participatory universe, suggested that every situation contains many potentialities. The very act of looking for particular information in any situation actually evokes the information we are seeking and diminishes our simultaneous opportunity to observe other information (Wheatley, 1992, p. 63). Even if these ideas were solely metaphors in the realm of social systems, they helped move my thinking forward.

I recalled a conversation with Noel Tichy when I was first learning about T-Group facilitation. Noel was a senior member at NTL, the National Training Laboratories for Applied Behavioral Science. He had often spoken of the powerful influence our personal histories and professional associations had on our intervention choices in groups. He pointed out that "what we view determines what we do." Because of our personal and professional histories, he said, we tend to see only certain things and make practice choices based on those lenses. None of this was wrong. It was important, however, that we be conscious of what lens we were using so that we were aware that, as practitioners, we were only working with a part of the total set of possibilities inherent in any group situation.

I was reminded of the old woman/young woman picture often used in T-Group training. Depending on the way you looked at it, you would see either an old woman or a young woman. I remember saying to participants, “Well, if you see the young woman on the street, would you approach her differently than if you saw the old woman?”

I realized I was living in the paradox of perception posed by the old woman/young woman picture and the particle/wave dilemma. I began to see the multiple potentials for dialogue (or lack of it) being like a sea of whipped egg whites on a meringue pie. The dialogue host, as I prefer to call the facilitator, could lift up from that entire sea of potential in any group whatever he or she was paying special attention to. The dialogue host’s choosing to notice and highlight certain facets of a group’s thinking seemed similar to a cook’s choosing to lift up certain peaks from the egg whites on top of the meringue pie. In both cases, what gets lifted or highlighted is where the attention goes.

Analogous to the particle/wave phenomenon, the dialogue host’s observations would make it more likely for the group to exhibit the qualities that the host noticed. Collective attention might even heighten those behaviors until someone decided to highlight different possibilities from the larger sea of potential.

Here is how I translated these ideas specifically to dialogue hosting.

When people walk into a room, every potential exists simultaneously in the generative “superfield” that Bohm and Peat described. The potential exists to manifest fragmentation, incoherence, frustration, polarization, conflict, and even hate.

Simultaneously, the potential exists to manifest connection, coherence, collective intelligence, mutuality, shared meaning, and thinking together.

If the host believes that the primary characteristic of human consciousness is fragmentation and incoherence, then the tendency will be for the host to notice and highlight their presence from the entire field of possibilities. This might especially be true if the host holds an underlying methodological assumption similar to that of Bohm and de Maré—that paying close attention to fragmentation and limitation and sensitively traversing predictable developmental crises provide powerful doorways to the experience of dialogue and cultural healing.

Doorways into a Common Courtyard

It seemed to me that the methodological assumptions that de Maré and Bohm had been using provided but one doorway into the common human experience of Dialogue (which I now will use with a big D to differentiate the lived experience of Dialogue from any particular enabling methodology). When I thought about Dialogue in this larger sense, I had the image of the open central courtyard in an old fashioned, Latin American home like the one I lived in as a teenager with my adopted grandmother in Southern Mexico. You entered the house itself through the single carved front door facing outward to the street. Once inside the house you could enter the central courtyard by going around and through any of the multiple arched entryways that surrounded this open, flower-filled space in the middle of the house. This courtyard was lovely, with flowers everywhere and trees growing in large clay pots.

For me, Dialogue is like entering this central courtyard in the spacious home of our common human experience. There are many doorways to this central courtyard just as there are many points of entry to the experience of Dialogue. Indigenous councils, salons, study circles, women's circles, farm worker house meetings, wisdom circles, non-traditional diplomatic efforts and other conversational modalities from many cultures and historical periods had both contributed to and drawn from the generative space that we were calling Dialogue.

Like de Maré, Bohm, and our colleagues on the research team at the Dialogue Project, I was a product of my times and my training. I came to realize that, in true dialogic spirit, there was no need for me to "take a stand" on the questions I was struggling with. I needed only to "discover my stance," my own theories in use. In that way I could enter the common courtyard and at the same time honor the multiple doorways being explored by other colleagues.

I searched to find ways of articulating my own theories in use in order to make my best contribution to the emerging theory and practice in the field. This was not an either/or. It was a both/and. I had a choice.

I realized that I was operating from an alternative set of working hypotheses and operating principles than the primary focus being explored at the Dialogue Project. My life experience had taken me through a different doorway into the generative space of Dialogue—the "magic in the middle."

I began to ask myself, "What if it were possible for the dialogue host to focus primary attention on contribution, collective wisdom, and community, and still embrace

the spirit and gifts of Dialogue? What if the host paid attention to the spaces "in between" people and ideas with a lens that noticed linkages and connections—a lens that focused on coherence rather than conflict? And what if, in response to the host's focus of attention, it became more likely that groups would exhibit and amplify *those* capacities? What if the deeper core process of tacit thought is *already* participatory, rather than fragmented, even though it is often not exhibited. What if there were participatory ways to display and explore underlying assumptions? If appropriate initiating conditions were created, might we not be able access amazing capacities for coherence and collective intelligence without suffering predictable periods of crisis, conflict, pain, frustration and instability?

Flying with Freire

As I was pondering these questions, I happened to take a trip to Sweden on a consulting assignment. On my way out the door, I noticed a book on my shelf that I hadn't looked at in years, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). I picked it up and took it with me on the overnight flight, having no recollection of the content of the book.

As I began to leaf through the book, I was amazed. I didn't sleep at all on that overnight flight. It was as if Freire's words, written more than 20 years earlier, were providing nourishment to my famished soul. Time stopped. Paulo Freire and I began a conversation together—a conversation in the air. In my conversation with Freire, winging

my way to Sweden, I came home again. I re-discovered my roots. I remembered the deeper source of my love for this work.

Even though Friere was part of the movement for grass roots liberation in Latin America, he was first and foremost an eminent Brazilian educational theorist. His work with mass literacy in Brazil, using what he called *conscientizacao*, or consciousness development, was based on what he described as a "dialogic theory of action" (1970, p. 177).

Freire's description of the experience of dialogue itself was strikingly familiar. He spoke of dialogue as an "act of creation" (1970, p. 77) and posed a series of questions which evoke rich images of this generative space of possibility.

> How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own? How can I dialogue if I perceive myself as a case apart from other men—mere "its" in whom I cannot recognize other "I"s? … How can I dialogue if I am closed to—even offended by—the contribution of others? … At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses or perfect sages; there are only men who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know. … dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence. (1970, pp. 79-80)

It was Freire's observations on the relation between critical thinking, dialogue, and action that really caught my attention. He believed that, "true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking … thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action" (1970, p. 81). From these observations, Freire developed the idea of dialogic *praxis* in which reflection and action are inextricably entwined as part of

a common process of forward and deeper movement of awareness focused on the real life issues and questions faced by a given community.

In addition, Freire's framing of dialogue as a strategy for social inquiry, collaborative learning, and accessing a community's living knowledge added an important dimension to how I wanted to focus my work in the field. He asserted that "apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, men cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only from invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (1970, p. 58).

In terms of methodology, Freire encouraged the discovery of and reflection on "generative themes" which are directly anchored to people's lived experience. He considered everyone engaged in this form of dialogic learning, including the facilitators, as active "co-investigators." He asserted that this type of dialogue "as a process of search, of knowledge, and thus of creation, requires the investigators to discover the interpenetration of problems, in the linking of meaningful themes" (1970, p. 99). He described this kind of linking of ideas and themes as the experience of a "reality perceived in the complexity of its constant 'becoming' " (1970, p. 99).

As importantly for me, Freire expressed an indefatigable belief in the wisdom and capacity of ordinary people to engage in dialogic inquiry and learning. He, like Bohm, believed that dialogue was a transformative and potentially revolutionary force in human society but emphasized that "trusting the people is the indispensable precondition" (1970, p. 47). If the facilitator (or teacher, in Freire's parlance) did not truly believe in the

capacity of ordinary people to think together constructively, then the likelihood of the teacher, herself, being able to engage in true dialogue was diminished.

These images were of quite a different texture and tone than those of de Maré, and later Bohm, who had emphasized a free-floating type of exchange in which the focus of reflective attention was the dysfunctional and fragmented nature of thought itself rather than the individual and collective concerns of a community and its positive capacities for change. Friere also encouraged a very different role for the dialogue host. Rather than being an dispassionate observer of the group's thinking process and its limitations, Freire's methodology demanded a highly engaged participative learning stance on the part of everyone, including the hosts. Although Freire obviously recognized the common courtyard of Dialogue, it was clear he was entering it through a different methodological doorway and with a different intent than either de Maré or Bohm.

I finished my conversation with Freire just as the pink and purple hues of dawn came filtering through the window of the plane winging its way to Sweden. The flight attendants came through the plane with breakfast. I wasn't hungry. I had found the nourishment I was looking for.

Study Circles : Dialogue and Large-Scale Collective Learning

Just a few days after my re-encounter with Paulo Freire, I was dining with several Swedish colleagues. I shared with them the impact that my "conversation in the air" with Freire had had on my own process of discovery. I told them that I wanted to experiment with the idea that participation in "conversations that mattered" was well within the

purview and capacity of ordinary people and could be experienced at increasing levels of scale without a great deal of formal training. I wanted to explore ways that groups could focus on specific areas of inquiry that had relevance to their real life questions and concerns. I wanted my conversational work to have a primary focus on learning, collective intelligence, and knowledge evolution. And I wanted my work to contribute to a revival of democratic practices and a renewal of hope at all levels of system—in families, in organizations, and in communities.

As it turned out, one of the guests at the dinner, Ingrid Olausson, had been active in the study circle movement in Sweden. She wondered if I knew about the role that study circles played in both local and national webs of conversations around key issues affecting the future of Swedish society. I knew about the folk high schools in Denmark which had provided the impetus for Myles Horton's founding of the Highlander school for community education in the United States (Glen, 1988; Horton, 1990; Horton & Freire, 1990), but I had only a vague idea of the actual history and impact of the study circle movement in Sweden.

As soon as I got home I sought out the only book I could find in English on study circles (Oliver, 1987). I was intrigued by a number of elements that, although I did not know it at the time, came to be central to our later work with Café conversations.

Founded as a vehicle for grassroots popular education at the turn of the last century, the dialogic learning embodied in the Swedish study circles was described as a "living, activist process that relates knowledge to action and social change, to development and creativity, to social intercourse and collective development" (Oliver,

1987, p. 22). Very simple operating principles foster dialogic learning in study circles. These include: informal environments for meeting; no one in the "expert role;" a clear focus on issues directly relevant to that circle's learning interests; an emphasis on respect for multiple viewpoints; and listening for the collective wisdom residing within the group.

The power of Swedish study circles as a vehicle for linking local conversations to large-scale collective learning was nowhere more in evidence than in the 1980 nuclear referendum in Sweden. Prior to the formal referendum, more than 150,000 Swedes participated in 17,000 study circles in every part of that small country. Many of the circles used study materials reflecting multiple viewpoints on the nuclear question and illuminated the underlying assumptions of different perspectives. It seems that the 1979-1980 dialogues on the nuclear question represented a "true national discourse" (Oliver, 1987, p. 47) on an issue of deep collective concern regarding the nation's future.

Even with the current stresses of the global economy, the study circle movement continues to function. It has had a profound influence on creating Sweden as a learning society based on dialogic principles. The late Olaf Palme, the former Swedish Prime Minister, summarized the transformative power of this type of large-scale dialogic learning and participation.

> Sweden is to a fundamental degree a study circle democracy. It is through study circles that generations have trained themselves in critical analysis so as to be able to reach reasoned decisions in working with one another without abandoning their ideals in the process. (Oliver, 1987, p. 144)

It seems that the Swedish study circle movement had a significant influence on transforming the consciousness of an entire society at a time of high internal tension. A

number of observers have said that study circles helped avoid violence during the early part of the century by creating collective possibilities for institutional renewal in ways that enabled a more participative and egalitarian society to emerge in Sweden.

Could the Swedish study circles as well as Freire's dialogic approach to consciousness development and popular education be revealing two additional doorways into the common courtyard of the Dialogue experience—this time on a large-scale societal level?

My conversation with the ideas embodied in the study circle movement as well as my "conversation in the air" with Freire brought me a strange sense of inner peace. I did not yet know what doorway into the common courtyard of Dialogue my own work would take. However, I felt, once again, connected to my roots in a way that felt intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually authentic.

Social Construction and the Development of Generative Theory

There was one additional thread in the tapestry of my learning during this period in the early to mid 1990s that was, perhaps, the most important of all. Anne Dosher, an elder with extensive background as a scholar and practitioner in the area of large-scale community systems (Dosher, 1981; Dosher, 1993; Dosher, 1994), had been a key resource at the International Women's Dialogue which I co-hosted as part of the MIT research effort. Anne had been challenging me for some time to clarify my "theories in use." She sent me a chapter from a larger work which she said she hoped might further my exploration. The chapter, entitled "Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life," was

by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva (1987). This piece was a provocative exploration of the role of generative theory in the social sciences, particularly in relation to action research.

I already knew of Cooperrider's work in appreciative inquiry (Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990; Srivastva, Cooperrider, & Associates, 1990). I had used appreciative process as a lens in much of my work over the years. In fact, in the late 1980s I had contracted with an intern from Case Western Reserve University to conduct an appreciative inquiry into the life giving forces and innovative possibilities in a large-scale change process I was working on at Kraft Foods.

However, it was not the process of doing appreciative inquiry itself that changed my way of thinking about the research I was involved with at the Dialogue Project. Drawing on Kenneth Gergen's pioneering work (1978; 1982), Cooperrider and Srivastva framed the collective realities we experience as the results of a "social construction of interacting minds" (Cooperrider, 1987, p. 133). This image started me on the path of ongoing learning about the social constructionist stance toward knowledge, learning, leadership and change in ways that have greatly influenced my thinking about the World Café (Anderson, 1997; Bruner, 1990; Gergen, 1994; Lambert et al., 1995; Maturana & Varela, 1992; Vytosky, 1962).

However, it was Cooperrider's and Srivastva's reflections on the power of generative theory that most influenced my learning regarding the World Café. They asserted that "through our assumptions and choice of method we largely create the world we later discover" (1987, p. 167). This perspective on the power that the choice of

method has in social science research illuminated what I was struggling with in my own learning process at the Dialogue Project. They pointed to David Kolb's statement, for example, that "appreciative apprehension and critical apprehension are … fundamentally different processes of knowing" (1984, p. 105). They emphasized that in terms of both theory and method "each stance represents a commitment—a core conviction so to speak—which is given to each of us as a choice" (Cooperrider, 1987, p. 165). They added that:

> There may be multiple ways of knowing, each of them valid in its own realm when judged according to its own set of essential assumptions and purposes. In this sense, there are many different ways of studying the same phenomenon, and the insights generated by one approach are, at best partial and incomplete. (1987, p. 159)

They emphasized that a catalytic theory and the methodological choices it engenders can deeply impact people's experience both individually and collectively. They quote Gergen's evocative statement, reminiscent once again of the particle/wave paradox, that "in this sense the world is not so constituted until the lens is employed" (Gergen, 1982, p. 23).

This was the perspective that Cooperrider and Srivastva used in choosing to move away from a problem focus or critical stance which they describe as assuming that "something is broken, fragmented, not whole, and that it needs to be fixed" (Cooperrider, 1987, p.153). They issued an invitation to their social science colleagues to adopt a methodological and conceptual stance that "appreciates the best of what is to ignite intuition of the possible" (1987, p. 165). They added that "by raising ever new questions

of an appreciative, applicable, and provocative nature, the researcher collaborates in the scientific construction of his or her world" (1987, p. 165).

I realized that in my own life and work, like in the particle/wave paradox, I was actively and consciously choosing the lenses I wanted to work with in my own conversational practice. It became clear to me that the principles I later began to explore more deliberately with our World Café colleagues around the world represented simply one interpretation, a social construction, evolving in a particular community of inquiry and practice (Wenger, 1998). I wanted to clearly own and acknowledge the integration of theory and practice emerging from that community without any attachment to its being any more a truth than that of friends and colleagues who chose to work from a different stance. The real opportunity was to continue to learn with and from others who cared, whatever their conceptual lens.

It was a very liberating time for me. I wanted my work to make some small contribution to addressing Cooperrider's and Srivastva's challenge that, as social scientists, we contribute to developing generative theory capable of "stimulating normative dialogue and furnishing conceptual alternatives needed for social transformation" (Cooperrider, 1987, p. 131). Their challenge was just what I needed to "keep on keeping on" with my musings and my questioning.

Shortly after Anne Dosher sent me the Cooperrider and Srivastva article, the World Café was born in our living room. It provided a perfect opportunity to be in conversation with colleagues around the world about what it meant at a practical level to design for coherence as well as to articulate the theory underlying our work.

Chapter 4: Research Findings—Café as Dialogic Learning Methodology

Setting the Context

A well designed forum of people of average intelligence and consciousness can produce exceptionally intelligent, even wise, results … Contrast a poorly designed forum of the very same people that produces nothing but chaos, or some lowest-common-denominator compromises … Note that the individual intelligence of the participants has no correlation with the collective intelligence of the group … The only difference between the collective intelligence of the first group and the second made up of the very same people—is the process design.

—Tom Atlee, Founder
Co-Intelligence Institute

My partner, David, and I were eating at a noisy restaurant in Stockholm with Leif Edvinsson and his wife, Gunilla. It was Leif, the former director of intellectual capital at Skandia Corporation, with whom we first convened the Intellectual Capital Pioneers dialogues where the World Café was born. Amidst the din in the restaurant, we began a learning conversation about the birth of the World Café and its relationship to the multi-faceted work that has evolved over the last several years in the area of intellectual capital (Allee, 1997; Edvinsson & Malone, 1997; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Stewart, 1994; Stewart, 1997).

As we sat drinking our first glass of wine (there were several that evening) I recall Leif saying to Gunilla, "Juanita is gathering stories about the World Café for her dissertation." I found myself uncomfortable and jumped in, "It's *not* about doing a

dissertation, Leif. It's about sharing the story of the collective evolution of these ideas. It's about how Café conversations contribute to collective intelligence and living knowledge. It's about discovering the principles that underlie the Knowledge Café you've created at the Skandia Future Center."

I've now had the opportunity to be in learning conversations not only with Leif but also with other colleagues from Northern Europe, the Pacific Rim, Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the U.S. who are experimenting with Café learning as a conversational methodology for fostering collaborative exploration and thinking together about complex questions in varied cultural settings.

There are many valuable large-scale and/or multi-stakeholder interventions that support organizational change and renewal (Bunker & Alban, 1997; Holman & Devane, 1999; Owen, 1992; Pratt, Gordon, & Plamping, 1999; Weisbord & Janoff, 2000)**.** *However, our research is revealing that Café learning has a unique contribution to make when the goal is the focused use of dialogic inquiry to foster collaborative learning, knowledge sharing, and collective insight around real life challenges and key strategic questions. This is especially true in working with groups that are larger than most traditional dialogue circles are designed to accommodate* (Baldwin, 1994; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Garfield, Spring, & Cahill, 1998; Isaacs, 1999).

This section synthesizes our Café findings and explores the questions, "What are the principles and practices that underlie Café learning? How do we design for coherence without control in dialogic learning situations?" I highlight four core operating principles that, taken together and used in an integrated way, support Café learning at its best. These

four principles are quite simple. However, embodying them as an integrated practice demands creativity, thoughtfulness, artistry, and care.

CAFÉ AS DIALOGIC LEARNING METHODOLOGY
FOUR KEY OPERATING PRINCIPLES

- Creating hospitable space.
- Exploring questions that matter.
- Connecting diverse people and ideas.
- Listening together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions.

We are discovering that that the unique contribution of Café learning seems not to come only from *creating hospitable space*, although this operating principle is important whether or not an actual Café setting is created. Nor is *exploring questions that matter* the only critical factor. Neither is it just the product of *connecting diverse people and ideas*, although that also is key. And it doesn't depend alone on *listening together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions*.

While I have organized the material to highlight each principle individually, our inquiry with Café hosts and participants is revealing that it is *the integrated combination of these operating principles* that enables Café conversations to make their unique contribution to collaborative learning and co-intelligence. I am hopeful that you'll want to play with integrating these Café operating principles yourself as well as to explore, use, and refine them for your own needs and work.

I have chosen to explore each of the operating principles in two parts:

- *Part I, The Story*, is an actual Café experience told by the person who hosted the Café. The story highlights the practical ways in which that particular principle was embodied, along with the lessons learned.
- *Part II, Reflections and Observations*, talks in more depth about that principle and the contribution it makes to dialogic learning. Here, as part of the findings from my research, I've included observations on the ways that I and other practitioners have seen that particular Café principle demonstrated in action.

While I serve as the weaver and storyteller, the Reflections and Observations sections include many voices in addition to my own. These include Café hosts, participants in strategic conversation seminars where Café learning serves as the process thread, authors across disciplines, and organizational representatives. All of those interviewed indicated that they would be happy to add their voices publicly to the conversation. In several instances, because of confidentiality considerations, an organization has been described generically rather than being specifically identified.

I have chosen to include the voices of multiple contributors since our learning together has been and continues to be an ongoing conversational inquiry with cross-pollination among people and ideas, just as in a Café gathering itself. The inquiry has been similar in style to the Café experiences that are the focus of our mutual learning.

In addition, in the section related to the principle of exploring questions that matter, I've created a composite *Café on Questions* to help synthesize our research findings. This is what Clark Moustakas calls a "creative synthesis" which he sees as integral to the hueristic research methodology I am using for this dissertation (Moustakas, 1990). The composite Café reflects key ideas gleaned from my learning conversations

with multiple Café hosts on the "question of questions." Here I take dramatic license in order to provide the tone and texture of an actual Café conversation, while retaining the essence of many colleagues' contributions from around the world. As part of this creative synthesis, an individual speaker's voice may reflect not only their own specific observations but also the contribution of others involved in this collaborative inquiry.

During my Café research, I've immersed myself in several thousand pages of transcripts and field notes and reviewed many hours of video tapes taken at various Café events. I have tried to listen for the deeper patterns and themes woven throughout that body of lived experience. As I discussed earlier, in my methodology chapter, this is a hueristic inquiry. As Moustakas pointed out about hueristic inquiry:

> I am personally involved. I am searching for qualities, conditions, and relationships that underlie a fundamental question, issue or concern … I am reaching into deeper and deeper regions of a human problem or experience and coming to know and understand its underlying dynamics and constituents more and more fully. (1990, pp. 11-13)

Moustakas goes on to add:

> The question of validity is one of meaning … The primary investigator has collected and analyzed all of the material—reflecting, sifting, exploring, judging its relevance or meaning, and ultimately elucidating the themes and essences … that depict the experience. The synthesis of essences and meanings … is a reflection and outcome of the researcher's pursuit of knowledge. (1990, pp. 32-33)

I must take full responsibility for the interpretations and synthesis I have created from my immersion in the Cafe research materials and from my own lived experience over the last several years. In synthesizing the ideas of contributors, I have undoubtedly interpreted their meanings through my own set of glasses. In order to create a readable

flow of commentary, I have, at times needed to paraphrase key ideas from multiple parts of a conversation. However, I have made every attempt to remain true to the speakers' intent and to reflect their special contribution to our mutual process of discovery.

I recognize that my interpretations have come from the particular conversational partners I've interviewed, from the authors who have influenced my thinking, and from the personal, political and social history that has informed my life. Another author immersing herself in the same material and coming from a different social history might come to different conclusions and create a different synthesis.

However, by providing a coherent context for multiple voices and perspectives to be heard, and by contributing my own stories and creative expression, I hope to engage what Laurel Richardson calls "crystallization" as a research approach. Richardson suggests that crystallization "combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances … and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous" (1997, p. 92).

I am not searching for an ultimate truth. I am seeking to offer a variety of lenses into Café conversation as a methodology for collaborative learning and collective intelligence so that you, the reader, will be stimulated to engage your own perspectives. Do these operating principles resonate with your own experience in dialogue and collaborative learning? How might you modify or change them? What would be your rationale? What is your own theory-in-use as you work with Café conversations or other types of dialogic learning in collective settings?

Creating Hospitable Space

Part I: David Isaacs' Café Story

A System Thinking Together

In the early Fall of 1998 the national Systems Thinking in Action (STIA) Conference was held in San Francisco. The conference focuses on innovative applications of systems thinking, organizational learning, and new forms of leadership. It attracts about 1000 participants from around the world. The theme for this conference was Learning Communities: Building Enduring Capability. The following story focuses on creating hospitable space for collaborative learning in a very large group setting.

By David Isaacs
Clearing Communications

In the beginning, Juanita and I thought we might offer a two day pre-conference program on "Conversation as a Core Business Process." We also suggested that it would interesting to do a plenary World Café conversation that could involve the whole conference in building a large-scale learning community while "learning about learning" together."

To our surprise, the conference coordinator, LeAnne Grillo, called us and asked, "How would you like to do a keynote Café with the whole conference in the hotel ballroom? Maybe you could entitle it something like The World Café: Catalyzing Large-scale Collective Learning." We agreed that the content focus of the Café might be on the emerging understandings about the natural informal social processes that we were discovering lie at the heart of developing "communities of practice" and other forms of organizational learning. The announcement for the Conference contained the following description:

KEYNOTE PRESENTATION

The World Café: Catalyzing Large-scale Collective Learning

In the new economy, conversations are the most important form of work. Conversations are the way knowledge workers discover what they know, share it with their colleagues, and in the process create new knowledge in the organization.

—Alan Webber, Harvard Business Review

The World Café is a simple but powerful guiding image and infrastructure for knowledge evolution. Meeting at the World Café enables you to experience how collaborative insight, innovation and action emerge from webs of conversation to create knowledge and vitalize organizations. At the Café, the presenters join with you to pose "questions that travel well," focus on what matters, and share discoveries at increasing levels of scale. They then examine the implications of fostering large-scale collective learning for creating sustainable business and social value.

Well, that phone conversation and sending out the description of the session really called our bluff! Juanita, Nancy Margulies, our other partner, and I could hardly imagine what it would be like to create a Café for 1,000 people. The largest Café we had done up to that point was for 250 people. How would we scale it up to more than four times that size? How would we be able to create a warm, intimate café atmosphere in a sterile hotel ballroom with four blank walls, no natural light, stage raised above the level of the audience, formal speakers' podiums, chairs in lines, fluorescent lighting, and a hotel staff steeped in traditional banquet management?

I also wondered how we could create an appropriate learning context for more than 1,000 participants with widely varying learning goals and styles, from diverse professional backgrounds, and across global cultures. In a short one and a half hour session would it be possible for so many people to explore core questions about the social nature of learning as well as experience being part of a coherent learning community on a large-scale? How could we move beyond individual contribution and help people appreciate the phenomenon of collective intelligence in that large of a group?

Then I had an idea. Instead of focusing on the meaning of "systems thinking," we could focus on creating a lived experience of "a system thinking together." It was a subtle shift but I thought an important one. When I shared this idea with Nancy and Juanita, our anxiety rose but so did our excitement. Now our challenge was to create the context for this experience to happen.

Nancy is a gifted graphic artist, illustrator, and designer. Juanita is great at conceptual stuff. And, if I must say so myself, I'm a pretty good host. I know how to make people feel comfortable together. So the three of us began to imagine and play with what might be possible when we combined all our skills.

Here's what actually happened when we got to the Conference. We took one look at the large, sterile, hotel ballroom and thought about how we could transform it into a warm, friendly, inviting Café environment for 1000 people in the quick 45 minutes we would have at the break. We arranged for the hotel to get small, round cocktail tables for four (no small feat in a banquet oriented hotel!). Conference volunteers rounded up red-checked tablecloths, small vases, and fresh red and white carnations for each table. We put white paper sheets over the tablecloths, just like in many cafés, and left a small container of colored markers to use for doodling.

While we couldn't get rid of the large raised stage, we did manage to have the speaker's podium removed. We replaced it with a round café table next to a special type of overhead projector that Nancy could use both for pre-prepared graphics as well as for "real time" graphic recording. Her drawings of the audience's contributions would be projected onto huge video screens in back of us so that everyone's comments could be seen as well as heard. We brought in palm trees and other greenery to give the room a warmer, more natural feel. And, in a stroke of luck, we discovered an inexpensive way to project different colored designs on the walls. When the lights were dimmed, this gave the effect of walking into an intimate "jazz café." Nancy's son, Evan, had just completed his first CD. We decided to play his music when the Café opened.

We realized that creating a welcoming, hospitable environment for this large of a group was not just about the physical set up of our keynote Café. We wanted to create a different feel for the conference as a whole. Our keynote session was on the afternoon of the second day, but we wanted to

get people in the café mood ahead of time. We arranged to have the break areas also set up with a café theme—red-checked cloths on the large break tables, as well on café tables in the foyers nearby. Nancy made beautiful silk banners that had different quotes on them like Martin Buber's comment "All real living is meeting" which we hung in the break area, making it look like an art show rather than just a regular quick-get-your-coffee place. We tried to create many subtle signals that "something different, something informal, something comfortable and familiar is happening here."

When it came time to actually transform the ballroom, Nancy put colorful signs outside in the hallways that said "No Entry (yet!), Café Under Construction." Earlier, we had had a quick meeting with the volunteers, hotel crew, technicians, everybody involved in the set up. We had told them that it was important that we all think of ourselves as the hosts for this gathering and that, together, in the next 45 minutes, we were going to transform this traditional hotel ballroom into a welcoming World Café. Together we would create a wonderful, inviting space for being and learning together. Prior to our keynote, the ballroom had been divided into three formal forum rooms so we had our work cut out for us. We put up-beat jazz on the sound system and literally took the walls down! A professional video crew filmed the whole thing. It was amazing to watch that transformation. I'll never forget it. Everyone was pretty intense and focused since we didn't know if it could be done in time, but we were all having a lot of fun doing it together.

For the Café, Nancy had created hand-drawn, whimsical overheads with quotes from scientists and others giving a flavor of the key ideas which underpinned our work. There was Intelligence emerges as the system connects to itself, and In life, the issue is not control, but dynamic inter-connectedness, and The real voyage of discovery lies not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes. She had also made a colorful "Welcome to the World Café" overhead for the large video screen in the front.

Finally we opened the doors. There, to greet each guest, was a volunteer host shaking hands and extending a welcome. Posters at each entryway invited folks to sit with people they didn't know and to start getting acquainted. A jazz album played in the background, just like at any neighborhood café. We dimmed the ballroom lights slightly so that our projected designs could be seen all over the room, giving it a warm, intimate feeling even in such a huge space. The "Welcome to the World Café" sign

shown from one large video screen and the Café quotes alternated on the other. Our Café was coming alive as hundreds of people entered.

It was fascinating to notice the shift of collective energy from previous plenary sessions held in this very same room. We could feel the playfulness and curiosity as people began to gather at the small café tables. They immediately began talking with each other. The buzz of conversation filled the room as everyone got settled. Nancy, Juanita, and I also got settled at our café table on the raised stage.

Let me backtrack for just a moment here. An interesting and quite symbolic moment had happened just a couple of hours earlier between Nancy and Juanita. Nancy had come into our hotel room wearing her artist's tunic, long tights, and boots—looking very elegant, very beautiful and very artsy-craftsy, just like Nancy does. I could tell that Juanita was uncomfortable. She quietly asked Nancy if she was planning to wear that outfit to the keynote session. Nancy said, "Of course." Well, that started a conversation among the three of us regarding what was appropriate to wear for a keynote presentation at a global conference.

Juanita had been planning to wear a tailored business suit and had asked me to do the same. However, that would have seemed out of place with what Nancy was wearing. Now, this may seem trivial, but Nancy raised an important point. She asked, "What is our real intent here? Aren't we trying to create a different environment, one in which people step into a different collective archetype, the archetype of café? Don't we want to encourage people to collectively remember the kind of informal, social feeling that often accompanies being in a real café? Does wearing a business suit on a raised stage in the front send that message?"

That stopped Juanita right in her tracks. She could see that Nancy was making an important point about how to create hospitable space. As it turned out, when we finally appeared on the stage at our own café table, Nancy was wearing different pants rather then tights with her tunic. I was wearing a sports jacket with an open shirt, and Juanita was wearing a softer styled outfit instead of her tailored business suit. That little incident helped us all think about the details of Café hosting more deeply.

So now let's get back to the World Café keynote that is just about to begin. Nancy, Juanita and I, in our less formal garb, are settled at a café table on the raised stage. We had requested that when we were introduced, it would

be in a way that honored the sense of hospitality, friendship and warmth that we were trying to create in the Café, rather than introducing us as the outside experts. In an effort to reinforce our role as café hosts rather than presenters, I opened the gathering by welcoming this group from 27 different countries with their own word for "welcome" wherever I could. I wanted people to see that we were, indeed, a World Café, representing every continent around the globe. We were a fractal of the whole system. Perhaps, if we were lucky that day, we would see and experience ourselves as a "system thinking together." I asked the group "What if a thousand individual intelligences joined together to evolve our collective intelligence about learning and knowledge creation?"

Sitting at our own café table on the stage, with the video cameras projecting us on the large screens so people in the back could feel connected and a part of the conversation, Nancy, Juanita and I each briefly shared our passion for Café learning and why it was so important to our lives and work. I think this personal sharing helped create a context where others could engage authentically as well.

Juanita did a brief conceptual presentation on the research which is revealing that, contrary to traditional perspectives, critical organizational learning and knowledge sharing happens through webs of informal conversations moving through networks of personal relationships. This is in contrast to the prevailing view that most organizational learning happens through the organization's formal structures and processes, including most training and development programs. In addition, Juanita showed the group a living systems image of how webs of conversation moving from individuals to small groups to multiple groups can serve as a core process for knowledge evolution at increasing levels of scale. She pointed out that our Café conversations in the next hour or so would not only be a learning methodology but also a metaphor for the natural processes of knowledge creation and knowledge sharing that were going on all the time in their own organizations.

Nancy then posed the core questions for the gathering: "What if critical organizational learning and knowledge sharing did happen in this way? What difference would it make in our work with organizations?" Michael Jones, a wonderful pianist, provided quiet music as members spent a minute or two of personal reflection time on these questions prior to beginning their first round of Café conversations. Our only instructions to people were:

- Link and build.
- Listen together for deeper themes.
- Play! Write or draw key ideas on your tablecloths.

As people began to explore together the room came alive! When it was time for this first 20-minute round to come to a close, I decided to try an experiment. I quietly raised my hand and signaled to the tables closest to me to do the same. As people noticed what was happening, a wave of hands began to raise throughout the huge ballroom and in less than 60 seconds the entire room fell silent!

We were all laughing as we asked the participants to notice how they collectively already "knew what to do." Then I asked people to move into the second round of conversation by moving to a table in their general vicinity. One person was to remain behind as the host whose task was to welcome the new guests and share the essence of the just-completed conversation, using the notes and drawings left on the paper tablecloth. The guests' task was to bring the seed ideas and insights from their prior conversations. "Okay," I said, "Go ahead and change tables now." It was absolutely astounding to watch 750 travelers pick up their books, bags and materials and quickly move to surrounding tables where they were welcomed as guests by their new hosts. Self-organizing works!

I asked people, in this new round, to simply continue their conversations and "listen into the center." I suggested that they notice common themes, patterns, and deeper questions that were emerging from their shared listening and the cross-pollination of seed ideas from the earlier round of conversation. Now there were four conversations that were linked and thoughts about the initiating question compounded rapidly with this cross-pollination.

After the second round, I put up my hand again, and as before, a wave of silence swept the room. This time, Juanita and I stepped down from the stage into the audience, sort of like Phil Donohue and Oprah Winfrey, but we were not going to have a traditional question and answer session or ask for report backs. Instead, we were inviting the group to have a "conversation of the whole." Nancy stayed up front to draw ideas and insights on the overhead projector so that everyone could see what was being said.

Now the room seemed filled with a special kind of focused energy. It was palpable. I wanted the group to collectively notice this. I asked people to stay silent for a moment and to notice the energy in the room—the sense of connectedness, the sense of each of us feeling ourselves part of a larger community of inquiry and practice where the questions we were exploring mattered. I asked them to notice what it felt like to experience a "whole system thinking together" about things it cared about. And I mused aloud, "You know, most of the time we can't see the system thinking together. Think for a minute about what might be the conditions that would enable the systems we are part of back home to think together about its most important questions like we are beginning to do here? What different futures might be possible if we as leaders and consultants could help that happen?" Then I let the silence be present for a few moments so that people could become consciously aware of this collective possibility.

After that we asked people to share insights that had emerged from their conversations. We didn't do normal small group report outs. Rather, we asked people to add to the larger conversation whenever something they heard connected or linked to the conversations at their tables. Juanita and I encouraged the linking and weaving of ideas from all over the room. Very naturally, people moved from one area of insight into another, linking and building as they went, creating a "knowledge web" all across the room. We then asked people to share the deeper questions that had emerged from their Café conversations. During this whole period, Nancy was creating visual images of what was unfolding in this larger conversation. These were being immediately projected on the large screens so that everyone in the room could see them. As a way of ending, we asked people to turn to one other person and to share a seed idea that they wanted to take home, plant, and allow to grow.

Amazingly, all of this happened in just 1 1/2 hours. When the session was over and people began to leave, volunteers with brightly wrapped boxes were at all the doors giving each person a gift—a large, colorful poster, a "Map of the Territory," that Nancy, Juanita, and I had created. This poster summarized the assumptions underlying the Café work. It included key conceptual quotes, interdisciplinary contributions, simple guidelines for Café hosting, and ways to find additional resources.

Even though the Café was over, it seemed that many people didn't want to leave. Groups just continued sitting at their Café tables or standing in

clusters around the room talking. The hotel staff kept trying to get people to leave because they had to re-do the ballroom and put up the wall dividers again for the next session, but it was hard to get people to stop talking!

Many people came up to us after the session asking how they could learn more about this work. We asked people randomly if they had time to be interviewed about their experience by our video crew in a special video room upstairs. A number of them did, so we set up a picnic area near the video room with wine, cheese, fruit, and drinks. As people waited to be interviewed, we had a party. It was a great afternoon!

David Talks About His Learnings

What did I learn from this little experiment about creating hospitable space for large group dialogue and learning? I like to think about it using a model that our colleague, Eric Vogt, has created:

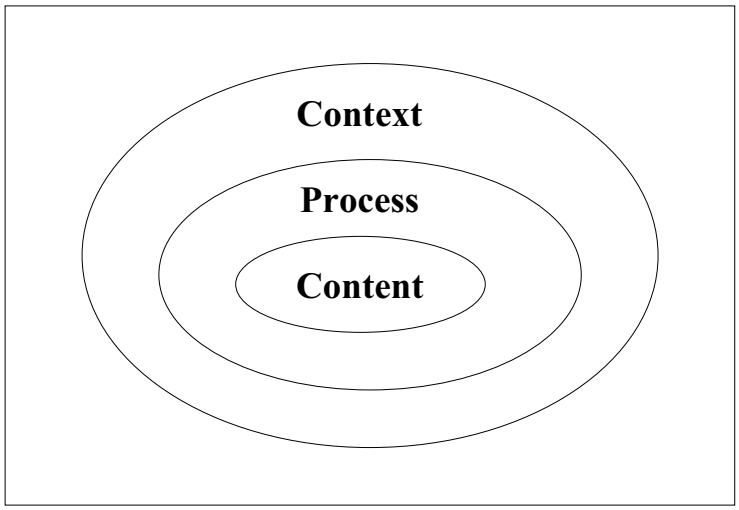


Figure 2: Context, Process, Content

In our Café session at the Systems Thinking in Action Conference, we paid a great deal of attention to the context (in this instance, the environment) which included:

- Setting up the room to actually look like a café.
- Having the intimacy of small café table conversations within a larger space where each table could feel connected to the larger whole.
- Using art, music, and greenery.
- Using volunteers as greeters and hosts.
- Using the language of "hosts," "travelers" and "guests" during the Café rounds to encourage a spirit of mutual hospitality and friendship.
- Encouraging more living systems images through the use of language like "planting seeds" and "cross-pollinating of ideas."
- Going out into the audience to be with the participants during the conversation of the whole.
- Wearing informal yet appropriate attire.
- Using hand drawn graphics rather than Power Point presentations.
- Giving gifts to each participant.

These may seem like simple things but they are rarely done in the context of supporting collective intelligence and knowledge evolution in organizations. I feel that it is critical to shift the context within which people explore the core questions in their organizations. There is something, for example, about the core image of a café that evokes, even across cultures, a common set of conversational responses—ones that are more creative, playful, curious, honest, intimate, and real than the responses evoked in most formal business meetings and hotel-based off-site retreats. Creating a warm, inviting, and informal space like a café is one way of shifting the context to encourage more generative conversations to emerge.

When this context, (a Café setting or other informal environment) is accompanied by a clear and creative process (the Café method or other self-organizing methodology) that includes cross-pollination and linking of diverse ideas around a content (strategic questions) that really matter to people, THEN you've got the possibility for coherence of thought to become visible at a collective level. I think we took a step in that direction in our World Café keynote and we're learning more all the time.

Part II: Reflections and Observations on Creating Hospitable Space

The spirit is to create a physical space that enables you to move in that space and create a social space that encourages you to swap and share and help each other. If you can design the physical space, the social space and the information space all together to enhance collaborative learning, then that whole milieu turns into a learning technology and people just love working there and they start learning with and from each other.

How do you actually construct a space that brings people casually together so that they start listening to each other … and find that they can contribute something?

—John Seely Brown, Chief Scientist
Xerox Palo Alto Research Center
(Creelman, 2000)

The power of third places

You may recall that the day after the Café process was born in our living room, our Danish colleague, Finn Voldtofte, my partner, David Isaacs, and I sat down to reflect on what had happened the previous day. Had simply changing the physical context from a traditional dialogue circle into the Café contributed to the richness of exchange we had experienced the previous day in our Intellectual Capital Pioneers group? What is it about a café environment that evokes intimacy, collective engagement, and collaborative conversation? Is the café a collective archetype of some kind, a common human

experience present in many cultures and across many eras? Does the very act of entering a café setting naturally promote more authentic conversation? Do people just "know what to do" when then they enter an informal and welcoming café setting?

It all seemed so simple and obvious as we talked together that day, like remembering common sense. There must be more to it than that! It took several years to put the conceptual pieces together. I remember the first time I was introduced to the power and potential of what sociologist Ray Oldenburg has called "the third place" in human communities (1989). I was reading Howard Rheingolds' book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1993) when I saw the reference to Oldenburg's research on third places. Rheingold, a pioneer in computer mediated communications and the on-line world, talked about the early collaborative conversations on the Net. He commented on the powerful way the Net has come to fulfill the role of a third place, a comfortable, informal environment (in this case virtual) for people to gather for conversation, community, and connection—to each other and to things they care about.

When I actually found Oldenburg's book I was even more intrigued. The full title of the book is *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through The Day* (1989). Oldenburg's research focuses on the importance of third places for the evolution of democratic practice and informal public life throughout history. His insights are critical to our understanding of Café conversations and why they work.

Although Oldenburg points out that "rare is the chronicler who has done justice to those gathering places where community is most alive and people are most themselves" (1989, p. 20), I found authors from a variety of disciplines who have touched on these questions. *The Joy of Conversation*, a history of the Salons and their influence on societal innovation from ancient Greece to the twentieth century, provides a complementary perspective on third places and the creation of hospitable space for collaborative insight and innovation. Michael Schrage's *Shared Minds* (1990), written while he was a visiting scholar at MIT's Media Lab, explores the critical importance of informal environments and shared spaces for collaborative work.

Sally Hegelsen's *The Web of Inclusion* (1995), includes ideas on organizational design metaphors based on living systems principles. She provides an organizational lens which corroborates the relevance of our initial musings on the power of informal settings for dialogic collaborative insight and learning. John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid's *The Social Life of Information* (2000) re-affirms Rheingold's earlier assertion that even in computer mediated environments, creating informal social contexts where people can talk together, share ideas, and provide mutual contribution to each other's learning is critical to effective work. Finally, Christopher Alexander's work on architectural elements which evoke "the quality that has no name" (1979) reveals deep patterns of design which support the creation of hospitable space for human endeavor.

When I first read Oldenburg's research on the characteristics of third places, it so mirrored what we had stumbled upon in our Café work, that I smiled for days. Oldenburg describes the third place as a locale that exists apart from the "womb" of private family

space and the "rat race" of the workaday world. He points to the role of third places, including cafés , in serving as neutral ground, a place where people of diverse perspectives and backgrounds can come together in an inclusive way. A third place accepts and welcomes newcomers as part of maintaining its vitality (1989, pp. 23-47). I realized that our own emphasis on having Café hosts who welcome travelers as guests taps into the sense of inclusivity, novelty, and hospitality that are hallmarks of third places.

Oldenburg emphasizes the way in which a third place also offers the opportunity to feel at home. He describes this as an intangible "feeling of being at ease or the 'freedom to be' " (1989, p. 41). The intangible feeling of warmth, emerging out of friendliness, support, and mutual concern also characterizes the best experiences in a third place. For example, in her discussion of the role of hospitality in the history of the salon movement, Jaida Nha' Sandra discusses how Gertrude Stein's "openness to visitors, her willingness to welcome anyone and everyone" demonstrates "one of the defining features of the traditional salon" (1997, p. 24). Sandra discusses many ways to make the salon environment more hospitable, informal, and inviting in terms of seating, furniture, and lighting in order to encourage the quality of conversation for which salons have been famous over several centuries. She says that "what matters most is comfort and a personal setting … the feeling that they have entered a friendly and informal environment" (1997, p.52).

It is intriguing that the Café environment and methodology seem to consistently evoke these qualities. Roslie Capper is one of the early pioneers of Café work in New

Zealand. She helped catalyze a national network of Café conversations to explore Maori indigenous treaty and land rights issues. The joint Maori/Pakeha (non-indigenous Anglo) design team framed these gatherings as conversations where "The Café Meets the Hui." The Hui is the traditional Maori meeting protocol. Roslie was seeking a forum for deep conversations that could be used across cultural traditions. She discovered that combining Café conversations with the traditional Hui meeting traditions helped build this cultural bridge in New Zealand. Roslie comments on the experience of hospitality and warmth that the Café evokes and its importance for large-scale change in New Zealand:

> The word "café" involves all of our senses. We can feel the warmth, smell the coffee, hear the buzz, relax, see our friends—all on just thinking "café." We feel welcome and at home there. It's an old feeling and international.
>
> Erihapeti *(a Maori indigenous elder)* teaches that their main value is 'manaakitanga' or hospitality. It was in my family too. We are being called to revisit the idea of hospitality. And to identify and engage a spirit of hospitality as we explore the difficult questions for our common future.
>
> In evoking the Café image for large-scale change we're evoking "coming home." What we're doing is coming home … to community, to a shared values base, and to a network of friends and colleagues. (Personal e-mail correspondence, March, 7, 1997)

Leif Edvinsson, formerly of Skandia Corporation, points to the importance of this same type of "home-feeling" in the development of the Knowledge Café at the Skandia Future Center outside Stockholm. The Café at the Future Center is an actual gathering place based on the principles Leif experienced during the early Cafés at our home in Mill Valley.

> We designed the Knowledge Café at the Skandia Future center as an open space where anyone could walk in and have a home-feeling. The kitchen turned out to be the hub. You had to go the kitchen to get your food and then you bumped into people you needed to talk to. You just walk in there

> and the connections and ideas start to emerge by just being together in the Café. It was even more than just making new connections. It was what I call contactivity. The home-feeling in the Knowledge Cafe creates a special type of contactivity. (Leif Edvinsson, Learning Conversation, October 1999)

Another characteristic of effective third places is that they are upbeat and at times, playful. They are a temporary world within the ordinary world, a place apart, a place where "magic" can happen (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 26 and p. 39). When Finn Voldtofte, our Danish colleague, David, and I first began to explore what it was that had made the initial Café experience so unusual, Finn commented on the positive and playful expectations that often accompany people going to a Café:

> There is a curiosity. You have to leave home to get there, so it's enough away from your normal situation that maybe you can leave your old habits of thought back where you left. And you usually don't come to a Café out of fear or a feeling that there are great disasters waiting to happen to you. … You usually enter a Café with an expectation that something good is going to happen there. (Finn Voldtofte, Learning Conversation, January 1995)

Arian Ward, former Director of Knowledge and Learning at Hughes Aircraft and who was part of the original Intellectual Capital Pioneers, describes the way in which Café learning evokes a sense of relaxation and "meaningful fun":

> Where do people end up at parties? In the kitchen around the table, if there is one. It's a feeling of warmth and intimacy. The Café is about meaningful fun. In childhood, meaningful play is an important part of the discovery process. That's what the Café is about too, and it happens in the conversation. (Arian Ward, Learning Conversation, October 1999)

We've also discovered that the very fact of having paper tablecloths with colored pens available to write with seems to evoke a more playful and creative spirit. Jennifer

Landau, specialist in interactive graphics, who has both hosted and participated in many Café conversations over the last several years comments:

> When people have the opportunity to "doodle" or draw their ideas on the tablecloths many seem to feel like having a serious conversation can also be fun and creative. I've also noticed this in actual Cafés where the crayons on the table are ostensibly for the children, but the grown-ups seem to have as much fun as the kids drawing on the tablecloths. In the Silicon Valley, the breakthrough ideas scribbled on the back of a napkin are legendary. (Jennifer Landau, Learning Conversation, September 2000)

Oldenburg points out that it is, however, the *quality of the conversation itself* that is the defining characteristic of third places (1989, p. 27). Eric Utne, whose magazine, the Utne Reader, helped re-vitalize the salon movement in the United States (1991), provides a vivid description of great conversations in these informal settings, which mirror our best World Café conversations. Utne states that:

> When the coffee's strong and the chemistry's right, our conversations seem to tap directly into the zeitgeist. One person's ideas inspire another's and another's. Each contributes his or her own piece to something larger. By making explicit, what may have been … only flickering at the edges of our awareness, these heady gab sessions turn into something transcendent—conversational and conceptual jazz. (as quoted in N'Ha Sandra & Reader, 1997, p. vii)

Creating Café learning environments

In our conversations with Café hosts around the world, the power and importance of literally creating a warm and hospitable Café environment to support collaborative conversation cannot be overemphasized. It is one of the key discoveries from our World Café research. Andrea Dyer is a learning organization consultant who has used Café methods in a range of settings, from understanding diversity issues to exploring a new

global marketing strategy in a major multi-national corporation with representatives from over 30 countries. In describing the Café environment at this global strategy event, Andrea comments:

> It was sort of like a Café amphitheater … quite intimate. To be on that stage and look out at 185 people in this setting was very close and cozy in an amazing way. The lights would dim and the music would come on and the atmosphere would just transform itself right then and there.
>
> We had people take pictures of sunrises in their home countries and send them in advance. And we had them take pictures of their families. We had a gallery in the hallway coming in. When they came back from breaks they could see the latest "art." We changed the artwork over the three days. People walked into the room through the gallery every time and saw what was new. We also put the graphic murals from the whole group conversation into the art gallery every day. (Andrea Dyer, Learning Conversation, July 1999)

Commenting on the use of a Café setting to catalyze the re-design of the North American Distribution Organization within a multi-national computer firm, Andrea reflects:

> When I walk into an environment like that, perhaps there's less need to be right or have all the answers. Maybe it's because we are all so familiar with sitting in a Café and having a conversation and taking notes on tablecloths. I think somehow, that it may activate some mechanism in our brain … like the neural pathway shifts into Café mode. (Andrea Dyer, Learning Conversation, April 1999)

Bo Gyllenpalm, the former CEO of Phonogram, a Philips subsidiary in Sweden, and himself a very experienced Café host, discusses the first Café conversation he was ever part of. It was a "progressive dinner Café" that David and I hosted under a tent on the island of Lidingö outside Stockholm. We invited 50 of our Swedish friends, many of whom did not know each other, to be part of a Café conversation where they moved to a different table with each course of the dinner while one member remained as host. At

each turn we posed a different question to help people explore what they cared about and the questions they were living with. When I asked Bo, "What do you think helped the Dinner Café work well?" he responded,

> Well, the whole atmosphere. The surroundings were very beautiful. It was the garden, the water, and the very relaxed atmosphere. It created an immediate openness to what would happen there … It was not forced or pushing us into discussion, but I was surprised at how fast people were to speak from their heart." (Bo Gyllenpalm, Learning Conversation, April 1999)

In reflecting on a later Café conversation which he hosted himself, Bo describes the setting where he chose to explore the future of environmental sustainability at a major Swedish telecommunications company:

> We picked a very unique park, Skansen, which is a living history museum. We wanted people that usually go to a conference to view something that was not so familiar, to link the past to the future. We put them into a new context and that threw people off in a good way. .. People opened up and dared to talk about their dreams. Many good ideas came out because they could say anything … It was small groups sitting around Café tables. There was a very close atmosphere and people could relax. You could listen and if you had something to say, you could say it. (Bo Gyllenpalm, Learning Conversation, April 1999)

In another corporate setting, Tammy Sicard, a senior internal consultant at a large bio-medical company, created an Italian Café as part of the process for crafting a global human resources strategy after a major corporate merger:

> First, we had HR people from all over the world sit on a panel and talk about the challenges and questions unique to their area … Then we taught people how to do mind mapping. After a break we had them walk into the room, into the Knowledge Café. It was set up like an Italian Café—Italian opera music playing and Chianti and red and white checked tablecloths, with different focus topics.
>
> It really felt different. The minute you walked in it felt like a different place. And I think that actually became a very important aspect

> because people were curious right from the start and it was a little playful because they could self-select where they went. They were having fun, having rich discussions about topics they had a shared interest in. They were using their mind mapping skills right on the butcher paper on the Cafe tables. People hooked right into it. It was pretty spectacular to me. (Tammy Sicard, Learning Conversation, August 1999)

It seems that being intentional about creating a Café environment is just as relevant in non-profit settings. Sharif Abdullah is the director of the Commonway Institute in Portland Oregon. After being introduced to the Café concept at a Fetzer Institute meeting on Peacebuilding for the 21st Century, he decided to experiment with a "Commons Café"—bringing people of diverse backgrounds together including Anglos, Blacks, Hispanics, blue collar, middle class, and homeless people to explore issues of race, class, ethnicity, values, and politics. A variety of local organizations were asked to send members of their constituencies.

> We wanted to see if it were possible to go deeper into these conversations … Our goal was not to have people feel good about each other. … We wanted people to shift their consciousness from thinking 'I am separate' to thinking 'we are one'. … Is there something about the Café format that can trigger or facilitate this immediate experience? Is this a tool in which consciousness actually changes? (Sharif Abdullah, Learning Conversation, November 1998)

Sharif describes his choice of location as key to success:

> The place is really important. We wanted to have a relatively light and a very safe atmosphere. We didn't want anyone to feel "I'm going to get beat up physically, mentally, or emotionally if I go to this." On the other hand, we wanted it to be an adventure. We held this in a festival market place that had fallen on hard times. The tables and chairs were already there and the coffee vendor was already there and it was already a Café place. The coffee vendor was one of the sponsors and there were other patrons all around us. One of the incentives from the sponsoring organizations was that you get $5.00 worth of latte's and desserts for free,

> just by showing up. (Sharif Abdullah, Learning Conversations, November 1998 and July 1999)

Other colleagues have also reflected on the importance of the Café in creating not only a hospitable space but also a safe space for conversations that matter. Chuck Roe, formerly a senior executive for Total Quality efforts at Phillips Electronics in Michigan, has had a good deal of experience both in traditional dialogue settings as well as Café learning conversations. He makes a fascinating observation about the way in which the Café environment meets three aspects of what he said has been called by Paul MacLean (1990) the triune brain—fundamental human needs to feel safe, to belong, and to exercise our cognitive capacities in the service of something we care about. He says:

> I've done some work about the triune brain theory, which emphasizes the importance of people feeling really safe, comfortable, and not threatened. Then creating a space of belonging and finally creating a larger purpose by doing strong cognitive work around things people care about. I think the World Café takes care of this reptilian brain sort of thing from the very beginning. People aren't threatened. They can say "I can see how this is a space for me; I belong to it." At a very unconscious level there are some things going on within the brain and the heart that make the connections quite strong in Café conversations. It's just there. I think the World Café is the only conversation tool I've seen that really deals with all three of these simultaneously and can achieve it in a large group. (Chuck Roe, Learning Conversation, July 2000)

Stefan Wängerstedt, a founder of the Synthesis Group in Sweden who first experienced the Café approach at our original Dinner Café in Stockholm, provides a provocative image of the way in which the Café creates a safe space for the birth of new ideas. In discussing his first experience of Café hosting with executives at a major Swedish bank, Stefan explains:

> Using the Café you can provide a safe space for people to be human beings and not be gods. It's a womb in a way. I would draw a parallel between the Café and the womb. The Café is a sort of pregnant place where you can explore all phases of the new life of ideas in your conversations. So what the Café is providing is a safe place, nourishment, and all of the things that an unborn and newborn life needs. The tablecloth in the center becomes a collective place where the birth of the ideas can come out in the center. (Stefan Wängerstedt, Learning Conversation, November 1998)

Michael Schrage, a former research fellow at MIT's Media Lab, carries Stefan's image even further in his evocatively titled book, *Shared Minds* (1990). Schrage focuses on creative ways to support collaborative insight and innovation, including meeting places, technology tools, and the varied uses of "shared space." In a reflection reminiscent of Stefan Wängerstedt's image about the Café tablecloth as a place for birthing new ideas, Schrage comments that "one of the fastest growing young computer companies in America, Compaq, was launched after a few of its founders sketched a prototype of their proposed portable computer on a paper napkin over a meal" (1990, p. 157). He points out that many of the great scientific innovations were born and sustained in third places like cafés. For example, he notes that "the staff of Nobel laureate Walter Gilbert's molecular biology lab at Harvard was famous for repairing to the local pub to continue research debates that began back at the lab benches" (1990, p. 157).

Transforming traditional meeting spaces

Schrage is very critical of traditional meeting environments as spaces for the birth of new ideas saying that:

> Most meeting environments can't help but subvert genuine efforts to create understanding. They are cramped, hard, and uncomfortable. The

> typical meeting environment subsidizes the excesses of individual communication at the expense of collaborative community … In many respects, it's easier to get results by changing the meeting environment than by trying to persuade people to behave differently. (1990, p. 122)

I had a fascinating conversation not long ago with a group of executives enrolled at the Executive MBA program at the University of Texas, San Antonio, where I teach an MBA module on strategic conversation. As part of a recent program, we tried an experiment that had interesting results. Our meeting room was beautiful, with plants, natural light, comfortable chairs, and plenty of space for a lovely Café as well as a traditional dialogue circle. Bob Lengel, the program's director, and I told the group that we would be meeting in another room after lunch to discuss the principles of hosting and convening strategic conversations. Bob had selected one of the regular classrooms in the university for this session—small hard chairs lined up in rows, no windows, linoleum floors, fluorescent lighting, and air conditioning humming loudly.

People filed into the room, giggling at first, not knowing what was happening. They then sat in complete silence as Bob went to the front of the room. He began his lecture in normal "presenter" style using black and white typed overheads on a projector. After he had gone about 10 minutes, I piped up from the back of the room, "Bob, I'm wondering what's happening here? What do the others of you think about this situation we're in? What are you noticing?"

All of a sudden there was a rush of comments. " There's no real air in here. We can only see the back of each other's heads or see them from the side, so it's hard to really think of talking together. Bob is so formal. He has his agenda and hasn't asked for input. There are no windows in this room. This is stifling."

We then walked back to our regular meeting room. We had two large boards set up, one entitled “Hosting” and the other entitled “Hospitable Space.” We gave each person a pack of large stickies and asked them, under the “Hosting” board to put all of the knowledge, skills, and qualities needed to be an effective host for any kind of collective gathering, particularly where they wanted good conversation to occur. We also asked the group to write on individual stickies all of the elements that they believed contributed to creating “Hospitable Space.”

Within about 10 minutes the board was full. As we stood back and looked at the emerging patterns, several themes stood out. The skills of good hosting included things like helping others feel welcome, being open-minded, feeling relaxed and confident, being able to guide conversation and pose useful questions, recognizing other’s contributions, leading by supporting others in being themselves, and having the capacity to synthesize and integrate different perspectives.

In terms of creating hospitable space, people mentioned the importance of creating relaxed settings, having intimate space that is connected to the larger whole, providing comfortable seating, preferably circular rather than in rows or long tables, serving refreshments and food, creating a sense that there is enough time, having art, music and the presence of beauty, using natural light and greenery, and avoiding “cells, beepers, or electronic crap.”

As we stood back and looked at the boards, one of the executives said, “You know, this is so obvious and so important. These are the everyday human things we pay attention to when we’re having a gathering in our home, but we just don’t think about

how important they are at work." Another added, "Our workplaces and even hotels aren't set up or designed to create the right environments for the kind of strategic thinking and conversation that is so important to do these days for the future of our business. It's something we're going to need to pay a lot more attention to as leaders if we want to support knowledge sharing and get the best results." (Executive MBA Program conversation, University of Texas, San Antonio, August 25, 2000)

What do these insights from our Café research tell us about the value of creating hospitable space to catalyze collaborative learning and access collective intelligence? Michael Schrage has eloquently argued that "environment and variety of environments matter" (1990, p. 158) for true collaboration to flourish. From a design point of view, he admonishes that:

> "the key is to create an environment that shifts attention away from the individual participant toward community expression. … You create an environment where shared space—not freeze-dried presentation—becomes the primary medium of communication and collaboration. … Physically altering the workplace is one of the most powerful and influential things an organization can do" (1990, pp. 124 and 137).

New images of organization

In her lively book *The Web of Inclusion*, Sally Hegelsen explores living systems images of organization. She points out that:

> an organization's physical space is the most truly tangible metaphor for the company as a whole; it is a *place* we visualize when we think about our work. And yet it is common for the physical places, even in the most innovative organizations, to remain mired in Industrial Era presumptions, contradicting any message about inclusiveness and change. (1995, p. 250)

She provides examples of organizations that have broken out of the industrial mold. She points out that Intel's cafeteria, for example, is a large and airy space built on multiple levels that feel both open and intimate at the same time. Everyone eats there, from the chairman to workers from the plant. Fountains, flowers, and trees grace the landscaped courtyard. The cafeteria serves as a relaxed eating environment as well as collective meeting place where people can put small signs on their tables if they want to retain the privacy of a one on one conversation. She emphasizes that having this kind of common space creates a feeling of shared identity and community, similar to the "third places" that Oldenburg describes. She adds that "a common space provides a common ground, and common ground is essential if webs of inclusion are to flourish" (1995, pp. 253-4).

Hegelsen encourages what she calls the "watercooler factor," the inclination of people to want to come together in casual and inviting places where they can hang out and talk (1995, p. 255). I was reminded of the old saying "stop talking and get to work" and how that one phrase has probably deterred designers for generations from creating organizational spaces that support quality collective thinking. Hegelsen's vivid metaphors of new organizational forms including "the hearth, the hub, and the working club" are powerful. Her stories of organizations, including several that have designed their physical spaces and social processes to honor these more human images, point to a new era emerging in our understanding of what it takes to support creative conversation, lively engagement and human authenticity in ways that encourage collaborative insight and innovation.

John Seely Brown provides one of the most fascinating examples of how, as Director of the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center, he combined a "high tech/high touch" approach to encourage great conversations and collaborative thinking. He points out:

> This will seem like a ridiculous idea but it turns out to be surprisingly powerful. … We subsidize coffee so that we have great French Roast. The coffee pot is attached to the Internet. When a fresh pot of French Roast is made, that fact is automatically broadcast over the Internet. I can guarantee you that none of the people that created the Internet saw it as promoting coffee and of course what I'm saying isn't really about coffee. What happens is when a fresh pot is brewed, suddenly, from around the building people come to get the coffee and collide with other people. You end up having discussions that start around the coffee.
>
> That's just the beginning. Then, what we do is we make these coffee places into beautiful areas, with couches, and floor-to-ceiling, wall to wall whiteboards so people can sit there and start sketching out ideas. Then we have digital cameras built into the ceiling to be able to capture whatever gets written on the white board to move it on to the web for further discussions. We create and capture informal conversations that lead to really interesting brainstorming sessions. (as quoted in Creelman, 2000)

As I re-read these reflections from both inter-disciplinary researchers and from our learning conversations with Café hosts around the world, I am once again drawn to Christopher Alexander's reflections on the essential "pattern languages" embedded in the human species, that, when honored and expressed in physical form, allow what is natural in us to emerge. In a beautiful passage, he speaks of what is needed to generate the "quality that has no name"—embodied in places and spaces which he describes as being comfortable, free, whole, and alive:

> Indeed, this ageless character has nothing, in the end, to do with languages. The language, and the processes which stem from it, merely release the fundamental order which is native to us. They do not teach us, they only remind us of what we know already. … The more we learn to use this method, the more we find that what it does is not so much to teach

> us processes we did not know before, but rather opens up a process in us, which was part of us already. (1979, p. xv and p. 13)

And so it is with intentional creation of Café settings as part of the Café method for catalyzing collaborative conversation, shared learning, and collective insight. Our varied experiences with the World Café and the last several years of Café research are re-affirming Alexander's fundamental insight. Perhaps it really is that simple and obvious after all. Perhaps all that is required is to "remember common sense." A sense that we thrive and are able to confront difficult questions, explore underlying assumptions, and create what we care about more readily in environments that evoke warmth, friendliness, authenticity, and good conversation than in environments less hospitable to the human spirit.

Exploring Questions that Matter

Part I: Two Stories by Café Hosts

WHAT COULD A GOOD SCHOOL ALSO BE?

Involving Children in Exploring the Future of Education

This story about powerful questions was told as part of a gathering of Café hosts in Denmark. Our Danish colleague, Finn Voldtofte, invited ten experienced Café hosts to join a day long "learning expedition" to explore deeper principles and insights from our Café experiences throughout the world.

By Toke Møller
InterChange, Denmark

I have a story I'd like to tell. The City Council of a small community in Denmark decided to take the initiative to redefine their educational mission and the principles that would guide the educational system in the future. They knew they couldn't keep going on the same old industrialist track. The vice headmaster of the little public school there, a village with only about 300 school children in 13 classes, contacted me since she had been at a Café for educators that I had hosted.

The vice headmaster wanted to include more people than just themselves in the process. I went there and talked with the headmaster and some of the parents as well as a number of teachers. I asked them "What about the children? Will they also be invited to look at the question of what the future might be? It's their future you are going to re-define." They said, "We can't bring all of them to the Café but we do have a student council that represents the 300 kids." I said, "Yes, that's fine, but you could have all 300 kids be a part of it beforehand, even though they can't all come to the meeting." And they said, "Children don't know how to think about these kinds of questions." And I said, "How do you know that?" Well, the headmaster and a few others trusted me so they decided to give it a try.

You know what happened? We decided to give the children the same question that we were going to use as the start-up question for the Café with the parents, teachers, and staff—"What could a good school also be?"

The children took charge of it, from kindergarten all the way up to eighth grade. And every class answered this question in their own way, asking the teachers only if they needed help with the process. Out of about 250 statements they gathered, each of the 13 classes did one combined statement for their class. Then these ideas were given to the student council members who had been invited to the Café to present their classmates' perspectives on the question.

When the parents heard that this was happening, they got so excited that they said, "We want to think about the question beforehand, too!" They used e-mail and self-organized themselves. The night before the meeting the parents' representative called me and she was high, telling me, "This is the most exciting time I've been part of here!"

Then the next day we did the Café. Everyone was there—the teachers, the headmasters, parent representatives, student council members, and other staff from the school—55 people in all. The first question that we asked in the Café was the same one—What could a good school also be? And everybody presented their ideas to everyone else in the first several Café rounds.

Then in the next Café phase we asked, "Okay, what principles are coming out here that you want to have in your future together? And what else do you want to say about the future based on these ideas?" There was much conversation about this and it all came from the first simple question "What could a good school also be?"

From of all the kids' responses to the question "What could a good school also be?" the student representatives made something so incredible—the ten commandments for the parents, the ten commandments for the children, and the ten commandments for the teachers. When the students presented these ten commandments on the wall at the Café, you should have seen the grown-ups. It was ten times worth the money I got to do this! The parents and the teachers stood back asking themselves, "Are our children really able to think like this?" In that moment, I don't know how many "castle walls" came down in their thinking about what great things were possible with their children.

Toke Talks About His Learnings

What did I learn about making questions from this? Well, I learned that it's harder to find the good, the right questions than it is to run the Café itself! I worked a lot with the school people to find the right question. We went back and forth on it. The question was not "How could the school be better?" It was "What could a good school also be?" The question did not imply action or fixing things and it had no judgment about what was already happening. It was more an invitation to imagine what might be possible.

I also think if you make the question too complicated, too sophisticated, then you take something important away from the question. It has to be simple enough and deep enough so that even a child can relate to it. Can the question evoke the secrets of the universe even from a child? I believe you have to think about this even if children will not be a part of the process. (Toke Møller, Learning Conversation, October 1998)

What do we share?

Engaging women legislators in discovering common ground

Felipe and Carlos, two experienced Mexican corporate consultants involved in scenario planning and futures thinking, were asked to host a Café with 25 key women legislators from throughout Mexico. All were elected representatives from one of the major political parties. In recent years, the party has experienced a good deal of divisiveness and fragmentation. This story was translated from our original learning conversation held in Spanish.

By Felipe Herszenborn and Carlos Mota
Founders, HMS Consultores

The basic theme of this Café was "Integration." We wanted to create a sense of collective possibility rather than just individual interests. We started with a short conceptual presentation of key ideas, like how complex our national situation was and how we haven't been as effective as we might be in confronting this complexity. We talked about the critical turning point we were at in terms of Mexico's future. We talked about the difference between "hacer" (doing) and "ser" (being) and how we have so much urgency

about the doing that we don't pay attention to what's even more fundamental, our being, as a nation and as a people.

We spread out to the Café tables. Each one had a question in the center. We had three questions with a different one on each table. They were very simple: "What do we have in common? What are the barriers and obstacles that we've created that keep us divided? Why are we really here?

There was an amazingly rich and deep exchange as people went from table to table, sharing their thoughts on each of the questions. I (Carlos) don't think I've ever had as profound an experience in such a short time, even though the conversation went on much longer than we planned. When the "historiadoras" (the "historians" who were taking notes on the tablecloths) spoke of what they had heard in relation to each of the questions, there was complete silence in the room. There was a very special energy all over the room. Everyone could feel it. Finally, one woman spoke and said, "I'm very sad because I realize we've wasted a lot of precious time being so separate." It was the beginning of harmonizing something collectively that had been very fragmented.

This Café was so successful that we now would like to see them happen not only with women but with men as well. And not only within one political party, but it would be so good if this kind of conversation could take place with all three major parties present.

Felipe and Carlos Talk About Their Learnings

Felipe: The question can generate a lot of energy if it's simple, profound, and clear. It's like a laser beam that can focus the energy of the sun on a single point and make that energy coherent.

Carlos: My analogy would be that a powerful question is like "el ojo del un huracán" (the eye of a hurricane). The question can serve as the quiet center around which swirls a lot of energy. I don't see the question so much as something that focuses energy like Felipe's image of the laser

beam. It's more like energy circulates and flows around the question that's in the center.

Felipe: The question creates a discontinuity, a disturbance, that the system tries to reconcile. The question needs to generate some anxiety. It shouldn't be paralyzing anxiety, or it becomes anguish. But it can't be indifferent or boring either.

Carlos: It has to create an "inquietud" (unsettling effect) on the person or the group. It should generate a gap. The power of the question lies in the size of the gap it creates. If it's too big, then it's incomprehensible. If it's too small, then there's no challenge

Felipe: The question is the bridge between what I might call the implicit order and the internal self. It invites and challenges you to reflect at a deeper level—to find the knowledge or wisdom that's already there beneath the surface.

Carlos: It's an art to both find as well as shape the right question. One time a friend told me about a time she was being interviewed. The interviewer said, "We're just going to ask you one question." And then they asked her "What is the question we should be asking?" Sometimes the most important thing to do is to use the Café process to actually discover and help the group shape the questions in the most powerful way since they know their own situation best of anyone. (Felipe Herszenborn and Carlos Mota, Learning Conversation, November 1998)

Part II: Reflections and Observations on Exploring Questions That Matter

> *Asking the proper question is the central act of transformation.*
>
> *—Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1992, p. 52)*

> *A vital question, a creative question, rivets our attention. All the creative power of our mind is focused on the question. Knowledge emerges in response to these compelling questions. They open us to new worlds. … The quality of those worlds depends on the quality of our questions.*
>
> *—Verna Allee (1997, p. 230)*

It's intriguing how the threads of our lives remain unbroken. I can recall vividly, as if it were happening today, my first memory of asking a "big question" and the response it evoked.

WHAT COLOR IS GOD?

I am seven years old, in the second grade at Orchard Villa Elementary school in Miami, Florida. Mrs. Johnson is my teacher. She is very religious, in the Southern tradition. I am a small child for my age—skinny, lively, inquisitive. I want to know everything about everything.

Mrs. Johnson holds prayers in the classroom each morning. One day, while everyone is praying to God, I start to wonder what God actually looked like. As soon as the class prayers are over I raise my hand and pipe up in my squeaky little voice, "What color is God, Mrs. Johnson?"

Mrs. Johnson turns beet red. She is extremely upset. I don't understand why she's so angry. She grabs my arm and hisses, "Young lady, you are going right to the principal's office and we're calling your mother." She marches me to the principal's office, and they call my mother. I sit in there, terrified, until my mother arrives.

There we are—the principal shuffling her papers, Mrs. Johnson, still looking outraged, and me, getting smaller and more petrified by the minute. My mother

> comes into the room and sits down quietly next to me while Mrs. Johnson recounts the sin I have committed in asking the obviously impudent question, "What color is God?" during school prayers.
>
> My mother listens in silence. She looks at the principal behind her big wooden desk, then moves her gaze to Mrs. Johnson, sitting primly next to the principal. Then she looks down at me, cowering in my seat. She puts her arm around me warmly, smiles, looks up at my teacher again and asks, "And what color *is* God, Mrs. Johnson?"

I was deeply grateful and relieved that day in the principal's office. Had that day turned out differently, perhaps my question asking days would have been over. As it turned out, I was encouraged to continue exploring questions that mattered to me and to those around me. I've been curious about the power of questions in our lives and work ever since.

The focused use of questions

One of the most important discoveries in the World Café community of inquiry and practice is the pivotal importance of discovering, shaping, and exploring "questions that matter" as a catalyst for collaborative learning, insight, and innovation. Café hosts across cultures and types of organizations have consistently pointed out that disciplined attention to discovering and exploring powerful questions (in contrast to identifying issues or problems) is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Café approach to dialogue and collaborative learning.

I first learned about the importance of paying disciplined attention to questions as a *systemic* process from Mike Szymanczyk, a senior leader in a Fortune 500 corporation. He and I have worked together in strategic change initiatives for over a decade. He is a

brilliant strategist and business thinker, as well as being a highly sophisticated architect of large-scale systems change.

Over the years, I began to notice that Mike consistently seemed to have business and organizational insights that appeared less accessible to others in the organizations he led. Was he just smarter than other people? Was it that he had more highly developed intuitive capacities? Or did he simply have some secret access to the Goddess of Strategic Insight? I told him that I wanted to sit down with him, along with Sherrin Bennett, a gifted interactive graphics specialist and developer of process tools, to hear how he developed strategic insight. His reflections transformed my thinking about the future of my work. Mike mused,

> This is not rocket science, Juanita. I think about developing strategy like panning for gold. The gold lies in finding the "Big Questions," the really strategic questions that can pull people's energy and learning toward the future. If you want to find the gold you have to care about finding it and you have to be curious. You head toward the general territory of where you think the gold may be located, with your best tools, your experience, and your instincts.
>
> You scan the horizon and contours of the land. You begin to notice the details of the landscape you're traveling in, because, for all you know, the gold might be right at your feet. You begin to notice interesting formations, and you begin to really look at the rocks as you continue to travel, knowing that you may be breaking new ground or making the path as you go. You begin to turn over rocks to see what shows up and to see if there are even small flecks of gold that might point you to the places where a real payload might be discovered.
>
> You look at the business and organizational landscape as well as scan the horizon. You look for the trends and subtle signals—similar to a tracker in the mountains. In a way, it's not that important if the signals point to good weather or storms. The purpose is to see where your curiosity and imagination leads you in order to identify the Big Questions that the business landscape and horizon tend to reveal.
>
> And I mean *questions, not problems* —questions put in a way that end with a question mark, not with a period or an exclamation point.

> Questions like, "How does A relate to C and what deeper question does that suggest? If X were at play here, what question would we be asking? Given Y, how can we. … ? What's the real question underneath all of this data?"
>
> Framing things as questions rather than problems, that's the hardest part. We're so used to thinking in terms of problems. Something fundamental changes when people begin to ask questions together. The questions create more of a strategic conversation than the normal stale debate about problems that passes for strategy. (Personal Communication, September, 1992)

Together we developed an entire corporate strategic planning model and set of tools, the *Game Plan Process*, based on the disciplined discovery and exploration of the "big questions" at every level and in every function of the organization. Based in large measure on Mike's insights about the importance of strategic questioning in evolving desired futures, I began to focus on discovering and exploring the "big questions" as a key element in my work with strategic dialogue (Bennett & Brown, 1995). As we deepened our experience with Café learning, I also began to realize how central the emphasis on catalytic questions as an initiating condition for collaborative knowledge creation was going to be.

It wasn't that I had never been exposed to the idea of inquiring systems and the use of provocative questions. In the late 1970s I served as part of the executive development program faculty at the California School of Professional Psychology. I recall a pivotal session in which we invited professor C. West Churchman as a resource. Churchman was an operations researcher and pioneer in systems thinking who taught for many years at the University of California, Berkeley. He raised a question that riveted my attention then and remains with me to this day: "If you were developing your

organization as an inquiring system, what design principles would you use, and why?" Our World Café research is one effort to respond to that question.

Churchman's book, *The Design of Inquiring Systems* (1971), is an academic and philosophical treatise on the nature of knowledge. I found it hard to absorb. However, underneath our different styles of expression, Churchman, the academic, and Juanita, the activist, share a common belief. We both believe deeply in the inherent individual and collective human capacity for inquiry and discovery. Churchman states that in spite of the fact that an individual may "never come to feel the act of discovery as part of his own natural life … it would be foolish to say that most people are indifferent to inquiry. They are curious about all the important things of their life … but their style of inquiry is not that of a scientific discipline … an inquirer is not a special kind of person; rather, every person is a special kind of inquirer" (1971, p. 268). He adds that "there are no experts in inquiry" (p. 269). He encourages designers of inquiring systems to create opportunities where the inquiry can happen within people and not be an activity that they merely observe being conducted by outside experts (p. 271).

Churchman never specifically focuses on the disciplined practice of discovering catalytic questions as a critical initiating condition for the evolution of inquiring systems. However, Churchman's belief that "conversations that matter" are at the heart of inquiry never left me.

I'm not quite sure how I connected the dots between the discipline of discovering and exploring catalytic questions, hosting great conversations, and engaging collaborative learning toward positive futures. Maybe it was the dialogue research at MIT coupled with

the experience with Mike Szymanczyk in developing the *Game Plan Process*. The dialogue work with MIT emphasized reflective conversation as a vehicle for developing collective inquiry. The strategy work with Mike emphasized the disciplined use of questions for learning into the future. Exploring Café learning as a methodology and the World Café as a metaphor enabled us to experiment with both dimensions simultaneously.

Multi-disciplinary threads

As we experimented with Café conversations, the role of questions continued to capture my curiosity because it seemed so central to the effectiveness of the Café work. I wondered who in the organizational field had written about the intentional use of catalytic questions as an initiating condition for the evolution of inquiring systems.

Outside of the family therapy area, (Anderson, 1997; Goldberg, 1997; Penn, 1985; Tom, 1987), there appeared to be relatively little attention given to working in a disciplined way with questions, particularly in collective learning and dialogue settings. Even recent and thoughtful books on dialogue from multiple traditions (Anderson, Cissna, & Arnett, 1994; Baldwin, 1994; Bolen, 1999; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1999; Ross, 1998; Tannen, 1998; Yankelovich, 1999) give only cursory attention to the art of framing powerful questions as a critical element in the evolution of collective intelligence and the "magic" of the dialogic experience.

One major exception is a fascinating monograph given to me by Roslie Capper, a Café pioneer from New Zealand. It is called *Strategic Questioning: An Experiment in Communication of the Second Kind* by Fran Peavey (1992), a community organizer and

pioneer in the area of large-scale social change, particularly in developing countries. A version of this monograph, published later, illuminates the evolution of Fran's thinking about strategic questioning as a vehicle for transformative change (1994; 2000).

I loved my "conversations" with Fran Peavey, even though they only occurred through my highlighting of key passages and scribbling my reflections in the margins. My encounter with her work was another highlight of the journey.

Fran evokes rich images of strategic questions—the type of questions that she describes as creating a "resonant field … into which your own thinking is magnified, clarified and new motion can be created" (1992, p. 4). I loved the idea of questions creating a resonant field and forward movement in the service of things we care about. Again, it seemed so simple and obvious, but why hadn't those of us working with dialogue and collective learning in organizations paid more attention?

Dr. Anne Dosher, former graduate faculty chair at the California School of Professional Psychology and an early contributor to the theory and practice of Café learning, sees strategic questions in a similar way. She describes strategic questions as ones that energize a "field of generativity out of which the future can be birthed" (Anne Dosher, Learning Conversation, June 2000).

In her community development work, Fran Peavey operates from a key assumption which also underpins Café learning—the assumption that the stakeholders in any system already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront the most difficult challenges. Given the appropriate context and support, including the introduction

of catalytic questions, it is possible for members to access their own collective deeper knowledge about underlying causes and leverage points for change.

Fran could have been sitting in any of our own learning conversations about Café work when she says that "One of the basic assumptions of the strategic questioning process is that knowledge resides and is alive in all people … The point here is to ask questions in such a way that it lets the ideas and energy come from the individual or system itself (1994, p. 100).

I continued my lively conversations with Mike Szymanczyk regarding the "big questions" in corporations as well as my own inner dialogue with Fran Peavey on strategic questioning in communities. Eric Vogt, another colleague who participated in the original Intellectual Capital Pioneers group, is developing Communispace, an on-line tool for knowledge sharing. He introduced me to the provocative possibility that there was, indeed, an "art and architecture of powerful questions" (Vogt, 1994). Later, Sallyann Roth of the Public Conversations Project, an institute that crafts dialogues among adversaries on polarized public issues, also pointed to the shaping of questions as a critical skill for engendering productive dialogue and collaborative learning (Roth, 1998).

The art and architecture of powerful questions

What *is* the art and architecture of a powerful question? Are there principles that can be illuminated? How can we become more skillful in shaping questions that matter?

Our Café research was not designed to focus on the construction of powerful questions. However, the consistency of Café hosts' experiences regarding "questions that

matter" has made this issue central to the next steps of the inquiry. Both Eric Vogt and Fran Peavey (Peavey, 1994; Vogt, 1994) point to the linguistic construction of questions as being a key factor. Eric differentiates between the construction of "high power" and "lower power" questions. Fran discusses the difference between "short-lever" and "long-lever" questions.

For example, in a community development effort to clean up the Ganges River in India, a short-lever question might be "Have you thought about cleaning up the pollution in the river?" Long-lever questions might include, "What do you see when you look at the river? How do you feel about the condition of the river? How do you explain the situation with the river to your children?" (1994, p. 105).

In a wonderfully evocative description, Peavey observes:

> Questions can be like a lever you use to pry open the stuck lid on a paint can … If we have just a short lever, we can only just crack open the lid on the can. But if we have a longer lever, or a more dynamic question, we can open that can up much wider and really stir things up … If the right question is applied, and it digs deep enough, then we can stir up all the creative solutions. (1994, p. 91)

She encourages people to not "be disappointed if a great question does not have an answer right away. A very powerful question, a long-lever question may not have an answer at the moment it is asked. … If the seed is planted, the answer will grow. Questions are alive!" (1994, p. 107)

David Cooperrider, the founder of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) movement, seems to share Peavey's perspective as well as corroborate our own World Café discoveries. In assessing the results of more than a decade of research and practice in the area of Appreciative Inquiry, Cooperrider states unequivocally that "the most important

insight we have learned with AI to date is that *human systems grow toward what they persistently ask questions about*" (italics in original; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000, p. 70).

A wonderful example of this occurred in a several year learning experiment using the metaphor of "work community" in an organizational setting. In a major U.S. corporation, we began a work community development process led by local leaders in the company's sales organization. This grass-roots participatory action research project used Appreciative Inquiry along with conversation as a core business process instead of the more traditional problem-focused approach to organizational development.

Mike Pfeil, the area Director of Sales, held Café gatherings with employees from all levels to explore the essence of community and the application of community principles at work. In reflecting on what happened in those Café conversations, he comments:

> We said to people, "Take a minute to think about a time when you were involved in an experience of community that really worked. What did it feel like? What do you see? What kind of activities were taking place? How did you fit into that? "
>
> Asking people to go back into what they know from their own best experiences was tremendously powerful. It helped us get to the analogies as far as business is concerned. For example, how does a community deal with the participation of its members? How does a community deal with emergencies and adapting to change? With members who don't uphold the community standards? All of a sudden values start to come forward.
>
> It seems simplistic, but asking the question regarding people's best experiences of community really worked. (Mike Pfeil , Learning Conversation, June 1999)

Another question emerged from our conversations that served as a "red thread" throughout the project. It was simple but catalytic. *How can we create a community at*

work that enables each person to contribute their best, inspires us to keep learning, and produces valued results?

Mike is now a vice president with the company. In reflecting on the role and power of the core question that guided the work, he shares that:

> The question wasn't static. As we learned, the meaning of the question continued to evolve. We asked ourselves, *How can we go out and plant this seed, how do we frame it as we bring other people in?* The question always worked in framing the dialogue. Sometimes as leaders it's important not to collectively work on what the answer is but to work on what the question is. That was a big insight for me as we did this work. The question never failed us. (Mike Pfeil, Learning Conversation, June 1999)

Cooperrider's discovery that "organizations grow toward what they persistently ask questions about" and Mike Pfeil's experience that "the question never failed us," encouraged me to continue my musings about the role of questions in human inquiry and change. Is it the linguistic construction of "short- vs. long-lever" questions as Fran Peavey suggests (1994) that makes the difference? Is it the persistence of exploring the question over time, as Cooperrider implies? (2000) Is there a deep curiosity embedded in human consciousness that gets activated when questions are posed that truly matter to people's lives? Or is there something else we should be trying to understand?

I recently read a soon to be published book by my friend, Barbara Waugh, a global change leader at Hewlett-Packard and co-founder of HP's World E-Inclusion, a project that is developing viable business models to enable the world's poor to enter the new economy. She asked me to write a blurb for her book entitled *Together We Can Do Anything!, Story of a Corporate Revolutionary* (2001). The book is the story of Barb's personal journey as a feminist and social innovator in the heart of corporate America.

Barb and I are soul sisters. Like myself, she grew up in Florida and was an activist in the 60s (and 70s, and 80s and 90s!).

Barb participated in our first World Café learning conversation with Café hosts from Mexico, Sweden, Denmark, New Zealand, and the U.S. in 1997. She knows about living systems. She knows about conversation. She knows about community organizing. And she understands the World Café as a lively metaphor to describe the informal networks of conversation and social learning that she and I both believe underpin large-scale systems change.

Barb's book shed more light on my questions about questions though I already knew parts of Barb's story. In fact, I had written about a major visioning effort she had undertaken at HP Labs in an article I co-authored entitled, "Asking Big Questions: A Catalyst for Strategy Evolution" (Brown, Isaacs, & Margulies, 1999).

Reading Barb's story gave me an idea. What if I ended this section by creating a "Café on Questions?" What if this Café included voices from the various learning conversations we've held with our World Café hosts as part of our research? And why not also include the voices of other friends and colleagues—folks like Barbara Waugh, Eric Vogt, and Verna Allee—who have both participated in Café conversations and also written about the "question of questions" (Allee, 1997; Vogt, 1994).

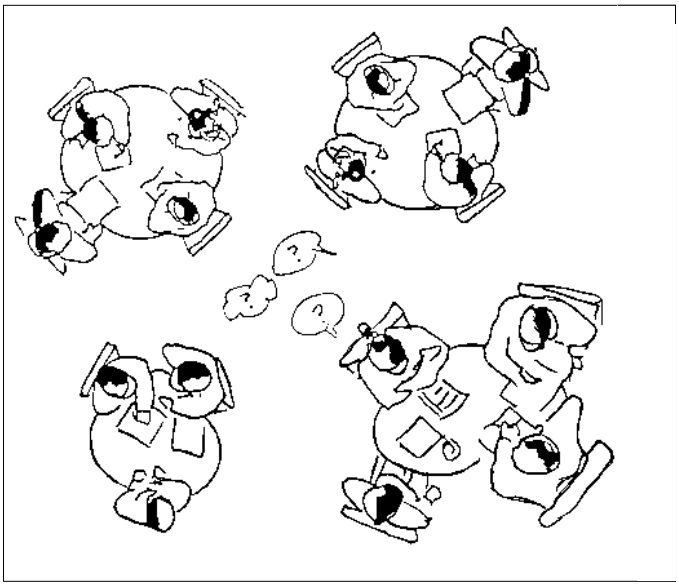
Why not! What might reveal itself about the use of catalytic questions from what, hueristic researcher, Clark Moustakas, calls "creative synthesis"(Moustakas, 1990, p. 32)? Creative synthesis often uses composite drama, story, and narrative as a way of revealing the essence of the phenomenon being explored. Why not have these multiple

voices in conversation with each other in a composite Café? Keep their comments true to the essence and spirit of their own and other Café members' contributions, but use my own creative imagination to develop the dialogue. Let their voices embody not only their own comments but also the reflections of the many Café hosts who have explored the role of catalytic questions in learning conversations over the last several years.

A Café on Questions

Imagine the following people are sitting at a Café table having a conversation about the power and importance of the use of questions in Café learning.

Listen in. The members of the conversation are just beginning to introduce themselves.



Drawing by Nancy Margulies

Figure 3: A Cafe on questions

Juanita: Welcome to the Café on Questions. Everyone here has been part of other Café conversations, but let me just share again how we'll be working ogether. We'll have three rounds of conversation. I'll serve as the overall Café hostess. I'll let you know when each round is coming to a close. One person will stay at the table as a host to welcome "guests" who have been a part of other conversations. They'll be bringing seed ideas from their tables into the second round. The important thing is to capture the essence of

what's been said in drawings, symbols, and words on your tablecloths. Continue to link and build ideas. Notice patterns and common themes as well as the "ahas."

We're discovering that a critical factor in Café conversations, which may often distinguish it from other conversational approaches, is its focus on discovering the right question(s), shaping catalytic question(s), constructing the exploration, deepening the question(s), and finding the common themes in relation to the question(s) that evolve at the center of the conversation.

Perhaps we could play with the Café question I've put on the flip chart here.

"What are you learning about the use of questions for engaging collaborative learning and collective intelligence that might be of help to others?

Some of you know each other but others don't so it would be great if you could introduce yourselves before jumping in. (*A brief silence ensues and then …*)

David M. Well, I'll start. I'm David Marsing from Intel. I've worked with the company in different parts of the world, including Malaysia. I first encountered the Café as part of the original Intellectual Capital group. Then I co-hosted a gathering of senior corporate leaders in Monterey, California, where we used the Café to explore our questions about large-scale systems change. We called it the Ocean Café since we were literally looking out on the ocean the whole time.

Verna A. Hi, I'm Verna Allee. I wasn't at the first Café but was invited to a later session of the Intellectual Capital Pioneers. I had just finished writing a book called *The Knowledge Evolution: Expanding Organizational Intelligence*. As you can imagine, the whole subject of questions fascinates

me. Since I first saw the Café in operation, I've been experimenting with Knowledge Cafés whenever I can!

Finn V. I'm Finn Voldtofte. You can probably tell from my accent that I'm not from California. I'm European, from Denmark. I'm interested in the Café work from the perspective of collective consciousness. I think that the Café helps make visible a deeper structure of collective consciousness. I've been doing what I call Café seminars in different places in Europe. We've trained maybe 100 Café hosts already in Denmark.

David I. Welcome, brother Finn. I'm really glad you've come to be in this conversation. Anyhow, I'm Juanita's partner, David Isaacs. All of you already know me. Since I'm talking anyway, why don't I just start. I think questions open doors to collective inquiry. Answers close them. When you have the answer, you're done, it's finished. Like the end of a stage play, the curtain comes down. The word "question" comes from "quest"—to be on a journey, to search for something important, worthy, even holy. When you've got the answer, the journey is over. That's not bad, but the excitement of the journey ends.

Finn And that's not what I want in a Café conversation, or in life for that matter. A good question opens the way to the realm of possibility. Like the question Toke Møller, a friend of ours, asked all the people at the school Café in Denmark, "What could a good school also be?" There was no judgment in that question. It was not, "How can we fix the problems in this school?" which implies judgment as well as the need for action. The question shouldn't imply action, at least not at the beginning. It should invite you to explore.

David I. People often want to jump too quickly into action. I have found that even beginning to explore the question allows a collective deepening to happen.

That deepening is a very important prerequisite to any kind of conscious action. The conversation itself is actually a very beneficial kind of action.

Finn Right! Effective action often comes out of it if you are exploring a question that is really alive for people either at an "I" or "we" level. The paradoxical thing is that action almost always does come out of a conversation that has life in it, but it doesn't have to be the stated goal.

David I. So the question you talked about in the school Café in Denmark was more like an invitation to bring more of people's aliveness to it, rather than a mandate to go out immediately and do something or fix something.

Finn Yes, it was an invitation to look more deeply at what we care about as a community. The question has to catch people where they are, to meet them where there is the most energy, and then use that collective energy to go deeper. Action will flow naturally from that.

David M. What kind of questions do that?

Verna I've thought a lot about what kind of questions have the most life. To me, the most energizing questions are those that involve people's values, hopes and ideals—questions that relate to something that's larger than themselves, to where they can connect and contribute. People don't have a lot of energy around questions that are about removing pain.

David I. But that comes up, the pain.

Verna Well, I don't mean that you can't address the pain. But you can set the context for the question to evoke collective possibility rather than pain. Here's an example. I recently worked with a large organization whose best people were walking out the door to work for the competitor. So most people would pose the question, "How can we keep from losing our best

people?" Boom. It would stop with that question. That's an okay question to ask but it's not an energizing question. It's about how to stop the pain. A better question might be, "How can we retain our best people?" That's a more positive framing, but it's still not a particularly energizing question. You need to find a question that will reach for a vision, get people excited, energize them, be something they care about, something that matters to them.

David M. So what would be an example?

Verna An example might be, "How can we create the kind of place that people are excited to get up in the morning and come to?" That's a little closer but maybe still not quite there. I would work with the people to come up with a question that is really alive for them and holds an element of personal vision as well as collective possibility. For example, "What would this work place be like if it were the kind of place I looked forward to getting up and coming to every morning?" Or it might be something like, "What have been my best times here in this organization, the times when I've really looked forward to coming to work? What contributed to that?"—and then build your next question from there.

David I. It seems really important to shift away from a problem-focus or fix-it focus to a possibility focus. I just came from doing a futuring Café with the leadership team at a global leather-goods company. At the end, when I asked the participants what had the most value for them, almost all of them said that the single most powerful learning for them was in converting a challenge or issue or problem into a question.

Verna What changed for them when they did that?

David I. It opened up more doors for them. There's always a subtle feeling of dis-

empowerment in a problem, a feeling that all the doors are shut. "We've got a problem … oh no! another problem!" There's a weariness and stuckness about it. Simply shifting the focus from problem to possibility helped them get unstuck, to open the doors.

David M. So a question that evokes possibility provides more space. The question has more power if it opens up more space.

David I. Absolutely!

David M. One way I like to look at a good question is that it is like a seed crystal. A good question starts a conversation that begins to take on a more complex, richer form. The conversation deepens, the crystal fills in with more and more facets. It grows in amazing and unpredictable ways. The conditions have to be right for this, of course, but the seed itself, the original question, is very important. The crystal won't grow without that seed, or it won't grow as beautifully or fully.

Verna I like that image of the question as a seed crystal very much. I myself often think of the question as if it were a mandala. Whenever we throw a framework up on a board or put up a slide and ask people to concentrate their collective attention on it, we are asking them to focus their energy and their mind in the same way that meditation devices focus the mind. In a Café, the question is the focalizer, much like a mandala is in meditation. I believe we need to treat that question with just as much sacredness as if we were introducing a mandala into the group to focus upon. Images, metaphors, and also questions—these all work in very deep ways both individually and collectively. A question creates motion and an awesome force of mind, a truly awesome force that we need to be very respectful of.

Finn I like how you give a question such respect. I also think of the access to a

deeper consciousness that a good question evokes as a doorway to wisdom. Sometimes, I think of the question as a "strange attractor" from chaos theory. It's a metaphor to think about it this way. But in a Café conversation, the question seems to be an attractor for the collective intelligence and deeper wisdom of the group to reveal itself. It can focus attention, energy, and effort in a way that helps bring more coherence to the whole thing. It's almost like an invisible energy field forms around the question.

David I. I'd be interested in hearing more from any of you about your thoughts on what makes a good question. We've touched already on several attributes of a good question—it is a question that matters; it is an attractor for energy and it generates energy, it opens up possibilities, it invites deeper exploration, and so on. Any other ideas?

Finn Well, I would add that a good question is simple and also has some personal connection. I try to stay away from questions that are abstract, general, impersonal. A good question invites a variety of voices, like the question about the school, "What could a good school also be?" Even young children could be a part of that question. It generated a lot of enthusiasm and a very rich response.

Verna In my experience, a good question is one that creates a certain tension, a certain dissonance between my current understanding and something bigger. The tension created by the question should pull us forward so the gap is lessened between our current knowing and our new learning. There's always a new area of learning and another and another.

David M. That's like my idea of the crystal growing from a seed question.

Verna Yes, I like that image a lot. I also like to think of a good question as one that

is creative—it has eros energy. When I'm trying to formulate the question, I ask myself, "Is this a sexy question? Does it create that arousal tension? Do I feel some attraction to that question? Does it seduce me?"

Finn That's a fun and provocative way of looking at it! What you're saying is that you have to feel a pull toward it.

Verna That's essential for me.

Finn One thing we haven't talked about yet is that a good question can be what we Scandinavians call "the red thread."

David M. What is that?

Finn I'll give you an example. In Scandinavia when we have a conference there is a person that serves as the "red thread" and helps weave the whole meaning of the conference together as it unfolds. If I think of the Café questions, they can be like the "red thread" that brings the many pieces of the fabric together. They have to be questions that "travel well."

The right questions can give a continuity and a wholeness to the entire collective exploration. So it might not be just one question; it could be a series of related questions that build on each other over the life of the Café, what I call the "pulsations." But you have to watch what's evolving so either you or the group can try to find the next question that will take the inquiry deeper. What's tricky is that seldom does one person alone know where that deeper place is. You just have to have faith that the wisdom is there in the whole group and believe that it will emerge given the right conditions.

Juanita *(Raises her hand quietly. Others see her doing this and they begin to raise their hands. The room becomes quiet as this round of conversation comes to*

a close).

See what having a Café experience does. You already know what to do! Did I tell you that David once raised his hand like that at the Systems Thinking Conference with more than a 1000 people who had never been in a Café. I was terrified. Oh me of little faith. But it worked!

So, let's take it to the next phase. Please move now to a new Café table and continue the conversation. One person should stay as the host to greet the guests who are coming from other conversations. Whoever is the host, could you make sure everyone does a quick introduction as you get started? Then let your guests know where your conversation has taken you so they can continue to link and build. And be sure to keep doodling on the tablecloths. On this second round, begin to listen into the middle even more to see what patterns and connections are emerging.

David M. I'll stay as host. *(Others arrive and get settled. David greets them. In true self-organizing fashion, this time four new guests arrive instead of three, so people pull up an extra chair. Everyone shakes hands across the table as they get settled.)*

David M. I'm David Marsing. I'm a line guy from Intel. I've been trying to take this World Café thinking into my operational work as a leader.

Barbara I'm Barb Waugh from Hewlett-Packard. For me the World Café is a metaphor that describes what I've done on my whole journey at HP, even though I've never conducted a formal Café learning event. Seeding conversations with good questions, sending people out to cross-pollinate ideas and connect, and letting things grow on their own. It's been quite a ride.

Eric I'm Eric Vogt. David, you knew me in my previous life as the President of MicroMentor. Now I've founded an e-company called Communispace. We've designed a wonderful software tool for collaborative learning and knowledge sharing for project teams. We're getting a great response!

David I. Congratulations!

Eric Thanks. It's good to see you again.

Andrea I'm Andrea Dyer, an independent consultant. I've used Cafés in both corporate and non-profit work. It's been serious fun.

Chuck I'm Chuck Roe. I was an engineer and exec for many years at Philips Electronics, especially in the area of Quality. More recently I've gone out on my own as an independent consultant. I've been using the Café in large-scale change work.

David M. As you can see from our beautiful drawings and scribbles here on the tablecloth … *(David, laughing, shows the group the free form drawings, ideas, and scribbles from the first round. The new guests begin to add their ideas.)*

Eric *(Commenting on the drawings and notes)* This is amazing. Many of the same things came out at our table. The one example you have on the tablecloth of making the questions more spacious while still being specific and connected to what people care about touched on something we also explored in our group. Can I draw a little diagram here? (*Eric takes a green pen and draws on the tablecloth near where Verna had written several questions related to the case where the company was trying to retain employees.)*

Eric Now, we didn't get very far with this, but, here goes. Maybe you all can help. The *architecture* part had to do with the actual construction of the question. For example, is it an open question that is more than a yes/no or multiple choice? For example, "Should you move the company to Albuquerque or not?" evokes a yes/no response rather than an exploration of what's really needed to make that kind of decision.

A *scope* question might be what you were talking about earlier at this table in relation to problem-solving or fix it questions. If you ask, "What are the biggest three problems in the school and how can we fix them?" the question has a different kind of scope than "What could a good school also be?" A *meaning/context* question is even more subtle. This type of question asks us to reflect on the larger context or the deeper assumptions that underlie the question. For example, "What might meaningful education be for 21st century children?"

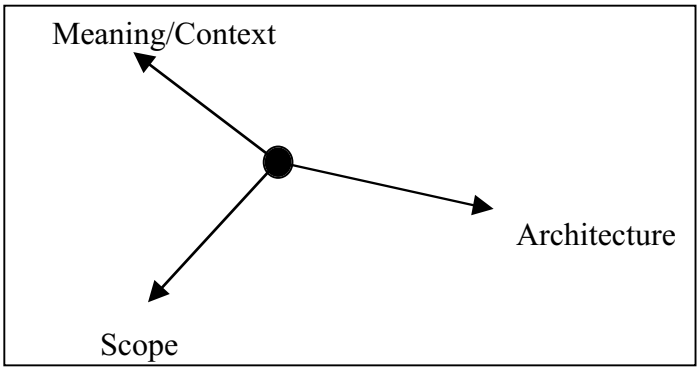


Figure 4: Questions—Architecture, scope and meaning

Andrea Taking it to that level could be threatening or overwhelming, couldn't it? I did a Café recently where the design team did not at all like the idea of focusing on a question. They were worried that it would open up more

questions. Of course! That's the idea!

Barbara Yeah, it can be a little scary at the beginning, but once you get it going I've been amazed at what can happen. Eric, I really like that little diagram, especially the part related to *meaning/context questions.* It helps me see my own situation at HP in another light, and how we've scaled the questions we've worked with—scaled up and scaled down. Let me give you a real life example that happened at HP. Can you handle a story? It might take me two or three minutes to share it but I think it might help us go deeper here.

Chuck It's okay with me. Are you all okay with it? (*Heads nod.)*

Barbara I'll try to be concise. I was helping to mobilize a visioning effort at HP Labs around the question "How can we be the best Industrial Research Lab *in* the world?" While we didn't use the Café as a method, we did start a whole global network of connected conversations around that question. It was great, but then Laurie Mittellstadt, one of our engineers, came into my office one day and said, "That question is an okay question, but what would really energize me would be asking the question 'How can we be the best Industrial Research Lab *for* the World?' " (*Barb writes "HP for the world" next to Eric's little diagram with an arrow connecting her HP question to the part of the diagram that says "meaning/context.")*

That one small shift changed the entire game. It scaled up the meaning/context of the original question. That one word profoundly shifted the meaning/context of the inquiry—the best for the world as the larger context for becoming the best in the world. This shift mobilized a huge amount of collective energy, not only at HP Labs but throughout the whole company. It was no longer just the Lab's question, it became the question many others at HP began to ask themselves.

Once we got the core question "How can we become the best for the world?"—we could scale it up or down, depending on the context. For example, scaling it down would be "What does 'HP For the World' mean for *me?* What does it mean in my life, in my own work?" Or, we could scale it up: "What does 'HP For the World' mean for my work group? For my department? For HP as a company? And what might it mean for the world itself for HP to be *for* the world?" *(Andrea scribbles scale up/scale down on the tablecloth with arrows connecting to Barb's question.)*

David M. That's fantastic. Maybe we should be asking the "for the world" question more intentionally in all corporations!

Barbara I feel humbled by what's happened at HP. Like in an individual Café event where there are different tables inside one physical space, the question has cross-pollinated throughout the company. The web of conversations is expanding. People are making their own local meanings. They're beginning to start more conversations. And they're taking action in self-organizing ways in their own units to help answer that question in practical terms.

To me, this is the World Café in operation. Our e-Inclusion business, which is just starting up, came about when people began to ask, "What would a realistic business model be that could bring the benefits of computing to the world's poor?" The e-Inclusion program is something very tangible that came out of the shift of meaning/context that the "HP for the World" question evoked.

Chuck I've never seen anything as broad scale as you're describing, but in my own experience of doing Cafés in large-scale change processes, I find that if you can get the question right, people shift their collective mind-set. People begin to know that they have choices about how to approach the question. They know they have something to contribute to the larger whole. They

begin to take ownership; they feel empowered. Has that happened to others?

Andrea Yes it has. I helped host a three day Café with marketing folks from over 30 countries—lots of different cultures in the room. The purpose was to explore a new global marketing concept and to begin a network of conversations about what it might mean for each local region. People were saying, "This is really different. We're used to leadership coming in and telling us what to do, but this time they came in with their questions. And then together we looked at what was really important about the new marketing idea and what it meant."

Chuck That's fascinating. One of the things I've done is have the leaders of the organization start a conversation at a Café table while everyone else observed. The leaders spoke about the dilemmas of their own "not knowing." Everyone else in the room listened from their Café tables as the leaders discussed their own questions. Then beginning with the second round, I had the leaders go and join other Café tables and everyone joined in. It worked great because all levels were working together to figure out the most important questions. The leaders were amazed at what good ideas their people had and the people saw the leaders asking questions instead of giving directives.

Andrea One question I like to ask a group is, " What core question, if answered, could make the most difference to … ?"

David M. A question about questions! Isn't that paradoxical. I've been involved in meditation for a number of years. Intentionally engaging people's "not knowing" is actually what is called "beginners mind" in meditation. In the Eastern tradition, that's the start of all wisdom.

Juanita *(The room is buzzing with energy. People are leaning in, intent, focused. Juanita quietly puts up her hand again and, as people notice, they begin to raise their hands. The room quiets down).*

Now for the third round. Please return to wherever you started—your "home" Café. Spend a few minutes sharing how the conversation has evolved and ask yourselves, "What remains at the edge of our 'not knowing' here? What deeper questions do we still have regarding how to use questions effectively for engaging collaborative learning and collective intelligence?" Get a sense of the two or three questions that, together, you think are really important. Put each question separately on a large hexagon stickie that's there on your table. When this round ends, we'll open up into a "conversation of the whole" to see what emerges in the middle.

(*People return to their original tables and begin to share the common themes and insights that have emerged from their multiple conversations. They begin to frame the few deeper questions they collectively think need to be a part of the continuing exploration. Juanita then moves into the middle of the room. The graphic recorder, Jennifer, is in front of the room, working on a large wall mural which serves as the "tablecloth for the whole.")*

Let's hear from one table. Then, if another has a question that is connected to the first, speak it out and we'll see what emerges. At the end, we'll ask you to put up all your hexagon stickies so we have all the key questions to work with as we go forward. We may ask a couple of you to work with Jennifer to cluster them and see what are the few Big Questions that might emerge for our future learning. If others don't know who you are, please

just say your first name and maybe a couple of brief words about yourself. (*People from a number of the tables begin to speak up.)*

Eric I'm Eric from a software company called Communispace in Boston. One of the things our table is still struggling with is how to get the level of the question right so it can "travel well" or even really get inside people in the first place. We discussed the *architecture, scope, and meaning/context* dimensions of questions, but what we're still trying to understand is:

> "What is the relationship between these three dimensions when you are trying to find questions that really touch people as a community in any given situation, both intellectually and emotionally?"

Verna I'm Verna. I'm a writer about Intellectual Capital. I'm still ringing with a question that Maria de los Angeles Cinta asked earlier. It relates to what David Marsing, sitting over there next to Eric, said about questions being the beginning of wisdom. Maria said that powerful questions tap into the mystery that lies beneath the things we care about. She talked about the importance of finding questions that touch the mystery and so engage our curiosity and deep creativity.

> "How do we find the questions that touch the mystery and how do we know we're actually touching the mystery in the questions we craft?"

Maria I'm Maria de los Angeles Cinta. I was talking about working in Mexico in a culture that has a great connection to the mystery of life but I think it's the same everywhere.

Toke I'm Toke from Denmark, and I believe that Maria's question is just as important across cultures. One of the questions at our table is connected to Maria's. It relates to how to tap into the mystery and the heart of things but from a different angle.

> "How can we make the question simple enough so that it really penetrates—gets through into the real heart of the matter? How little is enough?"

Tammy I'm Tammy Sicard. I'm an internal change manager at a global medical instruments company. Our table asked a question that also may relate to Maria's about the mystery as well as to the question of how to make the question simple enough.

> "Is it realistic to think that we as Café convenors can discover and frame questions that really get to the heart of a common concern—the essence of what matters—or can only the people themselves who are closest to it do that job?"

Finn Tammy, it's beautiful that you say that. I'm Finn and I think ours is connected to yours. At our table we asked:

> "What are the ways to begin to discover what questions are at the heart of things before the Café begins?"

Perhaps it might mean including a request in the invitation to the Café that people send in their own "burning questions" ahead of time. Then you can post these all around the room for people to see as they come into the Café.

Patric *(The youngest person in the room.)* Hi, I'm Patric from Sweden. I'm loving the energy and the excitement I feel here. We used the Café the whole time I was in the Kaos Pilots, a wild but very practical, action oriented, educational program in Denmark. We had young people from all over Scandinavia in the program. Right now I'm working on bringing the principles of Knowledge Cafés into the Internet environment. Anyhow, something we wanted to add from our Café table is:

> "How can you help the group really listen to their own questions and then turn them into exciting learning challenges to work with and take action from together?"

David M. That's one place where the rubber really meets the road, isn't it? Can we touch on a related area? (*Heads nods around the room and he continues.)* I'm David from Intel. Well, we were thinking about large-scale change like

Barbara's example of how framing the question at HP Labs changed the whole context/meaning of the inquiry in the larger company. Our question is:

> "How do you discover the questions that will really 'travel well' like this one did, either throughout an individual Café or, more importantly, beyond any one situation into a larger-scale effort like is happening at HP?"

Barbara I'm Barb Waugh and I'm in the thick of things right now at HP. I loved being in these several rounds of conversation because I got to see so many different angles on our 'HP for the World' effort. It's obvious that one of the ways it emerges is by accident like it did when Laurie came into my office that day. Even though we started with one question, the deeper question just popped out from a local leader at the grass roots level.

But there's another important question here. One of the big dilemmas related to what David's table asked is:

> "Not only how do you know what question will 'travel well,' but also, what can you do as a leader, to help a strategic question 'travel well' throughout a large system?"

If we think of an organization as a living system, then what are the simple initiating conditions—like the leader even being willing to ask "What would being the best <u>in</u> and <u>for</u> the world mean?" Also something so basic as having the technology infrastructure so people can actually be in touch across traditional boundaries to explore the question collectively throughout the system. That's made a big difference to our work at HP.

> "How can we be more intentional about discovering the simplest operating principles for creating and seeding a large-scale network of conversations around core strategic questions that matter to the future of an organization? And how can we make the organization's responses and knowledge about these questions visible to itself?"

Juanita As usual, Barb, you've spoken like a woman after my own heart! That's a key question for me too. I'm sure we haven't gotten all of the big ones out, even in this whole group conversation. So, as we go out for the break, I'd love you to put up all the questions you've written on your large hexagon stickies on Jennifer's "Wall of Inquiry."

Maybe as you are coming back from break you can take a gallery tour and informally begin to group the questions that seem to relate to each other. After the break, we'll take a few minutes to see what might be the really Big Questions that we're holding together. We'll look for the Big Questions that can take our understanding together to a deeper level. Thanks to all for being a part of this!

(Mellow jazz is plays in the background. Many in the group continue sharing in small clusters around the room once they've gotten their coffee. Little by little they meander over to the Wall of Inquiry individually and together. By the time the 20 minute break is over, folks have played around with the hexagons until several big clusters emerge that reflect their own collective sense of the patterns of meaning among the questions. Even though they weren't asked, people have gotten larger hexagons from Jennifer and put a Big Question over each cluster. As they come back from the break, the group doesn't sit down, but gathers around the Wall of Inquiry to see what they've created together. Chuck, a member who was rather quiet during the whole group conversation, takes the lead. He helps the group refine and clarify the Big Questions. After another ten minutes, it seems like folks have finished. They've added several other Big Questions that came up in the context of bringing this circle of exploration to a

resting point. Someone comments that having the Wall of Inquiry—with Jennifer's drawings as well as their own hexagons—is like having a big tablecloth on a huge café table, allowing them to discover as well as actually "see" their most important questions in a larger context. The room is quiet. There is a peaceful silence as people take in their collective insights. Another member speaks, "You know, it's a real surprise how all this came together. Our thinking has really evolved from where we started out, in ways I would never have expected."

Connecting Diverse People and Ideas

Part I: Bo Gyllenpalm's Café Story

A Virtual Knowledge Cafe

Bo Gyllenpalm is a member of the faculty of the Master of Arts in Organizational Management (MAOM) at the Fielding Institute. Fielding is a pioneering advanced graduate degree program in Psychology and in Human and Organizational Systems for practicing professionals. Bo is the former CEO of Phonogram, a Philips subsidiary in Sweden. He currently serves as an international member of Fielding's Board of Directors.

By Bo Gyllenpalm
Situational Services
Stockholm, Sweden

I'm happy to tell this story. To be honest, I didn't know if it would work to use Café principles in cyberspace, since the on-line world is a different world than face to face. I've learned a lot from it. First of all, I should tell you about the MAOM. It's an innovative on-line Masters program for professionals and decision makers in the new economy, one of the first of its kind in graduate education. The MAOM is fostering new ways of leading and working with organizational change and transitions, leadership and complexity, virtual work teams, and work design. Members come from national and global enterprises across many industries, including high technology, healthcare, transportation, telecommunications, utilities, financial services, consulting, education and public sector agencies.

Every course is conducted asynchronously over the Internet. This means that people are logging on at different times of the day and in different time zones from anywhere in the world. I designed my course, Organization Development Concepts and Methods, in a Virtual Café format using the same

overall design principles that I've used in face to face Café learning and knowledge creation.

This has been quite an experiment to see what would happen if I created a Virtual Knowledge Café using the Café methodology to cross-pollinate ideas and share collective knowledge. Since I'm be here in California for a few days, I'll write out my story. Then I'll have a written piece to use as a case study that can show how a different structure for knowledge creation and building group intelligence can work—and this one certainly has!

THE SETUP OF THE VIRTUAL KNOWLEDGE CAFÉ

My course is 12 weeks long and the class size is not more than 9 members. The first week of my course, there is a general check-in among all the members. Each shares their personal biography, why they have chosen this course, and what expectations and norms they would like to see fulfilled during our time together. Similar to the personal introductions in a face to face Café, this initial check-in helps to establish mutual trust and willingness to be open.

After the first week of check-in, we set up the Virtual Knowledge Cafés. There are three Café rounds of three weeks each, followed by a final week of mutual reflection on the Café process as a whole, including personal and collective learnings. In each Café round, there are two or three areas of inquiry or topics going on simultaneously. Every member serves as a Café host for at least one topic area during the 12 week course. The Café topic/question might be connected to a project they are involved in at work or a concept they want to learn more about.

The first week of each Café round, the host posts a "think paper" with information about the topic, their own reflections, and why this topic matters to them. They include references to a variety of additional resources, including books, articles, and websites. The host also frames the question or questions that will serve as the "attractor" for the Café dialogue during the period they are serving as the host.

As there are several different Cafés topics going on simultaneously, the participants move from Café to Café to discover what's in the "middle of the table" at each place and to make their contributions. Members add

experiences, observations, new ideas or questions, as well as additional references. I encourage the hosts of one Café to visit other Cafés that are going on at the same time so they can link and build ideas.

The participants who are not hosting this Café round are also weaving ideas among other Café conversations. This moving around and cross-fertilizing of ideas and experiences between Cafés creates a highly collaborative learning experience between students and faculty who are all recognized professionals in their field.

As a faculty member, I facilitate by simply participating in the different Cafés, perhaps making new connections, or encouraging a direction of inquiry that might not have occurred to the members. I also host an ongoing Café, called "Bo's Special Café," a social space where people can drop in at any time for a chat with me or others regarding non-topic related interests and concerns. This is one of the Cafés where the most authentic personal dialogue happens.

By the end of each three week period, it's quite amazing to see how the Café conversations have gotten deeper and are getting woven together into a larger whole. People have participated actively since we've asked them to contribute to the Cafés at least twice per week. We've found, however, that most people end up contributing much more often.

During the first week of the following three week Café sequence, new hosts frame their topics and prepare their "think papers." During this time, the hosts of the previous Café conversation are synthesizing the patterns and discoveries that have emerged in their Café. Simultaneously, during the first week of each new Café round, all members can go back into the Café conversations from the previous round to reflect on their own personal learnings and insights, and to review resource material.

The last week of the semester, all members develop a reflection paper about what they have learned from the overall Café process and discuss how they can use this shared knowledge in their lives and work. These synthesis papers are then posted in a special Reflection Café. This enables all members to get a sense of the whole by seeing the patterns made by everyone's diverse contributions.

BO TALKS ABOUT HIS LEARNINGS

The interesting thing about running a course as a Virtual Knowledge Café is that the students soon discover that everyone is the expert, including themselves. At first they are a bit uncertain how the Café will work, but they soon realize that the quality of the collective insight and knowledge creation can actually be much higher than in a normal face to face classroom setting where the faculty puts themselves in the role of expert. In the Virtual Café, everyone's knowledge is mixed together on an equal level.

To my surprise, I've found that Virtual Knowledge Cafés create as powerful collaborative learning as I've found in the face to face Café approach. First of all, in the Virtual Café setting, members have more time for reflection before they make their diverse contributions. Secondly, they can see everyone's contribution in writing. This often helps people who think more easily when they can see things visually. They can see the patterns and connect ideas more easily when they can read what others have said. Thirdly, they have time to find interesting resources and make a deeper contribution to each Café topic, including testing assumptions and mental models.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a diverse multi-cultural group of global leaders gets the opportunity to connect their thinking and ideas across a variety of on-line Café conversations before they begin to synthesize their own personal learnings. Through moving ideas and people around from Café to Café both within and between Café rounds, the members learn from each others' experiences and questions in a deeper and more coherent way. It's like actually weaving a living knowledge web across many different dimensions and perspectives. Something special occurs from this web of conversations. Powerful collaborative learning seems to happen if people are asked to move from Café to Café, even on-line. They can plant new seed ideas and questions as well as linking and connecting ideas among Café conversations.

STUDENT LEARNINGS

Here is a synthesis of comments from a number of students about their learning in the OD course and their experience with the Virtual Knowledge Cafés:

- I really liked the Café process of hosts creating initial "thought papers" followed by an extended conversation in the Cafés. While I will admit I did not fully understand the expectations in the beginning, it was obvious that the entire group developed new skills, particularly the skill of layering a deep conversation on later topics. This last learning about group conversation and how it deepens was pretty amazing! Each person brought their own perspective and style to the discussions so that the learning had a web design rather than being focused on Bo's perspective. I also think that the opportunity for a variety of students to facilitate the Café dialogues was a real bonus.

- I certainly perceive my knowledge level very differently now. I found the Café topics complementary. I could see how the themes connected throughout and saw a glimpse of the bigger picture for the first time.

- This course was far-and-away the richest learning experience that I have had yet. I loved the open adult learning method using the Café. It forced us (the learners) to find and share resources and knowledge. It seemed as though I were engaged with serious learners who were speaking from their passions as well as their intellect.

- This Café idea reinforces the need for me to be in community with others and to hear what they know, think, suspect, experience, and discover.

- This was not only a program of content. It was a program of experience. We experienced cultural differences, new group processes, formal and informal leadership, empowerment, and new ways of working with technology in the Cafés.

- The reflection time we had while each new Café was gearing up was key to my learning. It gave me the opportunity to really digest the previous conversations, instead of waiting until the end of the whole thing.

- Every member contributed a high level of intelligence, brought wonderful and relevant personal experience forward, and exhibited engagement and participation that created a supportive and creative learning environment. I was impressed with both the academic level as

well as with the caring and desire for each of us to have a good time while learning important material in the Cafés.

- I cannot say enough about the level of learning this approach has afforded me. The give-and-take interaction in the group was very powerful. My expectations for the class were to learn about team dynamics. I came away with much, much more.

BO'S SUMMARY

There are many Cafés on the Internet. Those are more like chat rooms. Chat rooms are fine, but they are not really Virtual Knowledge Cafés based on the face-to-face Café principles. I don't know of any on-line courses that are run according to these principles either, even though they may be very useful.

My experience shows me that Café learning using these principles can be done on-line. If we structure it right, I think that Café conversations can show great results for knowledge sharing and new knowledge creation. I found that out as I experimented with my own on-line classes. This was a big surprise, since I thought that without the face to face aspect it might not work at all. But just the opposite occurred. It seemed very alive.

That tells me that maybe these Café principles, especially connecting people and ideas across boundaries, are not about whether it's face to face or on-line. Maybe it's just about the basic few principles for how humans in general can be in real dialogue and think together in ways that create new knowledge, wherever they are. I wonder how we could design the next stages of research to help us learn more about this.

Part II: Reflections and Observations on Connecting Diverse People and Ideas

Intelligence emerges as the system connects to itself in diverse and creative ways.
—Margaret Wheatley, Berkana Institute

The Traveling Café

From our very first experience with Café learning, other Café hosts and I had speculated about how cross-pollination of people and ideas in Café learning environments supports leaps of collective insight and innovative thinking. (Finn Voldtofte, Learning Conversation, January 1994). But it wasn't until I'd been riding for two days in hot, dusty mini-vans on dirt roads in Mexico that I bore full witness to the creative power of connecting people and ideas across boundaries.

In late 1995, an interdisciplinary group from around the world began a five year inquiry hosted by the Fetzer Institute in Michigan to explore "Peacebuilding for the 21st Century." The group was diverse and impressive. It included the former U.S. ambassador to NATO, a member of the European Commission, a former Olympic athlete, media representatives," an African leader from the U.N., the director of an innovative program on social equity in Oregon, specialists in monetary policy, a pioneer in citizen diplomacy, a co-founder of the Global Business Network, and a young couple in their 20s who are at the leading edge of web technology and distributed learning. The group also included the minister of social development for Mexico and two Mexican colleagues involved in creating scenarios for the future of the Mexican nation.

In April of 1999 the minister of social development invited the entire Peacebuilding group to join him and his colleagues in Mexico for a four day learning journey. About 25 people responded to the invitation. The question we were exploring was, "What can we learn about Mexico's past and current situation that will enable us to generate creative ideas about future possibilities for Mexico's social development?"

The trip to Mexico was not designed as a Café, or so I thought at the time. Although many of the members, including our Mexican hosts, had experienced Café conversations, no one ever considered organizing this gathering as a Café. After all, we were going to be on the road for three days. We would see Mexico's spiritual and indigenous past at the pyramids of Teotihuacan, be with workers' agricultural cooperatives, and visit the forest sanctuary of the now-threatened monarch butterflies.

We were going to be traveling in several mini-vans because our Mexican hosts couldn't find a large enough bus for the group. We were disappointed that we couldn't all travel together but we planned for the whole group to meet periodically at a local hotel or inn for a traditional open circle dialogue to reflect on our learnings.

As we started out on the journey, people asked, "Where exactly are we going? What specific stops will we be making and when?" But, in Mexico, things operate somewhat differently than in the U.S. There was a rather spontaneous re-ordering of schedule and site choices as the trip unfolded. In fact, early in the trip, the mini-vans got separated and parts of the group were lost for several hours before being reunited (as if by magic) at a rest stop. The experience of *being lost, together* and then *getting re-connected* became a powerful metaphor for the journey as a whole.

Getting lost and getting re-connected again seemed to initiate a collective pattern that continued among the members throughout the trip. After each stop—a site visit, a meal, a rest stop—the group combined and then re-combined in different configurations to continue the journey. By the time evening fell, I might have been in a two hour conversation with one van group, an hour with some other mix, and a final stint in some other configuration altogether.

Sometimes the conversations involved the whole ridership of the van. People reflected on what they had just seen or heard. They often commented on the deeper questions their experiences had raised, both for Mexico and for the world. For example, after seeing the monarch butterfly sanctuary, a new member entered our van. He commented, "It's not just about the monarchs. The monarchs are a stand-in for the gorillas and the tigers who are threatened." Another added, "Yes, but what about the villagers who are cutting the monarch's trees for firewood? They're threatened too. Both the people and the monarchs are part of a larger system that's being threatened." A third chimed in, "Maybe there's no 'them.' What if it's us, all of us, who are in the same boat?" That began a lively conversation amongst the whole group.

Conversations might also happen in two's or three's with others resting or just looking out the window. Sometimes the conversations were relevant to Mexico's social development. Sometimes they wandered to questions far removed from the Mexican terrain we were traveling. In one instance, I found myself in an extended conversation in the back seat of a mini-van with Napier Collyns, a co-founder of the Global Business Network. That conversation had little to do with Mexico, but a lot to do with an important

strategy project I was working on. Could anything useful be happening in this meandering flow of mixing and matching —of experiences, people, ideas, questions, and random talk?

At the end of the second day we sat together under the trees at a rustic country inn for our first dialogue circle. We'd made several stops along the way. At the pyramids of Teotihuacan we'd been with public school children arriving in large buses. They carried little backpacks and wore identical school tee-shirts. The kids climbed the carved stone stairways, listening to their teachers talk with pride about the indigenous roots of the Mexican nation. We spent time at a workers' flower cooperative where members shared the story of their community's success, although no women were invited to speak as part of the group. At the butterfly sanctuary, we'd seen much of the forest denuded by peasants who needed firewood for cooking, resulting in the possible extinction of the monarch. On the way home, we'd accompanied a parade of pre-schoolers all dressed up as butterflies to honor the monarchs.

What were we discovering, individually and collectively? Paradox? Pain? Possibility? What did these vivid experiences suggest to our group of thought leaders from such diverse backgrounds, disciplines, and nationalities? These questions were hanging in the air as we gathered outside under the trees after two days of apparently unrelated site visits and mixing it up in the mini-vans.

As the group began their reflections, I sat taking notes as quickly as I could in my journal with a picture of the Tree of Life on the front cover. I was amazed and deeply touched by what I was hearing. One member spoke:

I don't know why but I'm suddenly thinking of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. I wonder, are we tourists or pilgrims? A tourist is just traveling and enjoying the sights. But a pilgrim comes to a place for a different reason—to honor it. Even though Mexico has a lot of problems, there's a lot to honor here. What is the deeper wisdom that Mexico offers to us and to the world?

The group continued to reflect, offering observations on what they had seen or noticed from their varied experiences and multiple conversations over the prior two days. A person who worked with development projects in India said:

I can understand now what it is that we were seeing—all of us together as one body. I hear my own thoughts deepened and expanded by others. We don't even have to agree. It's the contribution to the whole of our thinking that comes when it mixes together as much as we have over these last days. What has most value will come to the top and the rest will sort of settle, into the background, like silt in a river.

The leader from Africa added, "It's from connecting so many different experiences that our common insight can be revealed. I'm feeling a real joining here. Something new is coming from the deepening of our many perspectives." And a corporate leader said, "There's such a varied set of life experiences that we're bringing. I think we're on the edge of being able to offer something from our collective insights that may be able to make a real difference."

Then a woman, one of the youngest members of the group, spoke up. She had been in an earlier Café conversation we hosted at the Fetzer Institute.

> Oh my goodness. Do you know what's really happened here? We've been in a rolling Café! I understand now why it has been so powerful to have so

> many different conversations in the vans about Mexico's social development. We have these different visits to places and situations. They trigger all those smaller conversations. When we come back into the large circle there's a different wisdom that comes out from the multiple mixings. I'm beginning to see the collective without losing who each of you is. *Now* we can be the resources that we hope to be. I understood the Café idea intellectually. Now I understand it in real life.

One of the media people added, "I think what's happening here is deeper than coming up with action plans. It's deeper than that. It's wider than that. It's more mysterious than that." There was a long silence in the group as people took in his words. The air itself seemed imbued with a special quality of aliveness. I made a note in my journal: *When the conversation is connected and alive, action will emerge naturally.* And so it came to be. By the time the Mexico journey ended, a scenario planning process had been initiated and a number of task groups had been formed, without introducing any formal action planning methods or tools.

We rode back to Mexico City, a three hour drive, with my partner, David, one of our Mexican hosts, and another couple. I asked the group to reflect on what they had seen happen in the Traveling Café: "What qualities did the overall experience have?" I continued to take notes while the van jiggled along the bumpy road.

The group's vivid images pointed to a leap of collective "knowing," in a way that none of us could have planned or predicted. They used words like: "Alchemy; miraculous; mutual seedings; spirited and spiritual; enthusiastic; mind, heart and soul openings; discovering new levels; gaining striking insights; taking ourselves into another reality; discovering the roots of the future"

I asked our van partners, "What do you think were the conditions that enabled that kind of unexpected leap to happen?" Our Mexican member said, "*El espiritu es la fuente, la concsciencia colectiva es el agente*. Spirit is the Source. Collective consciousness is the agent." Another said, "It helped to start out having a common intention but without a tight agenda. We had a clear focus but there was time for us to be open to the possibilities of what might happen." Another added, "Yes, that's true. But if we hadn't also had so many different kinds of people, having such varied experiences, along with so many different conversations in the vans I don't think we would have gotten to the special level we did— either personally or in our collective understanding."

Our Mexican host then added something that really impressed me.

Creo que llegamos a un nuevo "*ser colectivo" atravez de este nuevo modo de aprender colectivamente en el Café Viajante. Este "ser colectivo" entonces dió vida al "hacer colectivo*." I was struck by his images as I translated them into English. "I believe we arrived at a new 'collective being' through our learning together in this new way during the Traveling Café. That new 'collective being' then gave life to the collective task at hand."

A Brief Journey into the New Sciences

Several years before the Mexico trip, I had read Mitchell Waldrop's spellbinding account of the early days of the Santa Fe Institute where multi-disciplinary scientists did groundbreaking work in the field of complex adaptive systems. Waldrop's descriptions of the early days of that work sound eerily like the experiences of the Traveling Café in

Mexico. In recounting a multi-disciplinary gathering regarding the origins of lifelike behavior Chris Langton , one of the scientists who organized the meeting, commented:

> It's hard to say exactly what was happening at the workshop … I was so hyped up, it was like an altered state of consciousness … I have this image of a sea of gray matter, with ideas swimming around, ideas recombining, ideas leaping from mind to mind … It was like being incredibly *alive."* (as cited in Waldrop, 1992, pp. 239-40)

Waldrop's descriptions of the best sessions held at the Santa Fe Institute had the same flavor. It's what I have come to describe in Café conversations as creating conditions which enable the emergence of *coherence without control*. Waldrop comments that at the Santa Fe Institute, "with bull sessions forming and reforming in the hallways or out on the patio under the trees … the energy and the camaraderie were electric … The talk was endless and, for the most part, fascinating" (1992, p. 249). People would continue their conversations over meals at the Canyon Café followed by more impromptu bull sessions. Waldrop describes the outcome of this combining and re-combining of people and ideas across disciplinary boundaries as being similar to watching a photographic image emerging in a developer tray as the group of scientists began to see new images of possibility that were becoming held collectively (1992, p. 250).

Key discoveries from the new sciences help illuminate our overall experiences with Café learning as a methodology and the World Café as a metaphor. These principles have been explored by many authors in recent years (Capra, 1996; Maturana & Varela, 1992; McMaster, 1995; Stacey, 1996; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991; Wheatley, 1992; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996; Youngblood, 1997; Zohar & Marshall, 1994). I'd like to highlight here my encounters with those few authors whose provocative

reflections in relation to the new sciences have most informed my thinking about the specific Café design principle of connecting diverse people and ideas and its impact on evolving collective intelligence. I'll weave their observations together with the reflections and insights of key Café hosts on this same question.

Mitchell Waldrop's *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (1992) may be the most exciting intellectual adventure story I've ever read. Waldrop brings scientific ideas alive as he tells the personal stories of the scientists exploring complex adaptive systems and he relays the exhilaration of collective intellectual breakthroughs.

There are many places in Waldrop's tale that resonate with our own Café experiences. Waldrop describes Stuart Kauffman's discoveries about autocatalytic sets, the emergence of new collective properties in a web of transformations among molecules. When the "soup" of interacting agents becomes dense enough, it undergoes "that funny phase transition" into a new level of coherence, what Kauffman calls "order for free" (Waldrop, 1992, pp. 124-33). Is this the catalytic experience we've noticed in Café conversations after a number of rounds moving amongst tables or other types of weaving among of people and ideas? In working with genetic networks, Waldrop cites Kauffman's finding that "if the connections were too sparse, the networks would basically just freeze up and sit there. And if the connections were too dense, the networks would churn around in total chaos" (Waldrop, 1992, p. 293).

I was amazed when I read Waldrop's observations just after reviewing a learning conversation I had with David Drake, a former minister who now serves as a

management coach and strategy consultant. He had recently done his first Café, bringing people from the training field together to explore the assumptions underlying the profession of Training and Development. He describes in vivid terms the exponential rise of collective energy and insight in the Café he hosted:

> For example, let's say you had the energies and ideas of eight people who begin at one table. On the second round they connect with the energies and thinking of another group of eight. Now it's sixteen. Each new group now has the energies and ideas of sixteen people. In the third round you have sixteen times sixteen. The energy of the room starts to increase exponentially with all those connections. It has a kind of "lifting" effect. You have this accelerated evolutionary process of ideas. (David Drake, Learning Conversation, January 2000)

Drake then seems to raise the same question in relation to the Café work that Stuart Kauffman was exploring with his mathematical models:

> Is there an optimal number of iterations, where, if you don't shuffle people enough it's not random enough for the connections to pay off and if you shuffle them too much you get to some other unproductive state? What are the mathematics of the optimum exponential rise where you can embody and transfer the wisdom of the whole to the next higher level? (David Drake, Learning Conversation, January 2000)

John Holland, another Santa Fe Institute pioneer described in Waldrop's intellectual adventure story, focused his research on fundamental processes of learning and adaptation from cells to social systems. Holland emphasized that optimum learning and development occurs in systems where there is a rich web of interactions between multiple agents, along with an environment of novelty where new opportunities and spaces of possibility can be explored (Waldrop, 1992, p. 149). Holland's discoveries are complemented by Doyne Farmer's theory that the emergence of surprising new

possibilities in any system lies not in the individual parts or nodes of the network but rather in what emerges from the connections among them (Waldrop, 1992, p. 291).

Christopher Langton, another key player in the Santa Fe group, believes that biological, intellectual, and cultural evolution embody complementary aspects of the same dynamic processes of emergence that seem to characterize many Café conversations. In human systems with the capacity for conscious awareness, Langton believes social co-evolution occurs through the process of concepts combining and recombining, leaping from mind to mind, all the while being recorded in the basic DNA of culture and language (Waldrop, 1992, p. 215). Humberto Maturana, evolutionary biologist, and Francisco Varela, noted cognitive scientist, add a key insight to this exploration by hypothesizing that we bring forth the world we experience "in the social coupling through language in the network of conversations" in which we participate (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 232). In their exploration of cognition, Varela, Thompson, and Rosch point to the phenomenon of "resonating neural ensembles" in the brain in which "behavior of the whole system resembles a cocktail party conversation much more than a chain of command" (1991, p. 96).

How different are these discoveries in the new sciences from the insights that are being gathered in the exploratory research with Café hosts from around the world? In a Café, questions that matter or key challenges related to people's real work serve as catalysts, increasing the density of connections in the network of conversations among diverse people and ideas. This enables surprising new possibilities to emerge. Our

colleague, Tom Atlee, calls this "co-intelligence"—the capacity of a system to access collective knowledge and wisdom not available to any individual member.

In a Café on Cafés held with a group representing nine different countries at the 1999 Systems Thinking Conference, the members commented on this phenomenon as it occurs in Café conversations:

- Having multiple conversations keeps people unstuck.
- People feel responsible for carrying their own as well as other people's ideas with them as they move, so more connections are happening all the time.
- It's like improvisational jazz. One person starts a riff, others pick up the beat, then everyone in the room gets up and starts to dance. Everyone's doing a unique dance but there's a new rhythm that wasn't there before.
- It's like discovering a collective intuition.
- It's like a reverberation of thought.
- Like harmonizing meaning rather than freezing it—more like a work in progress.
- A Café is like creating a painting in common versus making a collage where the different individual pieces are stuck onto the canvas.

(Journal notes, Systems Thinking Conference, 1999)

David Marsing, a senior executive from Intel, was a member of the Intellectual Capital Pioneers dialogue where the Café was born. He later co-hosted a three day Café with senior business leaders focused on large-scale systems change. David has also participated in Café conversations for senior executives at the Executive Champion's workshops where Peter Senge from MIT and I serve as co-faculty. Marsing provides vivid reflections on the ways he sees Café conversations mirroring the processes of

emergence and "bringing forth" that Maturana & Varela (1992) and other scientists describe.

> So you have the question sitting on the table as a starting point, but as people move around, it's combining with other elements, each person oriented to the question in their own ways. The thing grows so fast with these rotations. It's different than an amoeba. It's more complex. It has a life cycle that's undetermined and growing fast. It brings in a new reinforcing loop, a new food source. It becomes richer, but yet there's still a common enough structure that starts from the original question. You can imagine a three dimensional network forming, both in depth and breadth around the original question.
>
> In retrospect, I would call it a development of coherence. It's more directional than random evolution, more like co-emergence. The co-emergence part is an experience of resonance—a kind of higher fusion. I've never seen any other approach get the same kind of response from a qualitative perspective in a large group. (David Marsing, Learning Conversation, April 1999)

It was during my work with the Dialogue Project at MIT that I was introduced to Danah Zohar and her provocative hypotheses on the way the brain develops coherence and resonance through diverse inputs. It sounds strikingly similar to what Marsing describes as the coherence or resonance of thought that can be achieved in Café conversations when they are really "cooking." Zohar's *The Quantum Society* (1994) links the work of quantum physicists, including David Bohm (1980; 1996; 1991), Ilya Prigogine, (1984) and others to theories about the development of individual and collective consciousness as well as societal evolution.

Zohar acknowledges that her reflections are based on grounded speculation (1994, p. 232). However, even at the level of analogy, my conversation with Zohars' imaginative ideas sparked my own thinking. I began to wonder about the possible ways in which Café conversations contribute to the emergence of co-intelligence from

seemingly random connections of people and ideas. Similar to other theorists of emergence, Zohar points to the dynamics of what physicist Paul Teller calls "relational wholes" (Teller, 1986). Zohar points out that, similar to processes in other parts of nature, diverse bits of information in the structure of consciousness combine and recombine to evoke surprising new realities. As diverse images and bits of information in the brain interact, new possibilities latent within the situation are "called out" and actualized. Zohar sees the dynamics of individual and collective consciousness mirroring the way the brain itself takes in disparate perceptual data, searching for patterns that can be scanned holistically. She then links the notion of perceptual evolution in an individual to the dynamics of social evolution.

> Perceptual evolution requires that the various bits of heterogeneous data recombine (resynthesize) into new holistic patterns. Social evolution requires that different points of view, different ideas, different ways of life, and different traditions recombine into larger, more complex emergent wholes. (1994, p. 288)

What I find most intriguing about Zohar's argument, however, is not just her observations on relational wholes and the network dynamics of emergence. Rather, it is her discussion of the "sea of potential" existing in what she calls the vacuum. This is what Bohm describes as the implicate order, the deeper source of the manifest reality we experience. Like Bohm, to whom she dedicated her book, Zohar emphasizes the importance of dialogue as our core human process for accessing the generative potential of the implicate order on behalf of positive futures. While I recognize the power of Bohmian-style small-group dialogue circles of 20-40 participants as one point of access to this generative potential, Zohar's work stimulated me to ask another set of questions.

What if we can intentionally invite, through Café conversations, a more accelerated and rich network of dialogic interactions on a larger scale than is common in most dialogue circles? What if, by doing so we have not just created an interesting vehicle for random emergence through the combining and recombining of diverse people and ideas? What if we have simultaneously created a simple, fast, efficient and intentional design for accessing greater collective wisdom and coherent thought than is often available in large- group settings?

Designing for emergence

Fritjof Capra, pioneering physicist and, more recently, living systems theorist (Capra, 1996)**,** has greatly influenced my thinking about the ways in which Café conversations might intentionally enhance the process of creating living knowledge in human systems. Fritjof and I have participated in several study groups together. With Peter Senge (1999; 1990; 1994), Joe Jaworski (1996), and others we have explored the nature of subtle fields of energy and their relation to organizational intelligence. With Meg Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers (Wheatley, 1992; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996), we have explored the application of nature's principles to social systems. Capra and his colleague, Morten Flatau, wrote an unpublished paper entitled *Emergence and Design in Human Systems* (1998). Their reflections helped coalesce my thinking about the way in which Café conversations may support the emergence of coherence without control in settings where people need to think and learn together about key questions and strategic issues.

Like other scientists of complexity, Fritjof and Flatau point out that the "spontaneous emergence of new forms of order, which is manifest in the phenomena of development, learning, and evolution, is one of the hallmarks of life." (Capra & Flatau, 1998, p. 4). They discuss two different and generally mutually exclusive ways in which new structures and order evolve in human systems. The first, which they term "embodiment through design," results in static structures such as those created by the designers of machines or formal organizational policies. The second, "embodiment through emergence," reflect more informal processes that create structure and order through adaptation and evolution, rather than through design. They point out that "there is a tension between designed and emergent structures … The challenge is to find a creative balance between the structures embodied by design and those embodied through emergence" (Capra & Flatau, 1998, p. 11).

Capra and Flatau's initial thinking about the relationship between design and emergence took my own musings in another direction. What if, as Capra and Flauau suggest, our capacity as humans for reflective consciousness enables us to intentionally balance the processes of design and emergence? What if the question of balance between designed structures and emergent structures was only part of the picture? I asked myself, what if it we could intentionally design for emergence or design for coherence, without the inflexibility that Capra and Flatau attribute to formally designed structures? What if our experience is demonstrating that Café learning is one example of a conscious and purposeful design for emergence and coherence of collective thought?

That took me back to Ilya Prigogine's idea of "organized criticality"—the borderline state between order and chaos (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984). Could the use of questions as "attractors" coupled with fostering a rich and diverse web of connections among people and ideas in Café conversations be one way of encouraging both informal emergence and purposeful coherence at the same time? How might intentionally designing for emergence in this way enable those involved in a network of conversations to keep from falling off the edge into chaos while simultaneously living on the edge in productive and creative ways?

Putting theory into practice

Peter Brooks, the theatre director, describes the way in which he encourages the creation of set designs which avoid constraining or taking the life out of a production. He avoids creating an elaborate, finished set for any given play. Brooks says, "What is necessary is an incomplete design, a design that has clarity without rigidity; one that can be called 'open' as against 'shut.' " (1968, p. 114). Café hosts from around the world have experimented with a wonderful variety of ways to move people and ideas across boundaries in ways that embody the clarity without rigidity that Brooks describes.

The most prominent and consistent pattern of connecting people and ideas across boundaries in the Café work is how people and ideas are literally moved in iterative rounds of conversation. As described earlier in a number of Café stories and examples, these conversations are focused on exploring questions of importance to those gathered. A round of conversation may include one host staying with the table to welcome guests while ambassadors travel to share as well as gather collective insights. It might involve

the travelers returning to their home café or continuing to travel for several iterations. Sometimes it's not one host who stays for all rounds. Sometimes the hosts change, with the first host becoming a traveler during the second cycle. Sometimes several members will stay while the others go out for a few minutes on inspirational visits to other tables. Their job is to collect one or two gems to bring back to their home table.

Another option is at the end of a conversation to have one host stay for three or four very brief rounds of storytelling. They share key insights from their Café conversations with several groups of new visitors who get to hear the gems that emerged in the earlier conversations. The host has several uninterrupted opportunities to share the essence of his Café table's insights. The visitors receive an enriched sense of the "mind of the whole" gleaned from the varied stories they've heard.

However, many other approaches are also used to develop the combination of both focus and freedom that characterize Café learning. Our colleague, Finn Voldtofte of Denmark, calls these approaches "weaving techniques" or "stretching the field." For example, to stimulate the thinking about the topic when the group first walks into the room, Finn may have Café table names on each table, each of which subtly reflect different dimensions of the area to be explored. During the early part of the Café he asks people to imagine the way in which their Café table name might related to the focus of the Café. He says, "It's like the smell of flowers, a scent of what might come. It can inform the whole conversation in a fresh way. Or people can come up with their own table names that they think link to the topic in some way. Using Café names can 'stretch

the field' of what's possible to emerge" (Finn Voldtofte, Learning Conversation, July 1997).

In addition, the pacing and rhythm of how the questions are posed can encourage new connections. Finn talks of organizing Café conversations to move intentionally through a series of pulsations which generally do not last more than two or two and a half hours. Within each pulsation people may move several times. He says:

> Whenever I begin a new pulse, for example after a break, I give the instruction to find a new table with people you haven't been sitting with. The next pulse is a new question or a continuation of the previous question that can build on it and deepen collective understanding. For example, in a first pulse you might focus on "What questions do we have about this topic?" The second pulse might be "What patterns do we see in these questions?" (Finn Voldtofte, Learning Conversation, July 1997)

Another variation involves moving people's ideas around rather than moving the people themselves. For example, Finn may ask people in the first round of conversation to focus, as above, on framing the questions they have in relation to the topic. Then, each table frames their core question, signs their table name or number and passes it on a large card to another table. The next table's assignment is to understand the question. He adds:

> If your table doesn't understand it, someone goes back to the table where the question came from, and you send a representative back to help negotiate the clarity. It's not that you have to agree with it, just understand it. Once this happens in several rounds, it's quite interesting to see how engaged people are with each other's ideas to make sure they really understand the questions coming around to them and to be clear about what they are sending out. I call this process of moving the question cards around the Café, "quality control." (Finn Voldtofte, Learning Conversation, July 1997)

In a later conversation with a group from Scotland whom we were supporting in the design of a global learning conference, Finn talked more about this approach:

> Sometimes we say, "Remain seated, don't move, just send a postcard or several with a key idea on each one about how to implement what we're talking about in practical ways. Send that to the table with the next higher number than yours." Then the people at the next table need to ask themselves "Do we understand this? How could this be an interesting idea?" It's another kind of connecting and weaving. People remain seated but the work of people moves around the tables. (Finn Voldtofte, Learning Conversation, October 1999)

Another weaving option was developed by Verna Allee in a Café she hosted in Australia for a computer firm. In addition to the Australians, there were members from Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, India, the Philippines and other areas of Southeast Asia. In this instance, there were six major strategy questions to explore. The tables were divided into sectors, with the tables in that sector taking one of the big questions. People could rotate out to several of the six topics from their own section of the room to learn about and make contributions to other parts of the strategy puzzle that interested them. Later that afternoon, representatives of the six questions came together to re-combine and synthesize their collective learnings in relation to the strategy as a whole. Verna observes that:

> What they discovered was their own collective intelligence. There really was such a thing as collecting their intelligence about those questions. And we got to this in two hours—two hours! I had people coming up to me and say it was amazing. (Verna Allee, Learning Conversation, November 1998)

In another variation, a Swedish colleague, Stefan Wängerstedt, was hosting a Café in Sweden with bank executives. After the initial Café rounds, it came time to think about the possibilities for their own functions and Stefan took the managers of each function aside.

> I asked each manager to go with a group they don't normally work with. So they swapped roles. For example, the customer manager and the office manager swapped roles. I told them to go into the groups they very seldom see and to listen and support their thinking, not to tell, just to support and to listen.
>
> Then, we came back into a whole circle where I asked them to tell the story about what might be possible in their functions based on what they had learned earlier in the Café rounds that included everyone together.
>
> Now their managers still hadn't been with their own groups. What was shared in that circle was amazing. It was, I mean, beautiful. It was like a community formed that hadn't been there before. A feeling of hope. (Stephan Wängerstedt, Learning Conversation, November 1998)

Experimenting with actively trying on diverse perspectives is another vehicle for moving people and ideas across boundaries. In one of the most daring designs I've encountered, Sarita Chawla and Andrea Dyer hosted a series of Café conversations with multiple ethnic groups around questions of diversity and race. They asked each group—i.e. Asians, Anglos, Blacks, and Latinos—to begin at their home table and share the story of their own ethnic group. Andrea recalls:

> They created the story of their ethnic group in images and words on the tablecloths. Then we had each ethnic group move all together to the next group's table, except for one person who stayed to greet the new group. So for example, all of the African-Americans went to the Asian table except one and all of the Asians went to the Latino table except one. Then the host told whatever was the story of their group to the visitors.
>
> There was one twist. We asked all of those at the new table to really listen carefully to the story of the new ethnic group they were visiting without judgment because on the next round, one of them was going to stay behind as the steward of the story. So the Blacks, plus the Asian who was originally telling the story would then go on, say, to the Latino table. One Black person would remain as the steward of the Asian story. Then the Black would be telling, say, the Anglo group that just arrived at his table the Asians' story, in the first person, from what he had heard from the original Asian host and what was on the tablecloth. Then, it switched again. A person from the visiting group took over as the new

> steward of the Asian story and all the others now moved on to another group. As the rotations continued it evolved that there might be an Asian and four Blacks listening to a Latino tell an Anglo story.
>
> The quality of the listening was like nothing I've every seen before. The stewards had to represent something so unfamiliar to themselves and they wanted to do it well. Something shifted. They became less judgmental and more able to see different perspectives. I think each one had compassion for the storyteller. They knew how difficult is was to tell someone else's story well. It was really rich and very deep. It's almost if they could feel it in their bodies. That was the success of the overall meeting. (Andrea Dyer, Learning Conversation, April 1999)

Andrea created another variation on this theme in a major strategy session with a global consumer products company. After the new strategy was explored in some depth, Andrea asked the members at each table to imagine a real life constituency group (i.e. customers, suppliers, distributors) that they would like to explain the new strategy to. Then, using analogy, metaphor, images, pictures or stories, the table members were to explain the new strategy to this imaginary constituency group. Andrea explains:

> My favorite was explaining the strategy to the truck drivers. Then we had members from each table go out to see how people were explaining it to other stakeholders and then come back to their home table to see what themes and patterns were emerging. It was so much fun. (Andrea Dyer, Learning Conversation, July 1999)

In a quite different approach to exploring strategy implications, the executives of a large bank in Denmark found that our colleague, Finn Voldtofte had placed an envelope under the vase of flowers on their Café tables. Unbeknownst to them, Finn had taken six different key excerpts from the strategy and distributed them among the 115 tables in the room. Finn says:

> The instruction was just "Look at the paper and consider how this relates to you and your work." Then, in the next round I asked them to go visiting, go traveling. When the travelers arrived at new tables, they

> discovered that others had different parts of the strategy. And then, after the break I told them to just return to their home table to see what they were making of their travel experiences. It meant that now that the perspectives of all six parts were reflected back at the original table—the wholeness was there in every table the room. That's when you can sense the magic.
>
> Then came the next phase. I asked each table to write one great big postcard reflecting the essence of what they thought was important from seeing the whole thing. They were in lots of colors. When they came back we'd taken out the redundancies and had them all up in the hallways so they could see the collective mindscreen. (Finn Voldtofte, Learning Conversation, July 1997)

The variety of ways to increase the richness and density of interactions in relation to the focus of the Café is limited only by the imagination of the host and the goals of the gathering. This is a domain where the art of hosting is especially important and where the creativity of the facilitation can make the difference between an interesting conversation and the magic of experiencing co-intelligence in action.

I'd like to end this phase of the exploration with a reflection from Peter Senge of MIT with whom I serve as co-faculty for the Executive Champions Workshop (ECW) with senior leaders from the member companies of the Society for Organizational Learning. We use Café learning in the ECW as the core process for engaging strategic dialogue around critical issues affecting the future of major institutions. In a conversation with Tom Johnson, a member of the faculty at Portland State University, Peter Senge provided evocative images of how the Café process of connecting people and ideas across boundaries produces useful results. In commenting on what can be achieved in Café conversations through designing for the emergence of coherent thought on a collective level he says:

> It's not the commonality of homogeneity. In fact, it's virtually the opposite. The commonality emerges from internalizing richer and richer diversity and then recognizing this web, this richer and richer web that connects and when it's this meaningful, we don't need a lot of proof. We're quite comfortable with the possibility that it won't turn out. But that's okay. What I like about the Café is it's an enacting. It's not a talking about. We are stepping in and enacting a new way of operating, a new way of being. (Peter Senge, Learning Conversation, April 1999)

We still have a great deal to learn about the myriad approaches to cross-pollination of diverse people and ideas in order to galvanize collective learning and co-intelligence in the service of futures we care about. Perhaps well designed Café conversations can make a contribution to coherent thought and action in ways that are worthy of our best efforts.

Listening Together for Patterns, Insights, and Deeper Questions

Part I: Jan Wallinder's Café Story

WHAT'S IN THE MIDDLE OF THE TABLE

This story is told by Jan Wallinder, former CEO (Chief "Evangelist" Officer) of the FutureComFactory a pioneering multi-disciplinary InfoCom Exploration Forum regarding the future of the infocom industry and the future of society. It was founded by three major Swedish corporations, Ericsson, Telia, and AP Fastigheter, to explore such questions as: "How can infocom technology and services support the evolution of a sustainable future?"

By Jan Wallinder
CEO, FutureComFactory, Sweden

Over the last few years, I have come to see that an important part of my own life purpose is working for a sustainable future on this planet. I wanted to figure out a way to connect that passion with my work at Telia, the largest telecommunications company in Scandinavia. Fortunately, senior leaders in the sponsoring corporations also thought the role of infocom in a sustainable future was an important question for our industry. I discovered I wasn't alone and this was a great feeling.

The CEOs of the three sponsoring corporations wrote the following in a letter to colleagues around the world inviting them to join in this exploration:

> *The driving forces behind our initiative are the information and communication services that are already playing a key role in everyday life. They effect, for example, transportation, the environment, material and energy resources, and food and health supplies. They all impact on our businesses. And our businesses impact on them. Therefore, the importance of the executive decisions we are making today bear huge responsibilities for our long-term future. Such decisions need not be made in isolation. There can be tremendous benefits if we share this*

> *responsibility through open dialogue within a global community of interest.*

Corporate leaders are often very busy. They don't have as much time as they'd like to think about the long term implications of their choices before circumstances force them to make strategic decisions that could have a vast impact on the future of society. We had to figure out a way to support their best thinking, but in a way that they could be a real part of the conversation and not just accept recommendations from experts on face value. That's what FutureComFactory is all about.

We decided to start the dialogue about technology and a sustainable future in two phases. I knew about the Café work and we decided that each phase would use a Café approach to help people from all the different interest group to see what they hold in common as well as using their unique perspectives to discover solutions. If we are Telia Innovation, we should be able to help that happen, right?

In the first phase we brought together global thought leaders who had an interest in the future of infocom and a sustainable future. We invited "out of the box" thinkers—environmentalists, scientists, academics, futurists, infocom specialists, young people, politicians, and corporate representatives. Their job was to help discover the areas of inquiry that were critical to exploring our key question over the next 4-8 years. These areas would guide the focus for the next stage of the conversations with the "power players" from different groups.

We called the thought leaders' dialogue a Focus Search Café. I don't want to spend too much time on this one because the second Café with the leaders themselves is the one I want to really tell you about. In the Focus Search Café we worked with the thought leaders to clarify areas of inquiry that could make a significant difference to the future of both the development of the infocom industry and the development of a sustainable environment.

The thought leaders' group targeted four key areas of focus. They also identified the important stakeholders for each focus area. In the Focus Search Café, the group came to a consensus that transportation of goods and sustainability was an important area for us to experiment with learning more about.

FutureComFactory then embarked on a five-month period of research on the topic. We used both internal and external research resources. We explored the hard issues and how the infocom services industry might help or hinder the development of a more sustainable future in relation to transportation issues. This synthesis, called the World Insighters Report (WIR) helped to pose critical dilemmas and decision points for the next phase of the conversation with key leaders. We called this second phase the Roundtable Dialogue, and we decided to hold it in a Café format.

We took a big risk in the Roundtable Café. We really didn't know what would happen! We invited very influential people from groups with very divergent perspectives—senior leaders from major transportation companies including DHL, UPS, and the Swedish railroads. We brought CEOs from companies that use their transport services. We also invited key players from IT companies who are developing transportation technologies, a member of the European Parliament, a key leader from Greenpeace, and the head of the traffic division of a large Swedish City. As you can imagine, these are not people who often, if ever, sit down to think together. If they do, they may be sitting on the other side of the table. These power players often meet each other in very formal discussions, usually around big conference tables, with structured agendas, everything timed out, and tight control to make sure nothing goes wrong.

We were a little nervous about what would happen when the people came to the meeting. We needed to figure out a natural way for people to really listen to each other's viewpoints to find out what they shared and not get polarized. So, we decided to go ahead. We created a Café with small tables and a friendly atmosphere. When people came in the door, we could see that some were a bit surprised when they saw the Café set up. At least they joined in, and sat down with their colleagues. They actually seemed curious to see what would happen next!

Then came our next challenge for a meeting like this. Right in the beginning, after making introductions, we had a young, newly married woman in her twenties come to share her thoughts with the group. She talked about wanting to raise a family. She talked about her hopes for her children and grandchildren. She wanted them to grow up in a world that they could feel proud of. She said she hoped that this group who had the power to change things, could find some ideas that could bring everyone together. She encouraged them to ask themselves what kind of world they wanted their

own children and grandchildren to grow up in. There was a very thoughtful feeling in the whole room when she finished talking.

We then did something even more daring that worked amazingly well. We introduced the "dialogue stone" as a way to avoid arguments and defensive positions. I think in the U.S. you call it a "talking stone." We brought beautiful stones from a pebble peach on an island not far from the outskirts of Stockholm. The stones have been there for thousands of years. They symbolize the history of mankind and the collective knowledge about our survival that we share as a species. We just set one stone in the middle of each table, along with a small vase of flowers and colored pens.

We presented the basic idea behind the dialogue stones. We said that usually in meetings like this there are a lot of discussions going on. It speeds up so fast that people have a hard time listening because they want to make sure their ideas get in. This is especially true when the participants come from very different camps. We asked everyone to consider having a dialogue instead of a discussion and explained that dialogue comes from the Greek dia+logos, or "meaning flowing through us together," rather than discussion which, like percussion, comes from the root meaning of "pounding on" or "breaking apart."

We asked if we could be disciplined about the use of the dialogue stone as a practical tool for listening together and finding what was in the middle of the table. Only the person holding the stone would speak. As long as he or she held the stone, others would simply listen without interrupting. This would allow the person holding the stone to stop and take a breath while thinking about what he or she really wanted to say instead of having to keep babbling so someone else wouldn't cut in while they finished their thought.

We also asked people to imagine themselves asking their "judge" to step aside and take a rest period, just for a little while. During this time the "judge" didn't need to worry about deciding whether what someone said was right or wrong. The goal at this stage was just to listen together to see how everyone viewed the topic and what contribution each perspective could bring. We encouraged people to speak in the first person, for themselves, and not with their formal hat on. We also asked the members if they would be willing to hold off presenting solutions and suggesting actions since this initial phase was just meant to find the deeper questions and not the

answers. We'd have time for solutions later if that's where the conversation led us.

After this short introduction we asked the participants to begin the first round of the Café dialogue exploring what insights or key questions were triggered by their reading of the World Insighters Report. Each member took the stone and presented his or her key insights, thoughts, or deeper questions. The other three participants at each Café table just listened together to the person talking, but we asked them to listen in a special way. We asked people, while they were listening, to keep track of the ideas and to draw in the middle of the tablecloth any connections that they could see. When each person had shared their ideas the stone was placed in the middle of the table and anyone could take it and add any comments or thoughts that had bubbled up while they were listening to the others.

We emphasized that the job of the Roundtable Café was not necessarily to come to consensus but just to get a better understanding of each other's worldviews and to share their insights and discoveries from the World Insighters Report.

In the second Café round, a host was selected at each table to stay and welcome the "travelers" from three other tables. The host's job was to introduce the new members to what was in the middle of the table from the first Café round. Then we added something. For the second round, we asked everyone to begin listening as a group for the deeper assumptions and patterns of meaning underlying the dialogue and write them on the tablecloth as well.

The conversation continued. People were still using the discipline of the talking stone to slow down and listen to what was showing up in the center of the table. But now they were focusing together on the underlying assumptions they thought were key to the different perspectives and connections of ideas being offered and how they could ask questions to help each other clarify the different as well as common assumptions or mindsets. Instead of turning against each other, it felt like they were standing next to each other, looking to see what was coming out of the whole conversation.

We changed tables again and started the third round of Café dialogue, continuing to see what emerged in the middle of each table. By this time people were really into it! I was quite surprised at how well it went. People weren't angry or upset at all, even though some, of course, had trouble not

jumping into forming solutions. The Café was sure lively! There was a lot of energy building in that old restored mansion by the waterfront that we used as the site for the Café dialogue.

When the third round was over, we opened the conversation to the whole group to pool the collective knowledge and insights. We had hired a professional graphic recorder who put a large wall mural up to literally draw out people's reflections. Having the large mural was like having a large tablecloth right in the middle of the whole group! We could see the themes of meaning, the assumptions, the connections between ideas, and the "Aha's" coming out right in front of us. The participants were quite excited at this stage because they could literally see that they were creating something quite different in the middle than they had started out with. There was a special energy in the mansion that day. It was some kind of vibration that was very different than when all the people came in with their different mindsets. They found something together that wasn't there before, or maybe it was there all the time but they had just not had a way to see it.

The meeting was very constructive, although, of course, sometimes people had a hard time not jumping to conclusions and immediately suggesting solutions. That was okay, though, because they were being creative. It wasn't just repeating the old tapes. When we had the check-out at the end, people said that this was the first time that they had sat down with others who could be considered competitors or even opponents and had been able to arrive at a better understanding of the other's deeper beliefs. Frankly, I was surprised that it could even happen at all, let alone in that short of a time frame.

There was a consensus in the group that they were all much closer than they had originally thought. They realized that they needed to find solutions that complemented each other instead of going off in different directions. I think they saw that none of them alone had the power to push the others into submission to their own solutions. I think they realized that they shared the hope that the young woman had talked about right at the beginning—they also wanted their children and grandchildren to feel proud that they had helped to create a sustainable future. This might not have happened if they hadn't been at those small Café tables really talking together in a close way.

I've been really happy with how the Café dialogues turned out. We are using the Café approach for additional areas of strategic inquiry including a Café on the Mobile Internet and the City of Tomorrow. This one should be especially interesting because it will bring together people at the forefront of thinking about both technology and all the issues of urban life. I'm looking forward to seeing how it will go.

Jan Talks About His Learnings

What did I discover about what you call "listening into the middle" from our experience so far? Well, as I look back on it, maybe it was pretty simple. Having that young woman come in the beginning to challenge people to think about their common hopes was a start. Also, it seemed that something so easy as the "dialogue stone" for listening together for insights and connections made a big difference. I think it helped that we said the stones we used were a symbol of our land that had survived so many centuries and was now in danger.

What surprised me was that we said very little about any rules of dialogue. We just asked their permission to use the stone and asked them to let their "judge" rest for a little while. And we didn't teach them how to listen. I think people already basically know how to listen when they are really interested in what's going on. We just focused their attention on what to listen for. And each time we asked them to listen into the middle for the next deeper layer of understanding—about each other and about the issue.

Another thing was the big tablecloth. If you want people to listen together to what's coming out in the whole conversation, then I think there has to be some way for people to literally see in a way that's bigger than just their own messy tablecloths. It's stronger to make the group's own collective thinking visible so they can say, "We did this, we all contributed to what we created, and we're responsible for it." Maybe it wouldn't always be a mural created by a graphic specialist, but I think there needs to be some way to capture the group's thinking as a whole.

Another surprise about the effect of sharing the listening is that the group doesn't have to make decisions, at least not on the spot. If this kind of special listening happens, they get excited about going back into their own situations with their new understandings to help make it happen. It's too

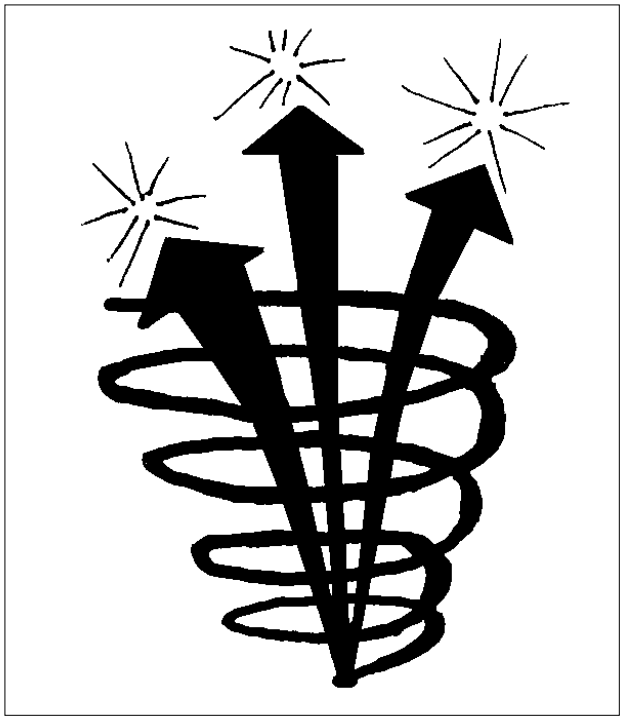
early to tell, but I think this way of having conversations may make it easier to get action, but it's not the same way we think about it most of the time—with voting and long lists of action steps. That's okay. Much of the time nothing comes out of those lists anyway.

It might also be that as a result of the Café conversations people will more naturally call each other up to think about upcoming decisions, because now they've found connections—not just at a personal level, but at an idea level as well. At least, that's my hope for what could happen out of all of this. Do you think I'm an idealist?

Part II: Reflections and Observations on Listening Together

> *Jam … to take a theme, a question, a notion, a whim, an idea, pass it around, break it up, put it together, turn it over, run it backward, fly with it as far as possible, out of sight, never retreating … but yes, here it comes, homing in , changed, new, the essence, like nothing ever before.*
>
> *—John Kao (1996, frontispiece)*

There is an expression I love in Spanish. It is called, *el meollo* (pronounced el may-ol-yo in English). *El meollo* means the essential nature or fundamental substance of a thing. It also means "understanding."



Drawing by Sherrin Bennett

Figure 5: El meollo

In Café conversations, we encourage members to seek a collective sense of *el meollo*. Our Danish colleague, Finn Voldtofte, describes this as a process of listening together for the "magic in the middle"—for the wisdom and/or insight that no individual member of the group would have access to by themselves (Voldtofte, 1997). In describing Café experiences where the magic of collaborative insight is revealed, Finn says that:

> When the kind of dialogue that enables "magic" is present, then the field opens for the collective wisdom that is there in the middle of the table. A field of magic becomes lively. It's the feeling that now something is going on there in the middle. It's more than any individual. It takes it's own life, follows it's own trail and you're caught up in it, like in a good conversation among friends about things that are really important. It's hard to describe but you know when it's there. (Finn Voldtofte, Learning Conversations, July 1997, and October 1999)

Finn adds that in Café work, in contrast to other dialogic approaches, we are explicitly designing for and linking "interactions for magic" across multiple Café table conversations. Café gatherings intentionally create the conditions for discovering co-intelligence around questions that matter at increasing levels of scale. We are searching for ways to access the human capacity to discover *el meollo*, not alone, but in a community of the whole, whatever size that community may be.

In making Café design choices to support the emergence of social intelligence through shared listening, we are calling on interdisciplinary insights from a variety of fields. These include reflections on the possibility that there is an implicate order that we can access collectively in dialogic situations (Bohm, 1980; Bohm, 1996); explorations of organizational fields and synchronicity (Jaworski, 1996; Wheatley, 1992); discoveries about the fractal nature of living systems (Capra, 1996; Hoagland & Dodson, 1995);

theories about holons and the holographic paradigm (Wilber, 1982); insights about collaboration and the uses of shared space (Schrage, 1990); and understandings about the power of visual language (Horn, 1998; Kelly, 1999; Landau, 2000, Margulies & Maal, 2001) . These find practical expression in the specific approaches used in Café conversations in several key ways.

Listening to, listening with, and listening for

In traditional dialogue situations, participants are often encouraged: "Listen to your own listening" as an individual within a group situation. Members are also encouraged to suspend interpersonal judgment or blame while listening to the reflections of other members of the group (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1999). These are valuable personal and interpersonal skills. They are important to dialogic communication.

However, Café conversations place a different emphasis on listening. In Café learning, the group as a whole is invited to engage in *shared* listening— "listening with" each other collectively for insights that are *beyond* the individual, even though they may be experienced *through* the individual. In Café conversations, the emphasis is on *transpersonal* rather than personal or interpersonal listening. We ask participants to intentionally turn toward that which is larger and/or deeper than any individual or interpersonal dynamic. One participant in our seminar "Conversation as a Core Business Process" at the 1999 Systems Thinking in Action Conference provided an apt description of this relationship between the individual and the collective. He observed, "It's not that it's common thinking or group think and it's not condensing. It's both individual and group learning within a larger context of collective relatedness of thought."

Members are actively encouraged to look beyond their own ideas and reactions. They are invited to notice emerging patterns and themes of meaning as they co-evolve through several rounds of conversation where people and ideas are, literally, traveling around the room, cross-pollinating, linking, and connecting. As we saw in the previous section, it is the density of cross-pollinating and connecting that increases the likelihood that new collaborative insight will emerge. Another of the participants at our Systems Thinking in Action seminar described this as experiencing "a reverberation of thought, like ripples in a pond."

Members are not only encouraged to listen with each other for connections and commonalities, they are also asked to listen for deeper questions or insights that may lie beneath the patterns that are evident and obvious. These may arise from an inward focus of attention at the personal or interpersonal level. However, in Café work, we are discovering that these insights tend to reveal themselves more often from a joining together with others to listen for the deeper "magic" of collaborative insight that lies beyond the visible. We believe these insights may arise from what Bohm called the implicate order (1980), what Zohar called the Vacuum (1994), or what Jung called the collective unconscious (1961). Each of these pioneers in the area of human consciousness was pointing to a generative source of deeper wisdom and insight that is available with sensitive attention and shared listening.

The fruits of shared listening become more visible and available through what Anne Dosher, President of the Institute for Relational Development, calls "gathered attention" (Anne Dosher, Learning Conversation, June 1999). Gathered attention means

that people are consciously focusing their attention toward a special type of collective listening that enables access to deeper currents of shared meaning.

In an evocative conversation among a small group of us in the early years of our Café experimentation, Anne Dosher, David Isaacs, and Finn Voldtofte were searching for a way to express the quality of the gathered attention and listening they experience in Café conversations.

Anne: It's actually a collective "listening forth."

David: It's listening for the deeper patterns.

Finn: It's taking the collective potential and bringing it into a new level. That level itself sparks a new possibility.

David: One part is the listening. The collective listening is essentially a bringing forth. A bringing forth of the collective intelligence in the whole Café. But it's an emergent process.

Finn: For example, we sometimes ask travelers to go to another Café table and listen to their story and then come back to their own table. The story they share is a collective story from each of the other table conversations. So they are bringing back three or four collective stories they have just listened to. You travel for the listening. When everyone comes back with the stories they heard and they weave them together, they discover the wholeness that was there all along. They gather the connections between their table's story and all the others. There's a new clarity from listening to more of the whole.

Anne: Maybe it's first like a diffuse light. That's in the first phase of the listening together. Then as it hits a turning point it turns into a laser or focused light. Maybe that's the bringing forth part.

(Learning Conversation, July 1997)

In Café conversations, gathered attention is focused on what is evolving not only in the center of an individual Café table, but also across Café tables and throughout the conversation as a whole. This enables a different relationship between the individual and the collective at a larger scale than is possible in many dialogic situations.

Relationship to the larger whole

One of the dilemmas in dialogue work is the tendency of individuals to maintain their personal positions and judgments. This frequently leads to fragmentation, incoherence, and excessive individualism in the group. These difficulties have often been cited as significant constraints on the group's capacity to think constructively together (Ross, 1998; Tannen, 1998; Yankelovich, 1999; Zimmerman, 1996). However, Café conversations are revealing a different pattern of relationship to the larger whole than seems to be the case in many interpersonal dialogue settings.

Something quite unexpected seems to happen when members are charged with the responsibility of not only putting forth their own ideas but also of becoming "ambassadors of meaning" or "theme weavers." They do this by listening for and carrying the collective ideas expressed in their previous conversation to new Café tables. This type of shared listening seems to create a different relationship with the community

of the whole than is the case in normal dialogic encounters. Andrea Dyer first pointed this out to us. In working with senior leaders in a corporate setting, she observed:

> We were working with the future of the organization and what the images of the future would look like. This was a team that was usually fairly defensive. They didn't really trust each other. People made their own images on separate sheets and then carried them to the different tables in each of the rounds. But they were also writing on the collective tablecloths what the themes were, what was emerging from listening to all of them.
>
> They could say, "Here's my image and how I see it," but as they listened together to the whole story from another table they could say, "Oh, yeah, I hadn't thought about that" and they would add things on. There's also the idea of starting at a table, moving to another table and bringing with you the responsibility of telling the story of the first table you were at. That builds trust. And knowing that somebody else is going to carry into the next conversation the story from the Café table you were at, and you are carrying the whole story as well.
>
> In the process of taking what was shared at the tables and bringing it up to more of a collective essence of what was talked about, people could witness how their contribution got included in the whole. I saw this new image emerge and they all had a connection to it.
>
> When the group has been big enough to shift three or four times, it's almost as if you don't know where the thought came from because it's merged so many times that it's added and molded and shaped and shifted with new dimensions. People are speaking for each other or using words that started somewhere else that they hadn't thought of before. It's such a natural, organic process for that to happen. (Andrea Dyer, Learning Conversation, April 1999)

Other Café hosts have expressed variations on this phenomenon—the growing sense participants have of their responsibility to and for the whole. David Drake points to a similar dynamic when he describes a Café in which the group was exploring the deeper assumptions underlying their professional lives. He says that:

> There was a responsibility to represent views which people may not have held themselves. They did not actually have to agree with what they were sharing but they had to be responsible for listening well and for sharing it as cleanly and clearly as possible. Trust was present in a way that's not as

> present in other formats. I found people were, at one level, vigilant about the faithfulness of the reporting process, but, paradoxically at the same time were less attached to who said what. (David Drake, Learning Conversation, January 2000)

It seems that this type of shared listening and mutual responsibility also contributes to building a strong sense of community while honoring the importance of individual contribution.

Contribution and community

Patric Carlson spent two years with other students in an ongoing Café format with the Kaos Pilots, an innovative educational program in Denmark. Patric offers another lens on people's relationship to the larger whole and to the collective knowledge evolution they experience in Café settings. He observes:

> The orientation of the Café is toward contribution. It starts with somebody giving something. You can't blame somebody for giving. The purpose of the Café is not to criticize but to contribute. You don't have to perform, only contribute. You can see the knowledge growing. (Patric Carlson, Learning Conversation, November 1998)

In describing his experiences with Café work in Mexico, Felipe Herszenborn builds on ways people experience themselves as contributors to the evolution of something larger than themselves. He says:

> When people listen together and see the results of their diverse interactions they get really surprised at what they have created together. It's not conversations added together. It becomes one conversation, like a larger entity (*como un todo*). It's a group consciousness, a collective creation that is greater than the sum of its parts. (Felipe Herszenborn, Learning Conversation, November 1998)

Stefan Wängerstedt of Sweden adds another perspective:

> What I saw was the collective owning of the important values and qualities that the group had as a whole. It was developing a common sense. It came out at individual tables. Then it widened into the group. At the end, it was like a birth, but not in the individual sense. The feeling was very much of community in the room. It was beautiful. (Stefan Wängerstedt, Learning Conversation, November 1998)

In Australia, Café conversations have been used both to create a sense of community as well as to design community facilities. When the city of Marion (a suburb of Adelaide with a population of 80,000) wanted to design a new cultural center, they used what Café host Alan Stewart calls "Conversing Cafés" to create a series of community forums for listening deeply to diverse but passionate voices. Lloyd Fell, a research scientist who attended the initial meeting with the city Council members, commented, "I saw this tremendous wave of energy . . . right across the room. It was as if something had suddenly been unleashed, an invitation to speak freely in the more intimate setting of the Café table." A Council member explored how his perspective on the role of the Council in the community had evolved by participating in the citizen Cafés.

> Our role as a Council is to create opportunities for people to converse about important matters. Our staff, elected members and residents, are learning that this approach to significant issues, no matter how complex and conflicted, invariably generates surprisingly constructive outcomes. (Story cited from www.theworldcafe.com, 2001)

Cate Burke served as the graphic recorder for the Marion sessions. She shares:

> What set these Café gatherings apart from most other community meetings was the enthusiasm, respect, and warmth. . . . The caliber and momentum of dialogue continued to flourish with each successive session. Coincidentally, I had been to another workshop held at the Council around

> the same time on another complex issue which did not use the conversing process. . . . I could observe the growing impatience as individuals awaited for their own interest group to be invited to comment. . . . The behavioral contrast with the Conversing Café process was quite dramatic. . . . When I reflect on the Marion forums, I remember how a sense of true community began to emerge as the sessions progressed. (Story cited from www.theworldcafe.com, 2001)

Maria de los Angeles Cinta, in reflecting on her experience as a Café host with a leadership development program for middle and upper level managers from all over Latin America, also describes the experience of community that evolved from their Café conversations:

> We Latinos may be very friendly but that doesn't mean we participate as a community. We have a sense of family but not a strong notion of community. But, Latino people, they like to party. And going back and forth between tables was like going from one party table to another. There was a lot of laughter. And at the same time, we were working on the task at hand and listening in a new way.
>
> People started noticing that something new was evolving. When they got back to their original table after being at other tables, they realized that their perspectives were shared in other tables, with different viewpoints, but there was a general underlying story. As a result of working together in the Café format they were able to develop a knowledge-sharing community. (Maria de los Angeles Cinta, Learning Conversation, April 1999)

It seems that the experience of community that Maria describes can also be seen through the lens of a particular type of energetic resonance or coherence that emerges in many (though certainly not all) Café conversations.

Energetic resonance and coherence

Several years ago we co-hosted a senior executive strategic dialogue on large-scale systems change, with David Marsing of Intel. At the time, David was head of Intel's

global assembly test operations, the leader of a workforce of 18,000 people. We invited Jim Mathews, an accomplished jazz musician, to join the group as a resource. He brought his portable synthesizer. As an experiment, we asked Jim to "follow the energy" of the group as they worked together and to play whatever emerged from his listening into the whole. David Marsing's reflections on what he experienced as a participant is fascinating:

> First Jim sees people starting off in a regular sitting position. As the conversation intensifies, people are all leaning forward on the tables, listening. They are getting closer to each other and they begin, at some point, to make notes and drawings on the tablecloth. The tension level increases a little bit, but the tonality of their voices changes also because they are beginning to come together and resonate around this subject.
>
> Jim was picking up on this. He would change both the tempo and the tone of the music as he was sensing the changes at the table. He was taking his lead from the people at the Café tables. He was listening to the group as a whole and letting his music evolve just as a jazz musician would.
>
> There was a harmony that began to emerge, particularly after the second rotation. The tables began to synchronize, like being musicians themselves. It was like improvisational, conversational jazz. That was an interesting twist on the idea of the World Café. (David Marsing, Learning Conversation, April 1999)

Arian Ward, another member of the Intellectual Capital Pioneers, used a Café format to help people discover the shared meanings gleaned from disparate speakers and workshops at a major Knowledge Management conference. He uses the language of coherence to describe his experience in asking people to listen together in order to discover the underlying pattern that connects.

> The last event of the conference was a Knowledge Café. It gave people a chance to weave those different threads back into coherence in a Conference situation that seemed pretty fragmented. In most conferences *nothing* weaves those threads together. We discovered that underneath all

> the different speakers and ways of talking about knowledge was a key question. "How do you develop trust?" That's the key to knowledge management. People were so excited to get to that. It was the only time ever (and I've done a lot of speaking over a lot of years) that I not only received a standing ovation, but received two standing ovations. (Arian Ward, Learning Conversation, October 1999)

Are there specific approaches that support this type of coherence , resonance, and co-emergence in Café conversations?

Noticing themes, patterns, and questions

Café learning is intentionally designed to discover unity in diversity and to see the coherence in what may appear, at first glance, to be a chaotic and messy self-organizing exchange of ideas and perspectives. Designing for coherence in Café learning requires holding the intention, focusing attention, and weaving a tapestry of shared meaning through listening together and noticing themes, patterns, and deeper questions.

One dimension of designing for coherence involves focusing the intention of the conversation. Our experience is revealing that "questions that matter" or real life challenges in a given community serve to hold the intention of the Café, while not constraining its freedom of movement. To use a metaphor from chaos theory, they become the "strange attractors" (Gleick, 1987; Waldrop, 1992) around which the network of relationships, conversations, and diverse perspectives begins to cohere. Albie Merrill, of Boeing, after experiencing several Cafés, provided a wonderful image for this: "The Café is like a river. It has a source but it's flowing out to something larger than itself. There are rapids but also deep currents that carry it forward. The river has banks, but the

river's flow within those banks has a lot of freedom to go both deep and wide" (Albie Merrill, Reflections, Systems Thinking Conference seminar, 1999).

However, we are discovering that it is not enough to use powerful questions to focus collective *intention.* It's also important to focus collective *attention* on listening for themes, patterns, and deeper questions. In Café conversations, we are asking people to pay attention to the shared meanings that connect their unique and diverse contributions to the community of the whole. Verna Allee, discussing her Café experiences in the Far East, says that "the unique capacity of the Café to both expand the thinking as well as to converge around priorities in one process is what's interesting. Any brainstorm is going to produce copious amounts of stuff. That's easy to do. What's harder to do is develop a communal sense of what's there that's really important" (Verna Allee, Learning Conversation, November 2000).

Chuck Roe served as a key member of a team that used the World Café as a metaphor to design a systems thinking conference entitled *Discovering Connections*. He observed, "Our choice was around how to create the right structure and space so that we can notice all the interconnections that are out there. I believe that we're all interconnected anyway in ways we'll never, ever understand. The Café creates a structure that's familiar to people … that works with the interconnectedness piece and doesn't require a lot of explanation" (Chuck Roe, Learning Conversation, July 2000).

A conversation with a group of experienced Danish Café hosts echoed this observation:

> The Café just allows us to become conscious of the connections that already exist. Maybe the Café structure is already present in most human

> societies anyway … informal feeling, something we care about, remembering our connectedness, listening for wisdom … it taps into a deeper social life form. Maybe it's really simple, after all. When we feel the connectedness, we trust ourselves and trust that we can do it. So in the formal Café events, people are just tapping into that deeper reality in a more intentional way. (Danish Café hosts, Learning Conversation, October 1998)

What intentional practices have Café hosts discovered that help participants to notice the connections that already exist and to access deeper collective insight? In addition to the basic Café pattern of moving among tables and cross-pollinating ideas, Café hosts' discoveries about what enables "listening into the middle" are as diverse and varied as the Café hosts themselves.

For example, Toke and Monika Møller of Denmark describe an "Assumptions Café" regarding "leading as hosting" that they held in northern California with he Pioneers of Change, a global youth leadership group. Their approach to shared listening and noticing deeper themes was quite ingenious.

> We brought them into a cathedral of trees which were all in a circle. Toke formulated 13 assumptions about hosting. We put one on a piece of paper on a string at each tree. Toke walked to each tree and read the assumption aloud from his heart—what they had meant to him. Then he explained that "These trees are Café tables. Go to one of the trees where you want to explore and form a group around that tree. Then go out into the forest and have a Café dialogue about that assumption or whatever that assumption ignites for you. If there is no assumption you are interested in, make another one and gather a group with you."
>
> When people finished they came back into the circle of trees. Then Toke said, "Now we'll go back into the Café tables inside. Sit five at each table, but make sure you are in different assumption groups than in your forest Café conversations. Think of yourselves already as hosts who know what's important from your assumption but are looking for the essence of what leading as hosting is all about. Now share the essences of that or questions that arose from the different assumptions. See if there is a common pattern, something in the "in-between" that helps you find the

> essence of being a host." They talked together about the essence of hosting … the deeper assumptions underlying the whole thing.
>
> Then we took the weaving to a deeper level. We said, "Now, anyone who wants to practice the essence of being a host can do it right away." We organized a Knowledge Expedition, a marketplace of topics they were interested in. The self-organizing capacity of the group took over. So now they were practicing the deeper common meaning of hosting, but on questions related to the future of the Pioneers of Change. They began to also see the relationship of leading as hosting to the practical things they wanted to do in the future. (Toke and Monika Møller, Learning Conversation, October 1999)

David Drake describes another Café weaving approach he used in identifying and exploring deeper assumptions about training in organizations:

> We created a World Café around assumptions because our fundamental belief is that most people in the training profession may not have ever unpacked the assumptions they had around training. We wanted to get to the underlying beliefs that were really guiding their decisions about how they designed and delivered training.
>
> We created an imaginary scenario in which they were creating a briefing to a Senior VP related to a major change initiative. What was going to be the training component to prepare the management team and the staff to be ready for this big change? We asked each person to individually come up with the 5 core steps they would take. In the first Café round we asked them to put their heads together and develop about 10 agreed upon elements—large umbrella elements that might go into the change methodology.
>
> The host was responsible for shepherding the group's list until he had the chance to share it in the next round. When the new people arrived, their job was to look at what the first group had come up with and then unpack the assumptions that were behind the change strategy the host had shared.
>
> We did this for two more rounds. Sometimes the same host stayed and sometimes it was a new one but the only rule was that you had to take the assumptions to a deeper level. You could tweak the strategies but that wasn't the point. It was to unpack the assumptions to the next deeper level.
>
> It was pretty amazing how far down people went. They noticed their connections at a deeper level. At the end of all this, each group

> posted their final assumptions around the room and we had a gallery walk to review the work of the whole group. Then we asked them to say, how do you feel about this? What stands out for you now, as a collective?
>
> That was really powerful. Two predominant themes came out. One was a deep sadness about how marginal training often is to the change efforts in the organization. They surfaced these really powerful assumptions about how change happens and had to acknowledge how irrelevant traditional training often was to that work. But the second was a sense of great relief and phenomenal laughter about having permission for the first time in their careers to speak the unspeakable. Just a tremendous release. There was great liberation that evoked even more truth-telling. It created a more coherent community working on this together. It provided a sense of safety and accelerated the truth telling process. (David Drake, Learning Conversation, January 2000)

There are many other techniques for weaving and encouraging deeper collective listening. Finn Voldtofte of Denmark has perhaps done the most intentional experimentation and reflection on the use of weaving techniques to support groups in discovering and noticing themes, patterns, and collective insights. I've drawn from several in-depth conversations with Finn to provide a flavor for his range of approaches.

> I work from several key assumptions. The first is that there *is* a collective intelligence and that the weaving can help us access this deeper collective wisdom. The second is that the whole exists in every part, which we have learned from the idea of fractals in living systems. By weaving these various parts together, each of which contains the essence of the whole, we are becoming aware of and accessing the greater wholeness that already exists.
>
> I also operate from the assumption that you can access collective thinking via individual thinking, but it's hard to do that alone. I ask the question, how does the brain think? How does an anthill think? Both have many individual parts (i.e. neurons and ants) but they access a larger intelligence that is greater than any individual part. They do this by exchanging collectively the energy and information that the parts have access to. From this, a greater intelligence of the whole emerges.
>
> I do not say that this is how the world actually is, but these are my working assumptions. So the listening together and weaving builds on these ideas. The question is how do we weave the parts and the whole?

> In addition to the regular things that we know about—the hosts, moving tables and carrying ideas—we have other specific ways to begin weaving things together. One kind of weaving is the way you pose and sequence the questions during each pulsation of the Café so people can experience the building and connecting of their ideas over the life of the Café. I've found that a pulsation should not be more than about 2 or 2 1/2 hours before completing one phase of weaving and taking a break.
>
> So, what are some other examples? We've done many things. Of course, you can display the tablecloths and have people gather around those and see what they see. It also works well if people from different tables can give each other "tours" of their tablecloths. Then later the group can explore what's in the center of the table as a whole.
>
> If there are a lot of tables we may have each table turn in a large card with one key idea expressing the essence of what was important from the conversations they've been in. Sometimes we make a gallery tour from that, but sometimes we publish a newspaper right on the spot where people can "read the news" shortly after that session, so they can build on it later. We've even used T.V. to create news stories about what people have learned. Or sometimes we just have people pass the card with their key insight to a table near them. That's another kind of weaving.
>
> Other times, we might have people find a partner and just walk around the room talking about what they learned that day or what idea had the most life in the Café in terms of whatever the Café focus was. Then they link up with two others and then the four link with four. With each linking up you have to get more brief and more focused on the deeper things. Very quickly you can get a sense of what everybody is hearing, especially if everybody is listening for the collective wisdom in the larger group.
>
> Another way is to have each Café table create an exhibition. You tell people, "In one hour you will have the opening show for the exhibition. We'll serve drinks and everyone can come to the gallery and see the essence of what each Café table or group of tables created in terms of the essence of what's been explored, what people learned, possible actions, etc." And then people can go to the opening and take a tour of the gallery but they can add their insights and put actual comments on each other's contributions. Maybe it's something like growing a living picture of the whole. (Finn Voldtofte, Learning Conversations, July 1997 and October 1999)

Discovering useful weaving techniques that help people notice the deeper connections between the parts and the whole is a learning edge in this work. We are in

the early phases of our understanding about how to weave and display ideas and insights into coherent wholes at increasing levels of scale as well as weaving them in such a way that deeper wisdom is revealed. It is my belief that sophisticated weaving techniques represent only one path forward. We can also become increasingly skillful in using the simple power of Anne Dosher's idea of "gathered attention" to notice connections that already exist. We are discovering that utilizing shared space and visual language offers one doorway into this type of "gathered attention."

Utilizing shared space and visual language

Not long after the World Café was born, Sherrin Bennett, a close friend and colleague, showed me *Shared Minds*, a book by Michael Schrage, a visiting scholar at MIT's Media Lab (1990). In my earlier section on hospitable space, I included Schrage's insights on the importance of informal environments for collaborative learning. What has been most exciting for me, however, are his discoveries regarding the critical role of shared space and collaborative tools for visualizing conversation. They have enriched my emerging understanding of how and why Café conversations seem to support collaborative learning and knowledge creation in such replicable ways.

Schrage describes collaboration in terms strikingly similar to our own Café experiences:

> Collaboration is the process of shared creation: two or more individuals … interacting to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come to on their own. … Real innovation comes from this social matrix. … There's an alchemical, almost mystical quality to the best of these collaborations; a sense of creation that transcends individual talent and skill. (1990, pp. 40-41)

What is even more striking is Schrage's insistence that it is shared visual space—from paper napkins at restaurants to computer whiteboards and other visual meeting tools—that are critical enablers for collaborative thinking, new knowledge creation, and innovation. He points out that we need tools for thinking together that are "convivial"—that are easy to use and that foster social interaction and visual representation in new ways (Schrage, 1990, pp. 70-71). In commenting on why universities and R & D labs have blackboards lining all the walls, he says:

> People on the path of innovation and discovery need to sketch and they need to build. They need the insights that only a visual or tactile representation … can evoke. … The images, maps, and perceptions bouncing around in people's brains must be given a form that other people's images, maps, and perceptions can shape, alter, or otherwise add value to. … *It takes shared space to create shared understanding*. (italics in original 1990, p. 95 and p. 99)

Schrage then points to something that we've also noticed in our use of wall size graphic recording with strategic dialogue in corporate settings (Bennett & Brown, 1995). It has come to be just as central to knowledge creation and collaborative learning in Café settings. He suggests that shared visual space is critical because:

> Conversations are ephemeral … the words vanish the instant they are uttered. … the serial and ephemeral nature of conversation works against collaboration … In most conversations, the absence of memory means a useful phrase or expression can be distorted or lost … Shared space literally adds a new dimension to conversation … exploring ideas and arguments in the context of shared space can completely transform the conversation. (Schrage, 1990, p. 98)

Schrage adds the observation that:

> The shared space becomes a representation of the discussion. In some respects, it *is* the discussion because it captures the conversation and makes it visible and accessible to all … it transforms the traditional

> meeting … into an act of shared creation. (italics in original 1990, pp. 125-26)

Schrage is also concerned with intentional design for collaborative work. He says, "Designing for collaboration means that the emphasis shifts from networks of information distribution and transmission to networks of shared spaces" (1990, p. 148). He adds, "The multiple representations and the shared spaces serve, in effect, as a conceptual and technical playground for the collaborators" (1990, p. 156).

The image of networks of shared spaces clarified what I saw happening in Café conversations. Could the simple act of writing, drawing, and playing on the tablecloths at multiple Café tables be one example of the network of shared spaces that Schrage is talking about? Is what we are creating in Café conversations a collaborative network of same place/same time shared spaces where members can actually live and embody a common experience of "I See What You Mean" (Horn, 1998; Landau, 2000)? Could the simple process of connecting the evolving ideas from the network of tablecloths be a key factor in the kind of large-scale collaborative learning and co-intelligence that we often see in Café learning?

I was intrigued and wanted to learn more. I invited two of our long time Café colleagues, Jennifer Landau and Susan Kelly, to join the exploration. Both Jen and Susan are highly experienced interactive graphics specialists. Between them they have either hosted or supported approximately 75 Café conversations. I wanted to understand their lived experience of the relationship between shared space, visual language, and a group's capacity to listen together for collaborative insight. The conversation below is a synthesis of our musings together.

Juanita: What I'd like to focus on are your experiences with the use of graphics and shared visual space as a tool for supporting people in the common courtyard of Dialogue. I want us to explore the place where shared listening, collaborative learning, and innovation can happen, where people begin to see in new ways, and where the connections and the knowledge base expands.

Jennifer: One thing occurs to me. It's important to listen for the connections without assuming that you know what the connections are. That's a fine line, both for me as a recorder, and for the participants as well. You can listen for connections and capture ideas in multiple ways and at different levels of scale—drawing on a cocktail napkin, on a Café tablecloth, on a billboard size wall, and electronically as well. What's important is that you're all looking at the same thing together and making the connections.

Juanita: Let's think about listening into the middle from small to big. What helps shared listening to happen in the first place?

Susan: I've discovered something interesting. Color helps. Color actually connects people to a deeper reality. Black and white is abstract and linear is abstract. The world exists in color, not black and white, and it's not linear. So having color in the center of the table, whether it's the flowers or the pens, helps you come closer to your real world. And color is playful. It opens up a wider range of expression.

Jennifer: What I've seen is that having the colored pens in the center gives a "visual voice" to those present. The symbol of the pen in the center is that "my voice can be seen and heard if I write on the tablecloth."

Susan: Writing on the tablecloth is contributing your voice to the whole that's evolving in the center.

Juanita: Maybe one of the critical things about finding the magic in the middle has to do with the very act of people literally "noting" their voice by whatever notes, scribbles or pictures they're putting on the tablecloth.

Susan: That relates directly to the size of the group at the Café tables. Once you get past four or five at a table, they can't get in to the center as well. You might be doodling on your corner but you're not talking with other people from the ideas you've put down.

Jennifer: Physical proximity is important. Just getting your thoughts out on the tablecloth is a type of sensory, visual, and spatial input. We think in symbols and images. Seeing your own and others' scribbles and pictures acts as a trigger for cascading levels of consciousness and memory. It helps trigger and access things you're not even conscious that you know, and it brings them forward.

Susan: They are doing it for themselves as a group at this stage. Not someone else doing it for them on a big wall, even though that helps later on. I think, though, that we have a lot to learn about how to help people begin to express themselves visually and build on each other's ideas in the shared space. Maybe we need formats on the tablecloths to help them do this in a more organized way.

Jennifer: I think it may have to do with how the overall Café host sets it up and what they tell people about how to use the tablecloths as shared space for drawing pictures and symbols as well as building and connecting their ideas. Many people aren't used to drawing. If the guidance isn't clear, then you don't get the richness you might otherwise.

Susan: I agree. I think that it is important for us to keep learning new and better ways to help people use visual language.

Juanita: Despite all the messiness and the fact that we may not have given the best instructions to people about how to use the shared space, let's imagine that we're moving to the next level. Imagine people have done whatever connecting they can at their individual tables. I'm the host and you and the others are carrying your best understandings of these messy scribbles into four other conversations. Now what happens? Three new people have just arrived at my table. There are little diagrams in the center of the tablecloth, a few key words, and some bold colorful figure that somebody drew because they were excited about a new connection they saw. As the host, I'm sharing what I understand from listening to the conversation at my table and how it is reflected in the drawings on the tablecloth. Then what happens?

Susan: Everybody who comes to your table says, "It's amazing because that's some of what we were talking about over there, and over there, and over there, too."

Jennifer: I always love that.

Susan: They have their own take on it but the conversation seems to build well. You can build because there is some piece of it that you have talked about over there. And everybody else is taking other pieces of the whole puzzle and elaborating on them at the other tables. So it's not like you lose anything important overall, because all the tables are working with different areas of emphasis simultaneously. The host is critical though. The host holds the shared space in the middle and helps people see what the connections are so far. Do you want to know my little secret?

Jennifer: Sure!

Susan: I've discovered over the years that there are about 10 things people really

care about at a deeper level—family, community, values, trust. If people are encouraged and have the shared space to do it, they will always reach for that level, no matter what the content happens to be. That's my little secret.

Juanita: That's a great secret. Let's see what happens when you take it to the next level. Now let's get even bigger. You're in the third or fourth round. More tables, larger fractal of the whole. People are making more and more connections. They're discovering their collective insights about the topic and building their relationships as a community around Susan's "secret 10 themes" at the same time. From the lens of the graphic recorder, what happens energetically in the room? What do you see going on?

Susan. It gets metaphorically larger. You begin to see that you're part of a bigger thing. You see how it happens, how it works, how you deepen it by interchanging perspectives around the same topic.

Juanita: Does it get bigger energetically or in terms of conscious awareness?

Susan: Both ways.

Jennifer: It's like concentric rings. The metaphorical middle starts to expand and, paradoxically, at the same time, it gets more focused. I see people begin naming patterns and themes. They go to essential language. Things are described very simply in a few words because the topic has touched so many people. A few words can be like a verbal icon, triggering meaning for lots of people in the room so you don't have to go back to re-explain.

Susan: They really appreciate getting down to something important. They get excited because things are getting illuminated. That happens better when there is something they really care about and where they are interdependent in some way.

Juanita: What about people pressing their own agendas? Are there times when people have not contributed or not felt heard and then they work their own individual agendas in the larger group?

Jennifer: That happens less than in other groups. By the time you get to the mural size tablecloth or some other method through which the sense of the whole group is being reflected, most everyone has had multiple opportunities to be heard and other people have built on or carried their ideas into other conversations. So they're not pressing their own individual agendas. It's very rare.

Juanita: Now we're at stage of having a conversation of the whole. We're not having group report backs. That's a big difference between most groups and the Café approach. But we're asking people to link and connect their ideas at the level of the whole room. Sometimes I ask people to imagine a string over people's heads going from one table to another, weaving key ideas into a web of connections. Or sometimes I have them imagine that everyone in the room is listening and thinking together about what's most essential from the whole conversation. A system thinking together.

Jennifer: If innovation is going to happen in the whole group this is the place where it sparks—where it will pop if it's going to at all. There might have been little sparks earlier, but in terms of a public happening at the larger level, this is when it will occur. Sometimes an image or symbol that appeared at one of the tables just pops out into the whole group conversation and crystallizes the whole thing.

Susan: Then the group can acknowledge and bless their collective insight.

Juanita: That's a wonderful observation. Maybe through all this focused messiness and searching together, maybe what's happening through the images, the

symbols, and shared space of the tablecloths is that you actually get to new understandings and insights about the heart of things. Not just the heart in terms of intellectual content but also experiencing together the heart of what the community really cares about, like Susan referred to earlier.

Susan: It's about accessing group consciousness.

Jennifer: And it's about humanness. The magic is experiencing our own and other people's humanness around whatever the content is. By and large that's what the Café is about for me and what having shared space allows us to discover. (Jennifer Hammond-Landau and Susan Kelly, Learning Conversation, October 2000)

In addition to interactive graphics specialists, other Café hosts have commented on the importance of using visual language, symbols, and sound in accessing collective insight. For example, Lelani Henry, in her strategy work with the staff of a major philanthropic foundation, describes her experiments with multi-sensory ways of focusing on and weaving deeper understanding and insight.

> It was a two day retreat. The first day the group looked at the major events, developments, and trends that would affect the future as well as other key strategic questions. I started the second morning in a Café setting.
>
> I did a small relaxation activity and then I asked them to reflect quietly on the whole previous day. I asked them to think about what was bubbling up as being the essence of what was important. I told them not to use words but to draw on the tablecloth their image of what bubbled up.
>
> When they began to share I saw that they were not just connecting the drawings, they were beginning to add to each other's drawings. At one point as we were in the conversation about what was most important, a new image altogether came up and someone else said "Boing!" Even later, back in the organization, the sound of "Boing!" became the sound we used whenever a new insight or image about the future came up, as well as to signal when people were really cooking together.

> "Boinging" became the sound of the future. They discovered multi-sensory ways (both images and sound) to signal those new individual and collective insights right when they were happening. (Lelani Henry, Learning Conversation, May 1999)

One of my own most exciting experiences of seeing a group utilize shared space to discover its own collective knowledge and insight occurred at 10,000 ft. in the mountains high above Denver, Colorado. It was early October. I was sitting in a rustic lodge with high beamed ceilings and a huge fireplace. The air was thin and I was having trouble breathing. I grew up in the tropics at sea level. What was I doing here at this altitude?

I had come to be with the Advanced Technologies R & D group of a major global communications corporation. They had gathered in this remote place to spend three days in a knowledge exchange. The goal? One member put it this way, "None of us knows what all of us knows. We'll probably never know all of what *we* know. But, we need to know enough about what all of us knows to be able to represent the whole of us to any client we are working with in the system. This way, we can truly become technical partners together for the future of the company, rather than simply providing our own individual research on request." (Field Notes, August, 1997).

Wonderful idea, but how to do it? These were highly sophisticated scientists, engineers, and wizards in fiber optics as well other esoteric disciplines. I couldn't understand anything of their world. Could they ever understand each others' worlds? I wasn't sure. We decided to try Café learning to support their knowledge exchange. Perhaps once their design team understood Café principles, they could figure out the

sequence and logic that would help them be able to see and utilize their own collective knowledge base more strategically within the larger company.

The three days in that rustic lodge in the mountains of Colorado were a real turning point for my own learning about the possibilities of how Café work can enable collective intelligence to become aware of its Self at increasing levels of scale.

We did a number of Café cycles over the first two days. These included sessions in which individual Café tables represented different client groups. Scientists rotated among the tables, both contributing to and learning about client needs throughout the system. There were also sequences in which the R&D members exchanged information on the variety of projects they were actually working on. They explored how these projects connected to their understanding of individual and collective client needs as well as future opportunities.

At the beginning and end of each day we gathered in a large dialogue circle using the talking stone to listen together for what we were discovering. What was coming out in the middle? The talking stone was a beautiful blue glass heart that is given as a gift to employees who have made special contributions to the company.

On the last day, the scientists themselves created a huge matrix on the wall. It had boxes for client groups across the top. It had their various areas of R & D down the sides. The scientists began to fill in the matrix boxes with easel-size sheets summarizing the understandings they had gleaned from the previous days' Café conversations. They self-organized into groups to synthesize the information in each cell of the matrix. Members found ladders and scaffolding and began to construct the matrix together on the wall. I

could see new connections emerging and evolving as they built the cells of the matrix, helping each other fill in gaps and expand on existing ones. It was like watching a conscious, living organism evolve and grow. I could actually experience living knowledge at work.

I was deeply moved as I bore witness to the unfolding of their effort to make their own collective knowledge visible to themselves. This was the biggest and most intellectually sophisticated collective creation I had ever seen. Through their personal storytelling and multiple Café conversations, the members were able to co-evolve their understanding of their shared professional worlds. They had demonstrated this understanding by literally constructing it in shared visual space.

When they were finished, the group stood back from that huge wall. There was a long silence as they took in the whole picture and observed the wisdom and experience they had assembled. The energetic field in the room was palpable as people honored and appreciated the collective knowing they had discovered together.

One member quietly commented, "This is amazing. I've seen a lot more power and expertise in our Advanced Technologies group than I ever imagined. We *can* make a difference to the future." Another added, "I now have many more people I can call on for key pieces of the puzzle. I know how to leverage our collective resources out there with the clients I've been working with. We all have different areas of expertise but I can see how it all fits together. We really are a strategic asset to the company."

In that moment, I was reminded of a statement attributed to Lou Platt, the former CEO of Hewlett-Packard. Lou said that if "HP knew what HP knows, we'd be three times

as profitable." I smiled inside. Is it really about profit, or is profit simply a by-product of becoming collectively aware that the knowledge and wisdom needed to address even the most complex questions is already present, if we can just discover ways to reveal to ourselves our own co-intelligence?

Harvesting collective insight: Learning edges

This raises a set of questions that have been voiced by a number of Café hosts around the world about how to harvest, document, and display collective insight and intelligence. One question that is often raised is how can we create useful documentation of our collective learning? For example, should we create a report of what the group has done so they have it to use later in their work? When large mural graphic recording is used, the question is then, how can the graphic recorder best display the collective sense of the whole either during or after the event?

However, there may be deeper questions to explore. Our colleague, Finn Voldtofte, identifies the dilemma of how best to create and work with the group's "collective mindscreen." He asks, "What does a reporting out of the collective mindscreen actually look like?" For example, is it enough just to take a tour of the tablecloths? Or, is a more coherent and focused display, like that demonstrated in the Advanced Technologies story, essential? These questions go to the heart of our assumptions about how Café learning supports the evolution of co-intelligence. For example:

- What is the true purpose of a Café conversation? Is it simply the shared understandings and new insights that connect diverse people and ideas across

traditional boundaries as they gather attention on questions that matter? Or, is it important to anchor that understanding in shared images and other forms of documentation, both during the Café and after it?

- How is accessing co-intelligence enhanced by being intentional about supporting people's sense of the whole as it evolves from smaller fractals into the whole group's collective awareness? For example, we've found it's important that the group do its work together in the same room without the separate (and separating) breakouts that are common in many group processes. Do we lose something important by not also creating a visual "memory of the whole?"

- Schrage (1990)would argue that fostering collaborative knowledge communities requires that we make every attempt to weave, connect, notice, and display as focused a set of understandings and insights as possible in shared space, either in real time or asynchronously in virtual environments. People often need to literally see each others' ideas to be able to think together. If so, what are the variety of tools we might use for this? In what ways can new interactive and groupware technologies help?

- Does making our collective insights and deeper questions visible to ourselves, either in words or images, create an essential platform for enabling action at a later stage? Or, when the conversation is truly alive and we are effective at weaving diverse threads of perspective into a more coherent picture, will individual and/or coordinated action be a natural and spontaneous outcome? In fact, is this "knowing together" actually the essence of action and a valuable outcome in itself? Is the common separation of conversation and action an irrelevant distinction?

- What is the deeper relationship between collaborative conversation, collective insight, and committed action? What unique contribution can harvesting collective insight as well as displaying and documenting the "mind of the whole" play in this process?

These are some of the questions that are evolving for us as we begin to look at the variety of ways that Café conversations create both business and social value. They will be important to explore as our Café inquiry and practice continues to evolve.

Chapter 5: Ongoing Exploration—Café as Living Systems Metaphor

Welcome to the World Cafe

The World Café is a guiding image that enables us to notice and appreciate the connectedness of the webs of conversation and social learning by which we in human systems, as living systems:

- *Discover shared meaning.*
- *Access collective intelligence.*
- *Bring forth the future.*

Using the World Café as an organizing image helps us engage and focus these dynamic networks of conversation and social learning in the service of institutional and societal renewal.

Setting the Context

When I was a growing up, I loved to do numbers painting. You begin with a blank canvas where faintly numbered shapes in all sizes are lightly outlined on the surface. Using a palette of colors, you start with a single color and fill in all the shapes marked with a number one, then the twos in a different color, then the threes, and so on. Or you can fill in the numbers in any sequence you choose. Then the exciting part happens. Slowly, bit by bit, you see one image and another begin to emerge until the whole picture slowly becomes visible.

As I think back on it, my years as a community organizer had this same emergent quality. I actually held the image of numbers painting in my mind as I worked. I

wandered around the community or organization, talking with people in different parts of the system. I noticed which people and which ideas were like the "one's, two's and three's" of the painting process. I searched for how people were contributing their parts to the larger picture. Then I tried to help people see how they were connected to the different parts of the whole. Just as my earlier community organizing had the feel of my childhood painting experiences, so did my discovery process regarding the World Café. In all three, I have searched for ways to discover and enhance the links that connect the seemingly disparate parts into the greater whole.

While the following reflections on the World Café as metaphor for larger-scale processes of change and renewal are presented in my personal voice, they are the product of an evolving network of conversations. As part of my global travels, I've spent time in conversation with members of our World Café community of inquiry and practice, as well as with colleagues doing work in related fields. In addition to learning conversations with Café hosts, my ongoing conceptual exploration of the World Café with close colleagues including Finn Voldtofte of Denmark, Nancy Margulies, David Isaacs, Jennifer Landau, and Susan Kelly has been critical to my understanding. In addition, Dr. Anne Dosher's fifty years of experience with social networks and large-scale community development has made an invaluable contribution to my thinking.

In my own practice, I have continued to experiment with different variations of Café conversations for knowledge sharing and strategic innovation. I have immersed myself in the lived experience of embodied practice. I've searched for the emerging picture of the whole and for the larger possibilities inherent in this practice.

However, as I continued my practice, I found that designing effective Café learning events alone was not fully satisfying. It did not satiate my deeper intellectual curiosity about the ways in which Café learning might contribute to our understanding of systemic change and institutional renewal. I had more questions than answers. Does the World Café embody an elegant metaphor for a naturally occurring core process of social co-evolution and large-scale change? If so, what are the action implications of focusing attention on the living systems images embodied in the metaphor of the World Café?

Although I've been an activist and a practitioner for my entire adult life, I'm also an introvert. I love to read. As a child, I never played with dolls like the other little girls. I preferred to take *Life* magazines down from the shelf and imagine myself in far away places. I imagined that I was in conversation with the authors. I pretended that we were talking and visiting together. I pretended that I could read until I actually could make sense of the words. Then I would stay up at night reading until the wee hours, hiding under the covers with a flashlight so my mother wouldn't see the light under the door and discover I was still awake.

I still love to read, although I'm no longer concerned about the light shining under the bedroom door. My inner conversation with authors whose works I find illuminating continues to be an important part of my life. In relation to the World Café, my encounters with key ideas and people across disciplines has contributed pieces to the larger picture. I've slowly begun to see the ways that the World Café, as a creative organizing image, can stimulate insight, innovation, and action in the service of large-scale change.

In their provocative article *Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life*, Cooperrider and Srivastva emphasize that with regard to the social sciences:

> We need a bold shift in attention whereby theoretical accounts are no longer judged in terms of their predictive capacity, but instead are judged in terms of their generative capacity—their ability to foster dialogue about that which is taken for granted and their capacity for generating fresh alternatives for social action. (1987, p. 137)

I am hopeful that the World Café, as one example of integrated praxis, can contribute to what David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva of Case Western Reserve University call "catalytic theorizing" (1987, p. 151). In contrast to the logical empiricist view, they encourage social scientists to step into a transformed role by offering generative theories "that can expand the realm of what is conventionally understood as possible" (Cooperrider, 1987, p. 140).

Cooperrider and Srivastva note that this personally engaged stance "invites, encourages, and requires that students of social life rigorously exercise their theoretical imagination in the service of their vision of the good" (1987, p. 10). They encourage us as social scientists to be willing to engage in "speculative reason" (1987, p. 159) in the service of new possibilities for social innovation. They ask us to honor and appreciate what they describe as the ordinary magic and mystery of collective life. They invite us to stand in our own deepest individual and collective knowing as contributors to the social construction of our common future.

Cooperrider and Srivastva describe the way that science, including the social science, often proceeds by offering new "root metaphors" which enable us to "open our eyes and sensitize us to…realities that otherwise might go unnoticed"(1987, p. 157).

They seem to echo the observations of Gareth Morgan, author of the pioneering work, *Images of Organization*. Morgan points out that:

> In using metaphor to understand organization we are not required to memorize complex theories or long lists of abstract concepts. We are simply encouraged to learn how to think about situations from different standpoints. We are invited to do what we do naturally, but to do so more consciously and broadly…we can follow the implications of a powerful image to it's logical conclusion. (1986, p. 336)

At the same time, exercising our theoretical imagination as social scientists, including the introduction of a new "root metaphor" such as the World Café, acknowledges that our "knowing" is only one possible vantage point from which to see and act (Cooperrider, 1987, p. 165). I recognize that I am drawing on insights from the new sciences and other emerging traditions of inquiry such as social constructionism that are the subject of lively debate within their own communities of inquiry and practice. These debates have been articulated by a number of authors whose traditions I am bringing into this conversation (Anderson, 1997; Capra, 1996; Gergen, 1994a; Gergen, 1994b; Lambert et al., 1995; Waldrop, 1992; Wheatley, 1992; Zohar & Marshall, 1994).

I have purposely chosen to focus on those key ideas that have most stimulated my own thinking as I weave together insights from various parts of my exploratory journey. At times these insights reflect only a small part of a scientist's or scholar/practitioner's overall conceptual framework. However, it may have been just this small part that made a needed contribution to my exploration of the World Café and its underlying dynamics in terms of large-scale change. It is not these insights alone that interest me. Similar to the iterations of a Café conversation, it is where these insights intersect that I believe holds real promise.

My reflections are necessarily tentative and partial. They are purposely suggestive rather than exhaustive. They intentionally do not illuminate the full range of discourse or reflect a complete literature review within each area of inquiry I discuss here. In one of his wonderful poems, the Spanish poet Antonio Machado reminds us that "we make the road by walking on it." I hope that by re-tracing the road I have been walking in regards to the World Café, I can in some small way illuminate this path and contribute to our joint understanding of the power of conversation as a generative force for large-scale renewal and co-evolution in human systems.

I invite you to join me on this path of generative theorizing about the World Café. I share my personal "aha's" and the key turning points along the way. I weave multiple threads of contribution and perspective as I return home from my learning expeditions and collaborative inquiries over these last years. I invite you to become an active part of the conversation as we now move the exploration beyond Café learning as a methodology toward seeing the World Café as a metaphor for larger processes of institutional and societal renewal. Join me as a co-explorer while I share my own, partial, interpretations. Add your perspectives to the larger picture we are creating together.

Discovering Conversation as a Core Process

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

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

What truly matters in our lives is measured through conversation.

—Peter Block (1993, p. 209)

My original awareness of conversation as a generative force for large-scale systems change 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 Mike Pfeil and Mark Becker, 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?

Mike and Mark asked me a lot of questions. What are the methods community organizers use? What's different about building a community versus 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 Mike and Mark 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 Mike and Mark 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 nots!"

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 the 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 Mike and Mark. 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 Mike Pfeil 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. (Mike Pfeil, 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 positives 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 livings 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 have described that portion of my conceptual journey in Chapter III, *Discovering my Stance vs. Taking My Stand.* 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 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 four Cafe 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. You will recall that in our early explorations with the MIT Dialogue Project, David Bohm 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 creative futures. 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 autopoeisis 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 autopoeisis

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 living 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?

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 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. Along with Maturana,, he also suggests that networks of conversation are the core process for entering these worlds 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 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 understandings at a larger scale in our work with organizations and communities?

The plot thickened as I and other world Café colleagues continued to fill in other aspects of the painting.

Energizing Social Fields

We're all connected and operate through living fields of thought and perception.

—David Bohm as cited in Jaworski (1996, p. 149)

Joe Jaworski, a close friend and colleague, had written a book regarding his leadership journey as the Founder of the American Leadership Forum and Director of Scenario Planning for Shell Oil (Jaworski, 1996). Joe had also co-authored a paper with Peter Senge and Kazimierz Gozdz, entitled "Setting the Field: Creating the Conditions for Profound Institutional Change" (Jaworski, Gozdz, & Senge, 1998). Joe's thinking about fields stemmed from a pivotal conversation with David Bohm in early 1980, just before Joe was to create the American Leadership Forum. In that conversation, Bohm spoke of "forces of unseen connection" that are influenced by our intention and ways of being. This led Joe to explore the possibility that:

> Behavior throughout large organizations is influenced by subtle fields of thought and emotion, and that these fields are susceptible to change—indeed they are continually unfolding. We believe the awareness of such emerging fields lies at the heart of all true leadership. (Jaworski et al., 1998, p. 2)

Similar to our role in co-hosting the Intellectual Capital pioneers, David Isaacs and I collaborated with Peter Senge and Joe Jaworski to convene a study group to explore collective fields. The group included, among others, Etienne Wenger (Wenger, 1996; Wenger, 1998), Senior Research Scientist at the Institute for Research on Learning who had done the pioneering work on social learning and communities of practice; Otto

Scharmer of the MIT Sloan School and Research Director for the Center for Generative Leadership (Scharmer, 1998; Scharmer, 2000); Fritjof Capra, physicist and author of *The Web of Life* (Capra, 1982; Capra, 1991; Capra, 1996); and Dennis Sandow, a researcher on social networks from the University of Oregon. It was an interesting and diverse group.

While all the eddies of this inquiry cannot be explored here, several key ideas from our conversations helped deepen my emerging understanding of World Café dynamics. We first defined our experiences of fields as embodying the following characteristics:

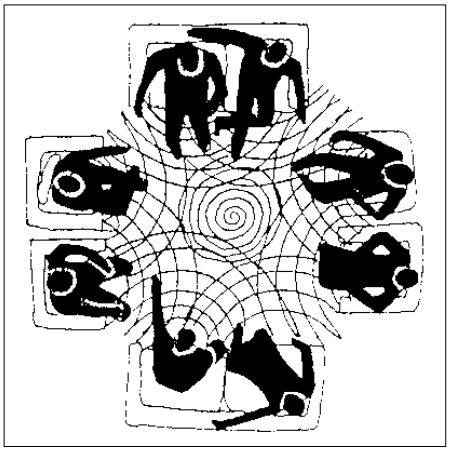
- You can "feel" the energy. It's palpable, both within and around you.
- There's a sense of coherence and ease, even with difficult tasks.
- The experience of time slows down.
- There is a sense of connection to something larger than self—unity and/or community.
- Distributed leadership seems to emerge naturally.
- A type of individual and collective creativity and wisdom arises.
- Meaningful coincidences and synchronicities seem to show up.

Not all of these characteristics had been described by Café hosts, but there was enough similarity to pique my interest regarding how this thread of inquiry might connect to our growing understanding of the dynamics of the World Café learning.

As a physicist, Fritjof Capra was very rigorous in encouraging us not to consider fields in the way that the physical sciences defines them. Rather, he encouraged us to use

the concept of *fields of coherence* as a metaphor for the experiences of resonance that members experienced in traditional dialogue settings, in our Café conversations, and in other types of collective endeavor, including dance, music, and sports. He described these collective endeavors as demonstrating what he called *social coherence or social fields,* which might be experienced at increasing levels of scale.

Even though social coherence might not fulfill the formal scientific definition of a field, such as a magnetic field, Fritjof did recognize that experiences of this type of social coherence, group synergy, or collective consciousness had been described by many observers (Elgin, 1993; Elgin, 1997; Hubbard, 1998; Kenny, 1992; Kenny, 1996; Radin, 1997; Sheldrake, 1981; Wilber, 1981). He felt this phenomenon need not necessarily be the product of independent existing fields like those in the physical sciences nor even the result of accessing a larger implicate order as Bohm hypothesized. It might as easily be explained by the network dynamics of emergence and co-evolution in social systems where energetic shifts and leaps of collective insight occur through the connections in the "spaces in-between" the participants.



Drawing by Sherrin Bennett

Figure 6: Fields of social coherence

The Fields Inquiry also explored the role of individual and collective *intention* in attracting a field of social coherence. Etienne Wenger shared his perspective on this in an evocative reflection on one of our meetings. Wenger's contribution recalled Varela's earlier focus on the importance of both intention and attention as "attractors."

> Addressing issues of intention at a very deep, yet intimately social level allows a kind of alignment based on a very personal, and thus distributed, but also a shared experience of the common direction that the field has produced. I remember thinking that such a social space creates the foundation for a new type of *distributed coherence*. In this sense, the generation of a field is the basis for how we unite the personal and the collective in a productive way. (Letter to Fields Inquiry group, Nov. 1998)

Etienne focused on the powerful relationship between intention, intimate authenticity, and the evolution of distributed coherence in collective contexts. His insights were another turning point. As I later reviewed the conversations with Café hosts, I noticed the consistent emphasis on the relationship between the intimacy and authenticity of the conversations in tables of four or five members and the way in which those conversations, as fractals of the whole, evolved through multiple iterations into what Wenger called distributed coherence at larger levels of scale.

Jennifer Landau sees this dynamic working from her dozens of experiences as an interactive graphics specialist in Café settings by noting that :

> When the first round happens it's intimate, it's this small intimate circle, represented by the table being only three feet across. As they move, people realize that others are talking about the same thing or at least different aspects of the same thing. It's like concentric rings. The middle gets bigger and bigger." (Jennifer Landau, Learning Conversation, October 2000).

Carlos Mota, of Mexico, shares how the meanings within a specific cultural context can nurture this dynamic relationship between intimacy and scale.

> When you sit at a small Café table there is an atmosphere of intimacy. When you invite someone in Mexico to join you for a "cafecito" (a small cup of coffee), it means you want to have a more intimate and real conversation. Then the cross-pollinization creates a surprise at what you've created together as a whole. It's not just the small intimate conversations added together. It becomes a larger whole. (Carlos Mota, Felipe Herszenborn, Learning Conversation, November 1998)

Amy White first experienced the Café in a group of 1,000 at the national Systems Thinking conference. She then participated in a Café learning at a global strategy conference for a multi-national consumer products company. The goal there was to engender a larger network of strategic conversations in local regions throughout the world. When I asked Amy to share her perspective about what allowed the Café experience to be successful, she pointed to the way that connecting informal small group conversations can co-evolve into coherent patterns of meaning at a larger scale.

> The Café allowed the intimacy of 1 person to 4, not 1 to 180. Along with the focusing question, in that intimate setting the conversation percolates out and moves and has a special energy. In my experience over many years in all kinds of formats, you don't get that level of intimacy along with that sense of connectedness with people on a large scale as fast I've seen with the Café. It doesn't require fully formed thoughts, but there's a freedom to let ideas grow and you begin to see patterns and themes that wouldn't be so obvious if it hadn't happened in this organic way.(Amy White, Learning Conversation, February 2000)

At a Café, the social field seems to be energized by the way in which questions focus intention in an informal, intimate setting where Café tables are "fractals of the whole." When this intimate, small group dialogue *is combined with* the larger

decentralized network of iterating conversations, then a distributed coherence at increasing levels of scale is seen.

I wondered, what if leaders could intentionally foster this type of distributed coherence at an organizational or societal level? What would it mean for strategy evolution and the creation of positive futures?

Co-Evolving Positive Futures

> *The emergence of strategy depends not only on a diversity of voices, but on the connections between those voices as well. Insight emerges when previously compartmentalized knowledge sets are juxtaposed in new ways.*
> *(Hamel, 1997b, p. 9)*

During my first 25 years as an organizational strategist, I'd always wondered about the images that many business leaders associate with strategy. Images of battlefields and military commanders mobilizing the troops. Images of tactical advantage and beating the competition. Images of analytical rigor, spreadsheets, hard data, planning and control. Images of elegant three-ring binders sitting on mahogany shelves. As I worked with organizations, I always wondered "what's wrong with this picture?" Yet the strategy orthodoxy was so prevalent that I found myself nodding assent as I, too, participated in the annual corporate rain dance while at the same time disliking even the term "strategy." I was beginning to believe that language creates reality, and I didn't like the realities that the word strategy seemed to create.

Then a powerful book took the strategy field by storm. I discovered it just after our first Café experience. Henry Mintzberg, a pioneering management theorist and

researcher, published a rather damning overview of the fundamental fallacies of contemporary strategic planning. In his book, *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning* (1994b), as well as in a widely read summary of his research published in the *Harvard Business Review* (1994a), Mintzberg reported his extensive research on formal planning models as well as how strategy formation *actually* occurs in organizations. He concluded that, "We have no evidence that any of the strategic planning systems—no matter how elaborate, or how famous—succeeded in capturing (let alone improving on) the messy informal processes by which strategies really do get developed" (1994a, p. 297).

What was more compelling in terms of our Café experiences as a metaphor for a larger-scale systemic process were his images of strategy formation as an emergent, iterative, and interactive social process of collective cognition. He saw strategy emergence being sourced by ongoing conversations which support the recognition of patterns from bits and pieces of apparently disparate data. Mintzberg pointed out that strategy is a joint endeavor. He added that "learning, in the form of fits and starts as well as discoveries based on serendipitous events and the recognition of unexpected patterns, plays a key role, if not *the* key role, in the development of all strategies that are novel" (1994a, p. 227).

Mintzberg concluded that the essence of strategy making in real life situations calls for "groping, interactive processes with an emphasis on learning and synthesis" (1994a, p. 319). And in an offhand comment that reminded me of how Café conversations seemed to access a type of subtle intelligence, Mintzberg added that "there exists a form of knowing deeper than analysis" (1994a, p. 267). He described this as a

type of wisdom based on intuitive knowing, a type of knowing that enables creative synthesis to occur, not in steps, but as emerging holistic images of possibility.

Mintzberg also called for a new role for planners. His descriptions reminded me of the role of Café hosts. He admonished planners to serve as catalysts, balancing design and emergence by creating interactive contexts for people of diverse perspectives to question conventional wisdom while searching for new synthesis and creative insights. In creating these designed opportunities, he encouraged planners to "pose the right questions rather than to find the right answers" (1994a, p. 107).

After encountering Mintzberg's thinking, I actually began to like the word strategy. I had been an English/Spanish translator during the farm worker years. As a translator, I could see the generative possibilities in re-framing the meaning of strategy in a new, more living systems context. I remembered a chapter in a book on change called "The Gentle Art of Re-Framing." Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues point out that re-framing allows us to:

> Change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the "facts " of the same concrete situation equally well or even better, and thereby changes its entire meaning….Re-framing operates on the level of *meta*reality. (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974, p. 95 and p. 97)

Mintzberg's reflections on strategy enabled me to reframe the meaning of strategy. I know that nature doesn't actually "plan" in the way humans do who have the capacity for conscious intent. However, I do operate from the assumption that all living systems possess a deep evolutionary intelligence, and it is from that intelligence that the future of any living system evolves. Based on my own emerging theory-in-use as I

worked as an organizational strategist with clients, I began to develop the following logic regarding the deeper ecology of what I came to call "strategy evolution." It was my way of creating a language that might serve as a bridge between living systems insights, conversation as a core process, and the evolution of life-affirming futures.

STRATEGY EVOLUTION

- Strategy in organizations has one primary purpose-the creation of desired futures for those who engage in it.
- Strategy evolution is actually the ongoing process of mutual learning and shared meaning that enables us to engage the collective intelligence of the whole organization to create the conditions from which desired futures may arise.
- Networks of conversation are a core process for mutual learning and shared meaning in human systems as living systems. Conversations are a key process by which *information* is shared, *relationships* are strengthened, and *identity* is sustained (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996)
- Thus, it may be useful to think strategically of the network of both formal and informal conversations in an organization as a systemic phenomenon at the heart of strategy evolution. These may be face-to-face, but they may occur in many other forms as well, including those supported by technology infrastructures.
- The disciplined use of strategic questions helps to focus the learning in this ongoing network of conversations in ways that can create sustainable value for the future.

Over the next few years, I began to see others who built on and deepened Mintzberg's ideas about emergent strategy and the informal conversational processes that lie at the heart of strategy evolution. It was fascinating to see how Peter Schwartz (1996) and Kees Van der Heijden (1996), pioneers in scenario planning at Shell Oil, also placed

a central emphasis on informal webs of conversation as being at the heart of strategy. Schwartz called them the "invisible strategy sessions of the elevator ride, the lunch room, or the car pool" (1996, p. 222). Van der Heijden took Schwartz's thinking a step further by pointing out that organizations are complex adaptive systems of "individuals linked together through a network of interconnections, largely based on conversation" (1996, p. 290). He saw scenario planning as a designed method that can help focus "the general ad hoc conversation about strategy that takes places in the corridors and canteens among groups of cognitively networked people" (1996, p. 273). I wondered, does the World Café serve as an easily visible example of this process of ad hoc conversations among cognitively networked people?

Not long after I was introduced to Van der Heijden's thinking, two dear friends, Peter and Trudi Johnson-Lenz, specialists in collaborative technologies, came to visit. Peter and Trudi had originally coined the term, "groupware" and were interested in our work with conversation as a core business process. They brought me an unpublished article that they thought I'd enjoy since I had been so involved in strategy work over the years. Written by another strategy guru, Gary Hamel, it was entitled "The Search for Strategy" (1997b) and was later published in abridged form in *Fortune* Magazine (1997a). Hamel collaborated for a number of years at the University of Michigan with C.K. Prahalad, one of the most influential strategy researchers in the world (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994).

When I sat down to review Hamel's material, I could not believe what I was reading. I actually got goose bumps! He described living systems principles similar to

those we had been discovering for evolving collective intelligence in our Café conversations. Just as we discovered in "designing for coherence" in Café settings, he pointed out that in large-scale strategy evolution "it's not that there is *no* crafting, *no* design, only that it works at the level of preconditions and broad parameters" (1997b, p. 7). He talked about the importance of developing simple operating principles or rules for strategy emergence.

In describing large-scale strategy innovation processes, he could have been discussing the World Café. Hamel pointed out that "strategizing depends on creating a rich and complex web of conversations that cut across previously isolated pockets of knowledge and creates new and unexpected combinations of insight" (1997b, p. 9). When enough voices and perspectives are heard in webs of conversation throughout the organization around things people care about, "there is an inflection point where the quest for divergence is transformed into a quest for convergence, and a new collective point of view emerges … strategy making doesn't have to be tightly corralled, people will search out order" (1997b, p. 11).

Hamel ended his discussion by reflecting on the living systems principles that he believed underlie a new theory of large-scale strategy innovation. He shared his personal belief that " our most valuable insights will come from far beyond the traditional strategy disciplines … at the juncture of emergence, self-organization, cognition, and learning" (1997b, p. 12).

I put down the article and sat there speechless. Reading Hamel's reflections reminded me of flying to Scandinavia as I re-read the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian

educator who used dialogic inquiry for popular education. In reading Gary Hamel's thinking about the importance of developing a deeper theory of strategy innovation, I had found another kindred perspective who spoke with the authority of his position as a professor at the London Business School. He was giving voice to things that I knew from my own lived experience, but had not yet fully articulated.

Hamel seemed to share our own theory-in-use about the ways in which the World Café as a metaphor embodies living systems principles for co-evolving creative futures. He was describing what I would call the "Café pattern" as being the core of strategy innovation. We had earlier called the World Café a mirror of nature's strategic planning process. Perhaps, with the guiding image of the World Café, we had discovered a simple way to help people consciously experience and understand what Maturana had described as "bringing forth a world" through the networks of conversation in which we participate. It was what Hamel also was describing as a core process for strategy innovation.

Café as Guiding Image

> *It's never enough to just tell people about some new insight. Rather you have to get them to experience it in a way that evokes its power and possibility. Instead of pouring knowledge into people's heads, you need to help them grind a new set of glasses so they can see the world in a new way.*
>
> *—John Seely Brown (1997, p. 216)*

> *In learning to use metaphor to create new insights, we enrich our capacities for generating innovative ways of dealing with new challenges and of forging new evolutionary patterns.*
>
> *—Gareth Morgan (1997, p. 377)*

As John Seely Brown, chief scientist at Xerox, so eloquently pointed out, it's never enough to simply tell people about a new image of organizational life, even if it's an image that helps people to remember what they already know or to notice what they are already doing naturally. It's more important to provide an experience that both evokes the power inherent in the new image as well as helps them grind a new pair of lenses so they can see in a new way.

Over the last several years, we have been experimenting with ways to help make the bridge from the lived experience of Café learning as a *methodology* to the larger awareness of the World Café as a *metaphor* or guiding image for larger systemic processes. We're exploring approaches for helping people move into a more conscious awareness of the strategic implications of adopting the World Café as an organizing image.

We believe shifting to this new lens can have a significant impact on the practical ways we participate in our organizations and communities. It also can have important implications for leadership and for the management of knowledge based organizations in the new economy. Based on our ongoing conversations with Café practitioners and our close circle of colleagues, we have developed a set of simple visual images to help people begin to see with this new lens. Even though these visuals are still evolving and are still in rough form, I'd like to include them here to help in describing our own theories in use regarding the World Café.

In developing these graphic images, we needed to identify the core assumptions underlying the World Café as a metaphor for a larger systemic process of institutional

change and renewal. We've framed these operating assumptions as *What If* questions rather than as assertions in order to keep the conversation open and invite new insights.

WHAT IF—

- The future is born in webs of human conversation?
- Compelling questions attract and encourage collective learning?
- Networks are the underlying pattern of living systems?
- Human systems—organizations, families, communities—are living systems?
- Intelligence emerges as the system connects to itself in diverse and creative ways?
- The wisdom and resources we need are already present?

A PRESENTATION AT THE STRATEGY CAFÉ

I'd like to ask you, the reader, to imagine that you've just participated in a Strategy Café with key leaders from your organization. You've explored a set of core questions that are important to the future of the situation under consideration. As a Café participant, you are only aware of the useful collective insights and action possibilities your group has developed in the fun and innovative Café modality. In the meantime, as the Café host, I have been intentionally focusing on supporting your collective learning through implementing the four key Café operating principles we've explored in this dissertation:

- Creating hospitable space.
- Exploring questions that matter.
- Connecting diverse people and ideas.
- Listening together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions.

I'm about to take a few minutes with you to reflect on the Strategy Café experience and to explore the larger implications of your Café learning. I'll be sharing a few overhead slides and exploring their relevance.

> Now, I'd love us to take a moment to put on a new pair of glasses. Are you willing to play with some interesting ideas? *(The group gives an okay and I put up the following slide.)*

Artist unknown

Figure 7: Old woman/young woman

> (*A few people begin to smile and I say)* Now, if you've seen this before, don't give away the secret!

What do you see in this picture? (*Several call out, "An old woman.")* How many see an elderly woman? *(About 40% of the group raises a hand.*)

And, how many see something else? (*Others call out, "A young woman."*) How many see a young woman? *(Most of the others raise a hand.)*

Now, let me ask you a question. Imagine you are walking on the street next to the elderly woman. Would you notice different things than if you happened see the young woman walking next to you? If the occasion arose, might you then act differently according to which woman you saw? *(The room breaks out in laughter).*

Well, that difference is what we want to talk about here—how what we see affects our action choices, both in life and as leaders of organizations. I believe that when we look at organizations, we can see alternative pictures just as we did with the picture of the old woman/young woman.

You've been participating here in a Strategy Café to do strategic thinking about the future. We've experienced on a smaller scale a set of principles that may be as important as any of the insights we've come to in our work so far. Can I share a little bit of action theory with you? It's been said that there's nothing as practical as a good theory! (*Some members seem a bit hesitant, but they agree to go forward.)*

I want to show you a fascinating quote by Noel Tichy of Columbia University who has done a lot of research on leadership and strategy. (*I put up the following slide.)*

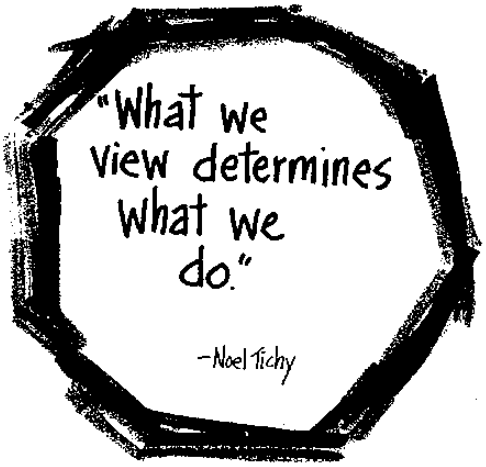
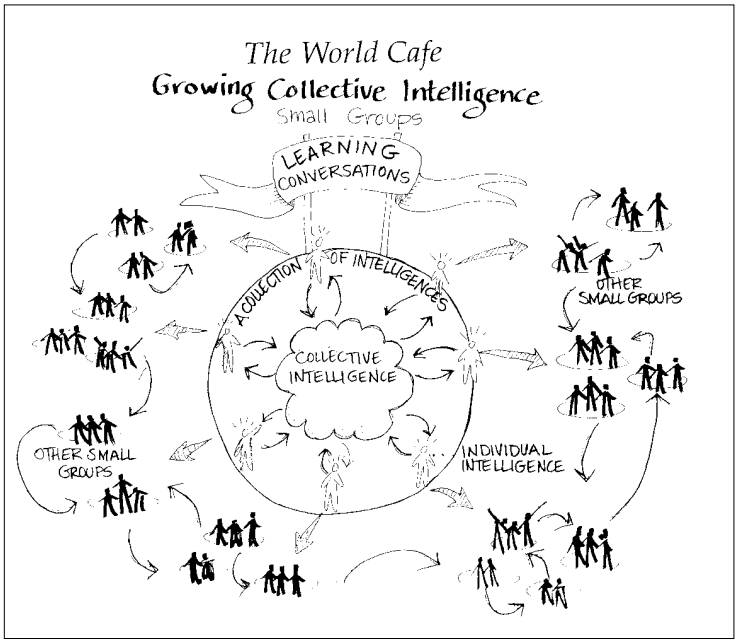


Figure 8: "What we view determines what we do"

What Noel and other researchers like Gareth Morgan who wrote a whole book called *Images of Organization* are saying is that there are actually core images or metaphors that we live by. If, for example, we see the organization as a machine, the predominant image for the last 200 years, then we make the strategic choice to do things like "drive change" or "fix what's broken" or "get the mechanisms in gear." Another favorite image is seeing the organization as a battleground. With this image in mind, we try to "mobilize the troops," or "attack the opposing forces." Any image we hold prompts us to highlight certain aspects of a situation and limit others. And any image that we hold internally can affect the action choices we make externally.

None of this is bad. It's just that in the new economy the core image of an organization as a machine, or a battlefield, or a sports arena may limit our range of strategic choices. For example, seeing the organization as a machine doesn't help us understand the ways to access the collective knowledge and organizational intelligence we need to create sustainable value in an increasingly networked world. Since knowledge and intelligence don't operate according to machine principles, it's not as useful an image today as perhaps it once was.

So, I'd like to offer an alternative image—the World Café. This image provides a simple way to include living systems principles in the ways we think and act in our organizations. I think this new image has important implications for leadership in a knowledge based economy. Are you ready? (*People nod and I put up the following slide.)*



Drawing by Susan Kelly

Figure 9:The World Café—Growing collective intelligence

Let's build from the ground up. What we're looking at here is basically what happened in our Strategy Café. An individual Strategy Café is one example of the World Café in action. We came in as a collection of individual intelligences. Individual minds. Then we began to join our ideas together in small groups. By then intentionally going out and cross-pollinating and carrying our best thinking to other groups, we began to evolve our collective understanding, insight, and intelligence at a larger scale.

According to living systems principles, collective intelligence emerges as the system connects to itself in a variety of diverse and creative ways. That is, the intelligence of the system as a whole emerges IF there is a common focus of attention like we had when we used the strategic questions you developed earlier. And the intelligence of the whole organization emerges IF there are also ways to weave together the discoveries across the system so that people can actually see the patterns or themes that are emerging collectively. Even though the Café might have appeared a little messy and chaotic in the beginning, it seems that we've gotten a better overall set of strategic insights, right? (*People nod.)*

Now, consider about how most of the real learning and knowledge sharing happens in your own organization.

The Institute for Research on Learning (IRL), sponsored by Xerox, did pioneering research on how learning *really* occurs in organizations. Do you know what they found out? It's really quite amazing. *(People are leaning forward, waiting.)*

The IRL research showed that many of our formal training and business process re-design efforts may be irrelevant or ineffective in creating knowledge or streamlining organizations.

Instead, the IRL folks discovered that the most powerful organizational learning and knowledge sharing is actually happening through informal webs of conversation and social learning in communities of practice, just like we are doing here. It's like the whole organization is one big Café with people moving from table to table within the whole organization and also moving outside, carrying the organization's ideas to "tables" with customers, suppliers and other stakeholders. And, it's not just happening face to face; it's happening via computer, fax, phone, and memos that fly all over the organization. The Internet as well as company intranets are just accelerating this whole process. That's how people are both learning their jobs and learning their way into very important strategic insights.

It's not only in the field of organizational learning that we're seeing these discoveries. Henry Mintzberg, the strategy guru whom some of you may have

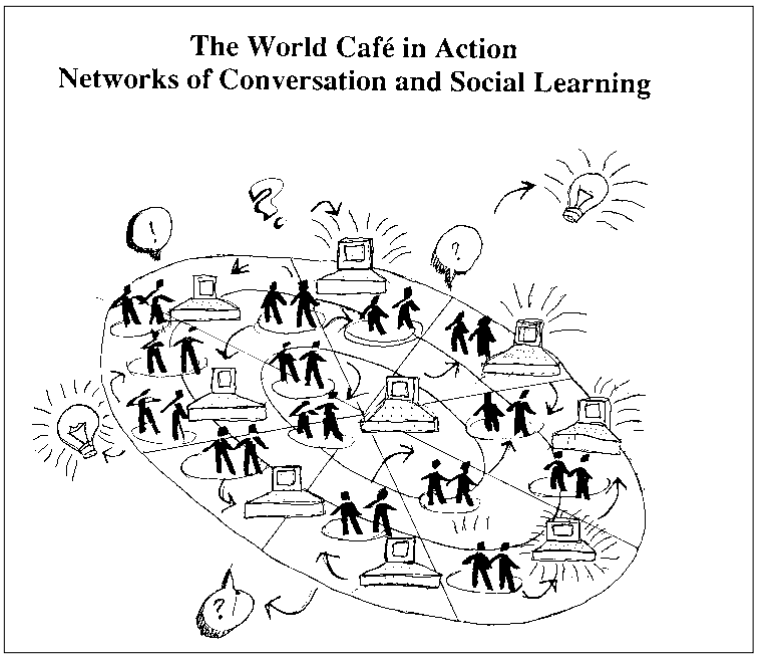
read about, reviewed corporate strategy over the last 30 years. He found out how real life strategy development actually works. (*I put up the next slide.)*

> STRATEGY EVOLUTION
>
> We have no evidence that any of the strategic planning systems—no matter how elaborate, or how famous— succeeded in capturing (let alone improving on) the messy informal processes by which strategies really do get developed. (Mintzberg, 1994a)

Figure 10: Strategy evolution

And Mintzberg as well as Gary Hamel from the London Business School and the guys from the Global Business Network who invented scenario planning are all pointing to the fact that it's these webs of informal conversations that bring diverse perspectives into the process and that hold a real key to strategy innovation.

We're finding that these networks of conversation may be as much a core business process as marketing, distribution, or product development. In fact, they may be *the* core process—the source of organizational intelligence that allows all the others to create results. Here's one way of seeing it. *(I put up the next slide.)*



Drawing by Susan Kelly

Figure 11: The World Café in action—Networks of conversation and social learning

But there's one big hitch. The dilemma is that there's not a lot of focus or coherence to these networks of conversation. They're often going off in all different directions. Nobody sees how these conversations are connected to each other or to the strategic future of the organization. Why do you think that is? (*People offer a variety of ideas—absence of common purpose, conflicting goals, no teamwork, etc.)*

Well, I'm sure that's true but I want to offer an additional possibility, based on what we experienced right here in the Strategy Café over the last couple of days, and in our own research with organizational learning. *(I put up the following slide.)*

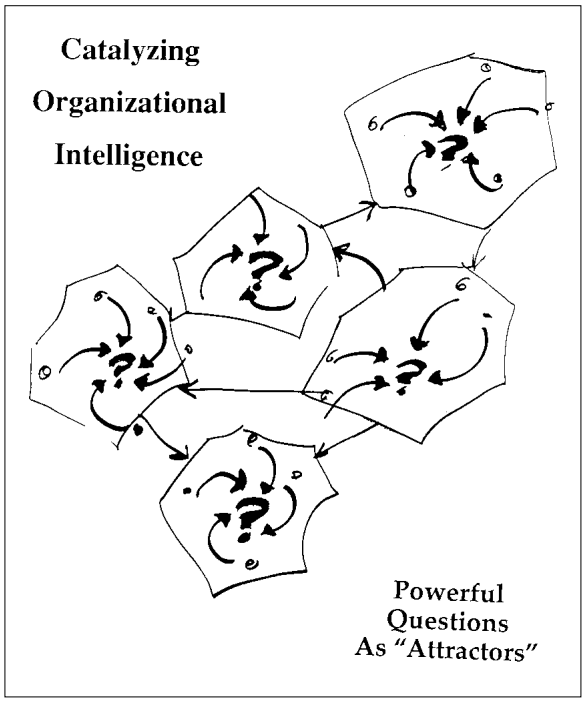


Figure 12: Catalyzing organizational intelligence

Do you remember what you said about how the strategic questions we framed together really helped focus the group energy and how your major learning was about the importance of framing powerful questions? There's an idea from complex systems theory—the idea of "attractors." That means that a system's energy moves within the space that the attractor creates. Even when it's messy in the beginning, over time, we get an increasing kind of "jelling" effect around the space of possibilities that the attractor creates.

You also talked about the importance of purpose or mission; it helps focus the *intention* of the organization, the broad direction for the organization. In addition, we're finding that catalytic questions are also critical because they help focus

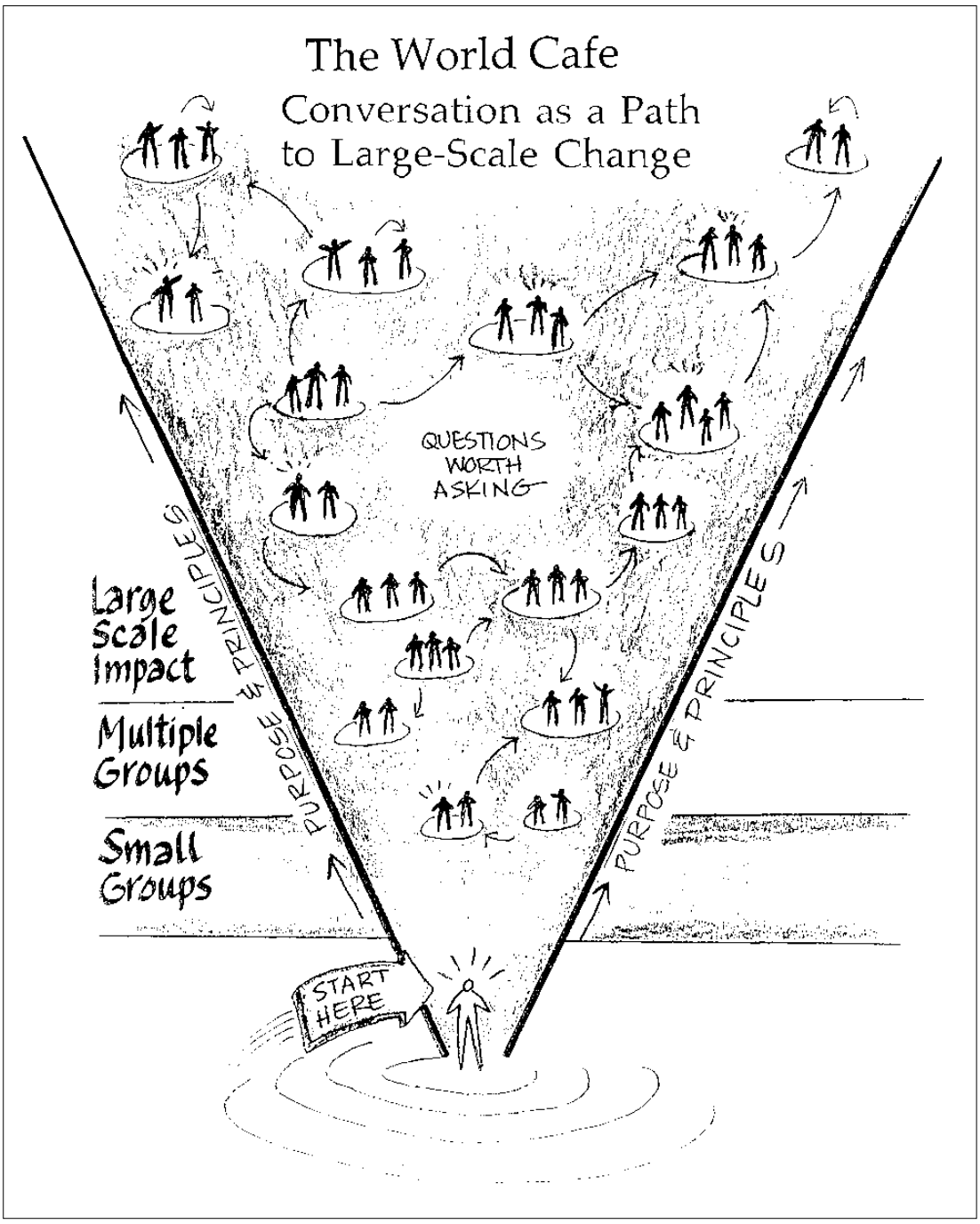
attention on what really matters within the broader context of the whole organization's purpose and values.

The people themselves can often help discover the really important questions. Then the questions themselves begin to attract curiosity as well as diverse resources and talent. This is one of the most important learnings from our large-scale systems change work over the years. *(I then share the story of Mike Szymanczyk. and the* Game Plan Process *without naming the company. I hand out a summary sheet of this process that helps an organization begin discovering the questions that matter. I also share the "What Does It Mean to be HP For the World?" story as an example of the way in which a powerful question can galvanize the energy of an entire organization.)*

How many of you feel that one of your main strategic responsibilities as a leader is to design infrastructures to discover and explore the core strategic questions in your organization? And how many think that one of your most important personal roles is to host and convene strategic conversations around the organizations most important questions? (*By now there is complete silence in the room and people are really listening. One of the members says, "I realize that this is a whole new way of thinking about my job as a leader.")*

Now, let's take a look at another image of how all this might work to support large-scale organizational change. (*I put up the following slide.)*

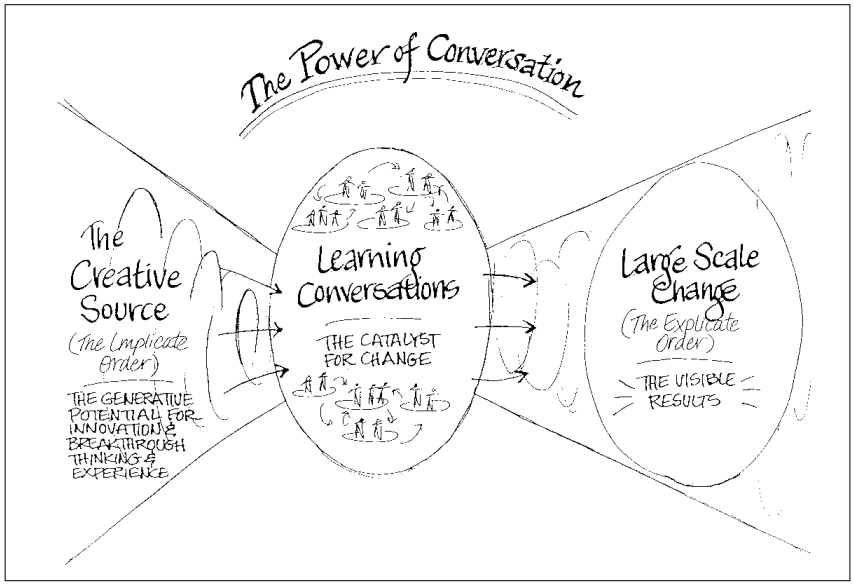
See Figure 13, following page



Drawing by Susan Kelly

Figure 13: The World Café: Conversation as a path to large-scale change

So, when we get down to the core, it's not that complicated. It's really quite basic, but something we don't see because we're in the middle of it. We're like fish swimming in water. It's key to our survival but it's invisible to us. It's the networks of conversation in the organization, often the informal conversations, that actually power the whole process. (*I show the next slide.)*



Drawing by Susan Kelly

Figure 14: The power of conversation

You see, when we first came here, none of us knew how to approach the questions we were facing. But as a group, in our learning conversations, we've begun to tap into our own collective knowledge to find new collective insight into your key challenges. In fact, I actually believe that any organization already has the wisdom it needs to deal with its most important questions. They only need to know how to access it. Hewlett-Packard's former president, Lou Platt, said, "If HP knew what HP knows we'd be three times as profitable!!

The quantum physicists say that there is a source of creative potential for breakthrough insights, like what happened here. I call it the "creative source." A famous physicist, David Bohm, called it by the fancy name of the implicate order. Bohm said that as human beings, our unique capacity to be in dialogue and think together is what allows us to "pull up" these collective insights from that big soup of creative possibilities. When we take action based on these insights, we begin to see the tangible results of our conversations together.

So it's not really that talk is different than action, or that we should "stop talking and get to work." Actually, our talking together, just like we demonstrated in the Strategy Café, is a powerful aspect of the overall action process. Think about all the things we see around us, including something as concrete as a building or as abstract as our system of government. They didn't just miraculously show up. They came into being because ideas got shared and people got excited and continued to talk and organize simultaneously every step of the way.

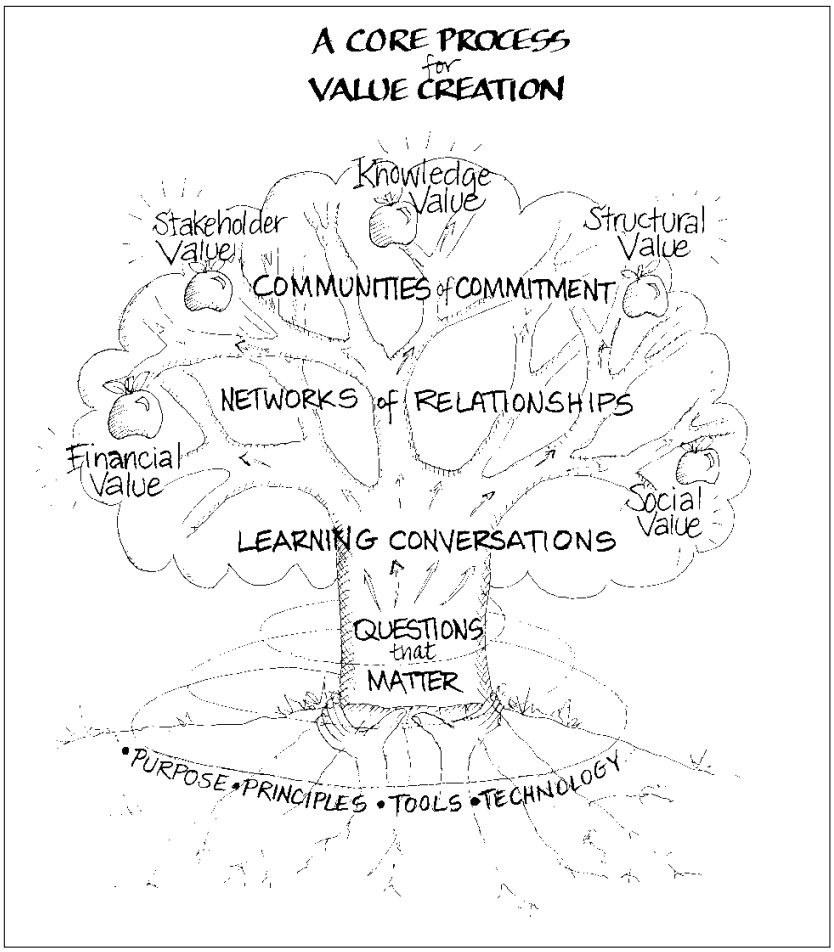
In our Strategy Café we had many people in the room having simultaneous conversations. What helped us to discover a common meaning and make strategic choices was everyone together looking for the patterns and weaving connections between conversations. We've discovered that when the conversation is alive, people *want* to organize. It's part of the natural way that life evolves. That's how the future comes into being. Our Strategy Café here is just one example of the larger World Café in action. That's why we call the World Café "nature's strategic planning process."

So, when you get down to basics, the World Café is a simple image to hold in our minds to become more aware of the natural processes of making meaning and taking action that are already happening in our organizations but that aren't happening in any focused or coherent way.

Most of the time we focus only on the content, the "what" of things. This is necessary, of course. However, we forget to pay attention to what I call the deeper ecology of strategy, the "how"—the core processes by which the strategy and collective knowledge evolve in the first place!

To me, one critical strategic issue for organizational leaders in our knowledge-based economy is this: *How can we work in practical ways with this natural core process to access the full collective intelligence of the organization in order to help evolve the futures we want rather than being forced to lived with the futures we get?* If leaders could see how these networks and connections already work, then we could use the simple organizing image of the World Café to help create sustainable value for the future.

Here's a summary of what we've talked about. (*I put up a final slide.)*



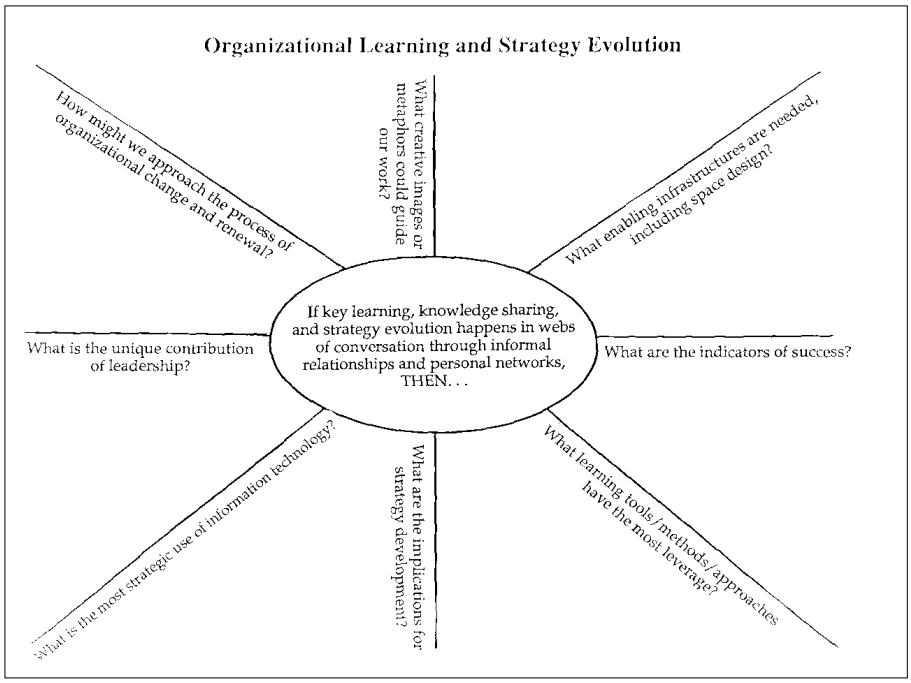
Developed with Jennifer Landau, Graphic by Susan Kelly

Figure 15: A core process for value creation

> Let me leave you with a few questions. You know I love questions. What if the research results are true? What if powerful organizational learning, knowledge creation, and strategy innovation *does* happen through these networks of conversation and social learning like you experienced here in the Strategy Café?
>
> If you saw your organization in this way—as the World Café in action—then how would it affect the way you approach your work as a leader? What might you be doing differently than you do today?

These are exactly the questions we have raised with several groups of senior executives at the MIT Organizational Learning Center's (now Society for Organizational Learning) Executive Champions Workshops. Peter Senge and I serve as co-faculty for

this program. In one program, we provided the following format for exploring the strategic implications of this shift of lens. This appeared printed on large paper "tablecloths" in the Café so people could fill it in.



Original graphic format by Sherrin Bennett

Figure 16: Organizational learning and strategy evolution

As we came back together after the third round of the Café, an executive from a multi-national corporation, a 6' 4" Texan with a booming voice, stood up. He was head of global operations with more than 50,000 employees across the world. His voice rang out across the room. He exclaimed, "Dang! Do you know what I've gone and done?" All eyes turned in his direction. I held my breath. He continued emphatically, "I have just gone and reorganized my entire global operation. Why didn't I see this? It's so obvious, what you all have been talking about. I didn't really see what it was until we began

talking together and playing out the practical implications on those tablecloths. Why didn't I see this before? I've just broken up the informal learning and conversational networks that have gotten built over the years. If I had thought about my re-organization through this shift of lens, I would have done the reorganization a lot differently. It's going to take us *a long time* to recover from this!"

His heartfelt comments stimulated a lively conversation about ways to avoid making major mistakes by recognizing the generally invisible but deeper conversational and learning processes that are the foundation of organizational and community life. Their exploration also included many ideas about ways to appreciate, utilize, and focus the creative potential of this "World Café" that we all participate in naturally as we create our lives, our organizations, and our communities. While detailing those specific implementation ideas is beyond the scope of this exploratory dissertation, our conversation at the Executive Champions Workshop helped affirm the vitality of the World Café as a metaphor for larger scale systemic processes.

We're also seeing a variety of specific practical examples of how people are using the World Café metaphor to guide strategic work in larger systems. Bob Veazie who worked with a major safety initiative across Hewlett-Packard was exposed to the World Café at Meg Wheatley's Self-Organizing Systems program. He wrote to me and my partners, David Isaacs and Nancy Margulies:

> If you only knew how much my mind thinks of your work and the impact it has had on me and passed through me into our organization. First of all, there are over 10,000 employees continuously talking to each other about how to be safe because of your thinking as it connects to the thinking of others. It is a clear and observable behavior. Our company's World Café has more conversations more actively organizing around safety. And it is

> clear to me that simply honoring the network of conversation, introducing questions about safety risks that exist, and inviting people into conversations about these risks has profound results. In some divisions our accident rates have decreased by over 50%, which equates to literally hundreds of fewer injuries. It's simply about conversation and the relationship that emerges in conversation. (Bob. V., e-mail correspondence, February 2000)

Leif Edvinsson, the former director of intellectual capital at Skandia Corporation, has used the World Café as an organizing image in the evolution of the global Intellectual Capital movement. He says that:

> The World Café idea led to the shaping of the Knowledge Café as the hub of Skandia's Future Center. It also led to Knowledge Cafés in Israel, through Edna Pasher's participation with us. They've even held Cafés with members of Israel's Armed Forces! And it's led to architects seeing that the office design of the past is inadequate to knowledge creation and sharing. I was recently in a meeting of architects who said "we really need to work on the architecture to support knowledge work." The Café has those principles. My learnings at the IC Café at your house helped me understand that.
>
> I think the next interface between the World Café and Intellectual Capital is in knowledge architecture. What's the physical design and context architecture that can support it? Where do you learn about living knowledge and how it works? That's the key. That's why the Café idea is taking off so much all over. Maybe the Café is not a process architecture. Maybe it's a *context* architecture. It responds to the thirst for a simple knowledge architecture which can take us back to the organic energy flow. It seems so obvious once you see it. Hopefully that can be a next phase of the World Café. We are actually exploring these principles for Future Centers in Denmark, Norway, Israel, Scotland, Malaysia, U.K. and maybe even in California! A tremendous number of waves have grown out of the original Mill Valley event. (Leif Edvinsson, Learning Conversation, October 1999)

I am currently collaborating in designing and implementing another disciplined use of the World Café as an organizing image for large-scale systems change. This is occurring through a global leadership effort called, "From the Four Directions: People

Everywhere Leading the Way." The conversations are being convened by the Berkana Institute that was founded by Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers.

Using an appreciative inquiry stance, we will support a global network of conversations among local leaders of all ages and backgrounds. Local conversation circles of committed leaders will explore their collective knowledge about what works on behalf of life-affirming futures. Using the Internet and other collaborative technologies, we'll feed the learnings back into the network, catalyzing this world wide web of conversations into a growing force for societal innovation.

In an early draft describing the project on behalf of the Berkana Institute, Margaret Wheatley created a vivid scenario for a global network of leadership circles based on our best understanding about small groups, webs of conversation, network dynamics, and large-scale systems change.

> Today, with the possibility of more conversations, including electronic ones, we are witnessing in magnified form what Margaret Mead described many years ago, the power of small groups of committed people to change the world. In a new understanding of how large change originates, researchers are finding that these changes begin in small ways, in conversations among friends—at kitchen tables, tenement stoops, cafés, town plazas. From that willingness to join together in conversation, small plans are born, local actions taken. As they ripple out through webs of relations, others learn of our efforts and join with us. Larger actions take form and global impact becomes visible.
>
> *There is no power equal to the power of a community conversing with itself about what it wants.* Meaningful conversations create the power to change, create or transform institutions, values, and worldviews … We are now living with this global information network that supports millions of conversations … In a networked world, size doesn't matter. Meaning matters. Small localized activities that have meaning for others quickly span the globe. It is critical connections, not critical mass that's important … Through processes of seeding the conversations, consciously connecting and linking the conversations together, feeding back

> information and insights into the network, we seek to catalyze this worldwide web into a global leadership presence whose strength and intelligence is far greater and richer than the sum of its parts. (Berkana Institute, Leaders for Life: Global Change through Support of Local Leaders, unpublished program description, 2000. For more information contact www.fromthefourdirections.org)

These examples help illuminate several practical ways the World Café is already being used as a guiding image for larger systemic change. It is not the Café process or methodology in any single event that is important. Café events serve to create the lived experience of a larger pattern that does not depend on Café tables and red-checked tablecloths. It is the simple "Café pattern language" that I believe holds real promise for supporting positive futures. Christopher Alexander, the famed architect, expressed this vividly in discussing the power of simple "pattern languages" to shape not only buildings, but the also our collective lives. He says:

> Each pattern is a field—not fixed, but a bundle of relationships, capable of being different each time that it occurs, but deep enough to bestow life wherever it occurs … When we remember this, it may be easier to recognize how powerful they are—and that we do, indeed, have our creative power as a result of the system of patterns which we have. *The source of life which you create lies in the power of the language which you have.* (italics in original 1979, p. 219 and p. 221)

We believe that the World Café represents one example of a simple pattern language that both mirrors living systems principles and affirms the deeper sources of life in human systems. At the 1999 Executive Champions Workshop, I hosted a learning conversation about the World Café with Peter Senge (Senge et al., 1999; Senge, 1990; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994) and Tom Johnson (Johnson & Bröms, 2000). Peter has spent many years applying systems thinking to organizational learning.

Tom Johnson is a pioneer in applying living systems principles to corporate accounting and performance management.

We were in Scotland, sitting at a little café table in the pub of an elegant 18th century mansion. The Executive Champions Workshop, where we had served as faculty together, had just ended. We had used the World Café is as our primary vehicle for stimulating strategic dialogue about institutional renewal. Here are edited excerpts from our conversation reflecting on the ways in which the World Café may serve life-affirming futures.

Juanita: What deeper principles or patterns do you think are at play in the World Café?

Tom: I see that the Café is just another example of natural principles. For example, the mutual seeding among the conversations reflects the way that nature practices diversification. It isn't just the working out of ideas in one big circle. The energy comes out of the cross-fertilization. There's an inter-seeding here that fits with the universe story. There is more interaction. New forms emerge.

Peter: There was an image that was flitting through my mind when Tom first brought up his comment regarding the diversity and diversification that occurs in the Café format. It's small enough at the Café tables so there's a natural tendency to include and invite. But the seeding that happens later isn't like a thing that is deposited. Other people show up and they start creating anew and it's influenced by what their history is, but it's not any kind of re-application. It's recursive, but not replicative. That's part of the mystery of the way Nature works.

Tom: Creating and recreating and recreating.

Peter: Right. In a Café, we're not forgetting what just happened; we are bringing it

with us, along with our whole personal histories; we are creating something new. The seeds are like apertures through which something new emerges. The seed ideas aren't what creates the outcome. They are part of the overall self-organizing process that's harnessing a vast array of resources, including the history of everyone who participates. Sometimes nothing much emerges. Sometimes things that are substantial and long-lasting emerge. But that's part of the surprise when something shows up that one wouldn't have any right to expect.

Tom: What is playing out here is the inability to predict the outcomes of non-linear dynamic systems. You can't foretell or understand the outcomes that are going to occur, but you can understand the process, with a few basic principles that are based on the way nature and the universe works. What's hard for us humans is to have the patience to wait for the outcome in anticipation that there will be a marvelous unfolding.

Peter: If the World Café can help us understand in a grounded way from firsthand experience some of these principles, it would give us a perspective to look at a lot of things going on in our organizations. The experience itself includes the intrinsic satisfaction, the enjoyment, the pleasure of getting someplace and going "wow, this is really compelling." You experience it once or twice and you begin to get a feeling for what else there is to do. Similar dynamics are playing out simultaneously at multiple levels. The Café is a microcosm.

Tom: The Café is like an evolutionary experiment. You would say that some of them work better than others, and yet you have to have all of these recursive cycles to get those "aha's" that make the difference. Perhaps the Café is a manifestation of structural coupling. We're unfolding a new explicate here. Maybe this Café phenomenon is another example of it.

Peter: I still don't think I understand structural coupling very deeply but when new patterns emerge it's because the structures are coupling in some surprising

and powerful way. So what are the structures at play in the Café? Well, its basically an interpersonal and group phenomenon of co-creating. When we participate together in creating, there's some aspect of us that comes into play which otherwise never does and so it's inherently meaningful to us. It's life in the sense of participation. It can be collective creating, bringing things into reality. It's really the implicate becoming explicate. It's a microcosm of what's going on.

Juanita: At larger levels of scale?

Peter: For example, the environmental crisis is a large-scale thing. Billions of people and countless institutions. We won't be able to plan our way out. But we kind of get a sense of it through the microcosm experience of the Café. We can grasp the meaningfulness of the human community creating. And the reason that I think the Café is meaningful is because I feel some confidence that this kind of process has the potential to demonstrate new ways of creating where goal setting and planning does not. We try to use planning and goal setting at the level of institutions and sometimes at the level of macro institutions. That doesn't have much potential, but this does, I think. We get a little glimpse. And then it raises a mind boggling question, "What would it be like to be alive and conscious and become more aware of the human community creating?"

Juanita: Yes, exactly. For our collective intelligence to become more aware of its Self at increasing levels of scale so we could deal with the larger questions we are facing as a human community to create more positive futures. I'd love it if the Café could help us reach that larger awareness.

Tom: Five million people are not going to get together with a Café technique to solve the environmental problem. What I hope could happen from the kind of awareness that the Café creates is that there would emerge a totally different way of acting, and from that, the problem would disappear. In other words, we'd come to a new level where the problem no longer lives.

That's what the universe does as it evolves. So in a Café, we start out grappling with something that is seen as a problem to solve and it is…

Juanita: *Dis*-solved rather than solved.

Tom: Yes, and everybody in the experience starts to see the problem in a different way.

Peter: My sense is that it basically goes back to how nature works. Nature doesn't change anything. Changes are always in process, but it's because something new grows.

Tom: And it goes meta, and meta and goes on.

Peter: And the new growth starts to become operative, in contrast to problem-solving which just reinforces more problems. So, this way of thinking helps create a million little ecological ways of acting. What I like about the Café is that it's enacting. It's not talking about. We're stepping in and enacting a new way of operating. Then we meet to reflect on it afterwards. We want to communicate how we're making sense of it, but fundamentally we're given an opportunity to enact as opposed to just talk about it and read about it. And that's important.

Tom. I'm really excited about this. It's exciting to me to see the Café in the context of this new scientific understanding. It's all playing out of the same script.

I'd like to conclude this part of our conversation by sharing with you one of the most heartening moments in this entire journey. It came a few weeks after I had attended a two day seminar at MIT with Humberto Maturana. He is a gifted professor. It was exciting to see how he had extended his insights from the biology of cognition into the realm of human affairs. He was accompanied by a close collaborator with whom I developed an immediate rapport. She showed me a copy of an unpublished manuscript

Maturana co-authored with Gerda Verden-Zöller**.** It was entitled "The Origin of Humanness in the Biology of Love." Even with its linguistic peculiarities, Maturana's reflections helped me to remember the deeper meaning of my own life's work. I began to understand I why am so committed to helping his theories about how we "bring forth a world" become part of popular awareness and action.

Maturana and Verden-Zöller provide an extensive evolutionary rationale for how we have become *homo sapiens amans* as a species. By this they mean that we are, fundamentally, love-dependent and love-giving conscious beings. They point out that in the absence of love, intimacy, and care human beings become ill or dysfunctional, often exhibiting aggressive or destructive behavior. In a poignant set of reflections based on his scientific understanding of our evolutionary history and our capacity for reflective consciousness, Maturana shares that:

> Our human existence is one in which we can live whatever world we bring about in our conversations, even if it is a world that finally destroys us as the kind of being that we are. Indeed, this has been our history since our origins as languaging beings, namely, a history of recursive creation of new domains of existence as different networks of conversations … It is only us as self-conscious beings who can stop, if we so wish, any unidirectional processes that we have generated, and which may have catastrophic consequences for the systemic dynamics of the flow of our own existence and the existence of other living beings in the biosphere. (Maturana & Verden-Zoller, undated, pp. 48-50)

It is my deepest hope that the World Café can make a small contribution not only as a methodology for collaborative learning, but also as an organizing image that can support our capacity to engage dynamic networks of conversation in human systems to nurture futures that will sustain life on this planet for future generations. That is why I am doing this work.

Chapter 6: Continuing the Conversation—The World Café as Integrated Praxis

We began to feel hopeful that it might be possible… to 'put your practice where your theory is.'... Instead of disseminating knowledge and protecting our turf (our theory), we tried to involve others in questioning and expanding our ideas. We were not delivering a product; we were engaged in a process.

—Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1997, pp. xx-xxi)

Research Question and Initial Discoveries

This exploratory dissertation has helped shed light on the following question:

How can our lived experience with the World Café both as a dialogic learning methodology and as a living systems metaphor deepen our understanding of conversation as a core process for discovering shared meaning, accessing collective intelligence and bringing forth the future at increasing levels of scale?

Using "conversational inquiry," a methodology grounded in narrative, heuristic, and hermeneutic traditions, I joined with other collaborators as storytellers on a mutual journey of learning and interpretation regarding the World Café. This study incorporates the lived experience of a global community of World Café practitioners. It also calls on interdisciplinary insights from living systems and the new sciences, community development, strategy innovation, consciousness studies, dialogue, and organizational learning.

The research findings articulate the following key operating principles or initiating conditions that, *when used in combination*, support authentic conversation, collaborative learning, co-intelligence, and community-building at increasing levels of scale.

- Creating hospitable space
- Exploring questions that matter
- Connecting diverse people and ideas
- Listening together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions

The research findings suggest that one unique contribution of the World Café lies in its capacity to support dialogic learning in very large group settings—to connect the intimate authenticity of small group conversational inquiry with very large group collaborative learning. World Café conversations have been conducted successfully with groups from 12 to 1,200 people.

The findings also suggest a second unique contribution of the World Café—its capacity to serve as a guiding image that makes more visible the role of conversation as a core process for organizational and societal renewal. For example, seeing organizations as dynamic living networks of conversation and social learning provides creative opportunities to re-conceive strategy innovation, organizational learning, technology design, and leadership development based on the ways human systems co-evolve the systemic intelligence they need to learn, adapt, and thrive.

Finally, the informal conversational style and innovative format of the dissertation itself makes a contribution to the social sciences. The choice of this style was intentional.

I wanted to explore my "woman's way of knowing" and my feminine voice both as a social scientist and as an active participant in the World Café community of inquiry and practice (Belenky et al., 1997; Richardson, 1997). This dissertation demonstrates that scholarly research can be collaborative, inclusive, and relational. I am hopeful that both its substance and its style will engage further dialogue and inquiry within a broader community than is normally engaged through formal academic discourse.

We are still at an early stage of developing the theory and practice of the World Café both as a methodology and as a metaphor. However, our early findings are extremely encouraging. The following sections explore key learning edges and questions for further inquiry.

Learning Edges and Questions for Further Inquiry

Setting the Context

In our learning conversations together, Café hosts frequently posed questions about the future evolution of the Café both as a methodology and as a metaphor. Together we wondered: "What are the edges of our own 'not knowing' in relation to this work? What directions for further inquiry should we be exploring? What do we still need to understand? What questions do we still have about the World Café? What areas are important to explore as we continue our learning together?"

To explore these questions further, I joined with a member of my doctoral Committee, Bo Gyllenpalm, who is also an experienced Café host. We each reviewed the entire set of my learning conversations with Café hosts from around the world. With

these voices present at the table, we transformed our kitchen into a Café, covered the table with a large paper "tablecloth," and noted down the key themes from these conversations. Just as in a real Café experience, we explored, synthesized, and wove together the essence of what others had said about their learning edges and their questions for further inquiry while we added our own reflections.

What emerged in conversation with Bo at my kitchen table was a reflection on the World Café as an example of integrated praxis—Café learning as practical methodology for dialogic inquiry, particularly in large group settings, and the World Café as conceptual metaphor for larger-scale change and renewal.

By sharing our conversational synthesis, Bo and I "closed the loop" on this phase of our learning by including many of the voices that have contributed to the journey. There will always be more voices to include and more conversations to initiate. Of course, this is not an end, merely a momentary resting place from which the next phase of the inquiry can be continued.

The Art and Architecture of Questions That Matter

Bo: In talking about their learning edges, many Café hosts mentioned the use of questions. They readily saw their critical importance in Café learning. What they were wondering about was how they could become more skilled in the art and architecture of crafting questions that matter.

Juanita: Yes, almost universally, people could sense a well-crafted question and they would note its power to influence individual and collective learning. From that, they began to wonder how they could more intentionally use questions

to catalyze a group's energy and focus. You'll recall Carlos Mota's and Felipe Herszenborn's image of the question being like the eye of a hurricane around which energy swirls, or David Marsing's image of the question as a seed crystal.

Bo: I think they are also asking:

- *How do we frame questions that will be attractors for collective discovery and learning, both in a group setting and at increasing levels of scale in a larger organizational or community system?*

Juanita: Other questions about questions come to mind:

- *Is there a craft for both discovering and framing "questions that matter"– questions that can really serve as catalysts for group learning, as well as engaging the collective intelligence of larger systems?*
- *If so, what are the principles that underlie this craft and how can we explore them in the next phase of this inquiry?*

Bo: Given what the Café hosts have said about the central role that framing the right questions plays in accessing new knowledge and innovation, I think that this is an important area for further research.

JB: As one of the next steps, I'd love to get together several Café hosts, folks who've worked with Appreciative Inquiry where the role of questions is also seen as important, along with a couple of family therapists who have worked in this area. It would be interesting to pool our knowledge and experience and to see how we'd shape the next steps of this exploration about the importance of questions.

Bo: I'd love to be a part of that conversation!

Guiding the Café Process

Bo: Another learning edge I noticed showing up in many conversations, particularly among the Scandinavian Café hosts, revolved around questions of facilitation. How much is actually needed for the Café to support people in accessing their own collective knowledge and wisdom most effectively? The broad question was *"How much is enough?"*—but there were a number of specific questions as well. For example:

- *What is the minimum physical set up needed to create an hospitable space where people can feel comfortable and safe? How important is it that the environment actually look like a real Café.*
- *What are the minimum instructions needed to clarify the basic "Café pattern" for accessing collective knowledge?*
- *How much guidance during the process is needed?*

Juanita: The intriguing thing that we've found is that the more Café hosting people do, the more they raise the question of "How *little* is enough?" How little can they actually do and still enable the self-organizing capacities of the group to emerge while sustaining coherence and focus.

Bo: That question is at the heart of the relationship between design and emergence. We know in living systems that simple initiating conditions are critical, but I think we're still in the early stages of really understanding what those few simple conditions are in Café work. I think you've made great headway in identifying the four guiding principles that underpin the overall Café pattern, but within an individual Cafe event, there's still more to learn.

Juanita: Definitely. For example, one of the things people have noticed repeatedly is how little dialogue instruction is actually needed to engage dialogic inquiry.

What is really essential? Different people, of course, have different ideas, but it is a learning edge for most of us. Here are some of the questions that have been raised:

- *How much orientation regarding dialogue, personal listening, suspending judgment, etc., is needed once people have stepped into the Café archetype which, itself, embodies dialogic qualities?*
- *What is the appropriate and/or minimum guidance regarding the mechanics of the Café learning process in order to support the overall progression of collective discovery?*

Bo: In this regard, one of the other questions people raised has to do with the role of the host.

- *What is the most appropriate role of the Café host, both the overall Café host, and the host at each Café table?*

I've discovered the hard way that if you are used to facilitating group processes you want to intervene and guide more than is really needed. For example, I've found that it is actually counterproductive to have formal facilitators at each table. Somehow it inhibits the natural conversation and keeps people from taking responsibility for their own thinking. And if the overall Café host keeps interrupting with instructions all the time, that can inhibit the energy flow of the "magic" that can happen in the conversation.

Juanita: A more subtle question in all of this has to do with the way the overall Café host sets his or her own intention and the way they choose to place attention in a Café learning situation. Toke Møller, Finn Voldtofte and the Danish Café host group has been especially sensitive to this. They're asking:

- *What role does the intention and attention of the Café host play in helping the Café accomplish its goals?*
- *Is it possible that simply "holding the space" in a much more self-organizing way than we normally do in group processes can be just as effective as the things we often choose to do to help facilitate the*

group? Can we let go of traditional facilitation if we are disciplined regarding the very few essential principles and initiating conditions?

- *They're not suggesting a totally unstructured free-for-all, but they are asking what is required for self-organization to be most effective. This is a very big area of inquiry for me personally, not only for Café learning in group settings, but also at a larger scale in big organizations where there may be thousands of geographically dispersed people.*

Bo: There's another area regarding the Café process that seems important as well, and that is:

- *When people want to take the Café process out to larger groups, what kind of process tools or other support do they need to do additional Cafés?*
- *What kind of information or help do people need to carry the substantive results of their learning into new conversations after the event?*

Juanita: This is a really interesting area to explore. Among Café hosts there are differing perspectives. Once people have participated in a Café conversation they'll often say, "Oh, this is so wonderful. This is so simple. So natural. I'd like to do it in my own organization. Can you send me something? Do you have an instruction guide?"

Café hosts have different perspectives on what to do at this point. Some say, "Look, we don't want to institutionalize this or rigidify it by making Café learning a technique that then gets implemented by rote. It *is* a natural human process. People intuitively recognize that. That's why people respond to it and love it, and find it so useful. So if people experience the process, they can then go out and do it in their own way."

Others say, "Yes, it's simple but it's not that easy. There's an art to hosting a Café. There are specific and practical things you need to do. There are also ways to focus your intention and attention as a host that are critical to

whether the group can access collective intelligence in any reliable way. We need to help people with the tools to use the basic Café pattern and it's operating principles while encouraging their own creativity and innovation."

Bo: I think it is important during the next phase of our learning to develop some easy-to-use process tools without making a huge manual or a detailed step-by-step guide. Maybe it should include minimum process instructions, like logistics and room set up, the four basic operating principles and why they are important, something about the role of the host, and maybe stories of different kinds of Cafés. People learn a lot just from reading stories.

Juanita: I think we'd also want to include some way of helping people understand the many Café variations that are happening around the world and how they work—i.e. Passion Cafés, Knowledge Cafés, Strategy Cafés, Scenario Cafés, Future Search Cafés, Leadership Cafés, Open Space Cafés, and so forth. There are ways to connect the Café process to other group approaches if you are clear about the intent. I think the questions we'd want to explore here are:

- *What are the similarities and differences in terms of guiding the Café process when you are using different Café variations for your own particular purposes?*
- *What, if anything, in addition to the four basic operating principles is common to all Café work and what are unique Café variations depending on your learning goals?*
- *What tools or conceptual guidance can we provide that can support people in deciding when Café learning is the most useful process choice for their particular goals? How can we best integrate the Café with other methods, like Future Search, Open Space, or traditional circle style dialogues?*

Cross-Cultural Applications

Bo: It's not just about adapting the Café approach to different learning purposes or using Café conversations to enhance other group methods. Café learning, as you know, has now spread to many places throughout the world. A number of Café hosts in the learning conversations I reviewed talked about the ways they were adapting the Café approach to their unique cultural situations.

Juanita: One of the major learnings of this research is that the Café itself serves as a global archetype. We have now demonstrated that you can have people from over 30 countries present in the same room, and working with no modification of the generic Café approach, people will have a powerful collective learning experience. There is something basic and human about the Café. It is easily cross-cultural. The learning question that Café hosts from other cultures have raised is:

- *When you are hosting a Café in a particular cultural setting, are there things you can do or not do that are unique to that particular culture that could really deepen the Café experience?*

Bo: Here's an example of that. I remember that Maria de los Angeles Cinta was using the talking stone in a Café she hosted for Latin American executives. Latin Americans are so used to lively exchanges that they didn't understand that the talking stone was about listening. So they thought the talking stone was about more and more talking! However, when she re-introduced the idea as the "stone of respect," they understood completely. Latin Americans listen to and respect their elders and when their elders talk, they afford them the respect of true listening. "Therefore," Maria said, "when you pass the stone of respect from hand to hand, it's like listening to an elder. You are passing the respect to each individual in the group." When she translated it

that way, people understood immediately. That small culturally relevant shift deepened the collective conversation beautifully.

So the question really is:

- *What are the unique cultural forms that could be introduced within a Café format to help deepen the collective conversation?*

Juanita: It's interesting that in New Zealand they've actually called the regional network of conversations regarding Maori treaty discussions by the name "When the Café Meets the Hui." The Hui is the traditional Maori meeting protocol and was combined with a Café style format to encourage informal collaborative learning and knowledge sharing around land rights issues.

Bo: Another unique culture is that of cyberspace, which as you know, has its own special culture. This is one I've been experimenting with very intentionally, using the Café principles in the virtual on-line world.

Café Learning in Cyberspace

Juanita: You're probably the only person I know who is doing on-line learning using the face-to-face Café operating principles in a virtual setting. Well, that's not completely accurate. We've also collaborated with Peter and Trudi Johnson-Lenz of Awakening Technologies who are masters at weaving and harvesting the collective knowledge web that emerges in on-line environments. What's your sense of what we need to be learning here?

Bo: I think we're still at an early phase of the discovery process in relation to the disciplined use of Café principles in cyberspace. I think the Internet itself is one big example of the World Café in action! It's allowed global networks of conversations and heightened our awareness of the power of the

connections among those conversations. Here are a couple of questions that I'm wrestling with.

- *How do you create the hospitable space that we emphasize in face-to-face Café settings in a cyberspace situation?*
- *Does using the Café method in cyberspace change the nature or role of the convenor?*
- *How can those of us who are working with on-line learning help people become more aware of the connectedness of their on-line conversations? How can we improve our own capacities as knowledge weavers?*

Juanita: In an on-line collaborative learning situation, the host's function is probably different than in a face-to-face Café. I have a sense that the weaving and harvesting function is particularly different, even though the Café principle of connecting diverse people and ideas as well as listening together for deeper insights and core questions remain the same. The on-line medium requires a different skill base for hosting than a Café host in a face to face setting.

Bo: That raises another question for me, one that I've just begun to explore as I experiment with using the Café principles on-line.

- *How would the design of on-line education change if the four Café principles were at the center of the curriculum?*
- *How would you design an individual course or even an entire on-line curriculum using World Café principles?*
- *How might that change our whole way of looking at on-line education?*

Juanita: The explosion of on-line learning makes this an important area to explore. My hunch is that on-line learning, in most instances, is simply replicating the old, individualistic approaches to learning. If you really thought about

using the Café principles as you have for your own on-line course at the Fielding Institute, I think you'd see a very different level of knowledge sharing and innovation among students.

Bo: This has almost revolutionary implications for how to think about collective learning in an on-line environment, especially if you think about applying the four Café principles in a disciplined way to the infrastructure and design of collaborative technologies themselves.

Juanita: You met Eric Vogt of Communispace didn't you? Well Eric is experimenting with just that very thing—creating learning communities in cyberspace using principles not only from Café thinking but also from Etienne Wenger's research on communities of practice, as well as community development principles.

Bo: That's right! I need to go visit Eric again and talk about all of this. I think this whole area has tremendous implications for the design and facilitation of on-line environments for learning and knowledge sharing. If my students' positive evaluations are any indication of the promise of applying Café principles more systematically for designing collaborative learning in virtual environments, this area of inquiry holds a lot of promise.

Making Collective Intelligence Visible to Its Self

Bo: I'm very focused right now not only on my on-line courses at the Fielding Institute but on running other types of Cafés as well. A number of other Café hosts mentioned the area of documenting and sharing collective learnings. I have questions about that too.

Juanita: Do you mean at the event itself or afterwards?

Bo: Well, my personal question is:

- *What's the best type of documentation from a Café event that can support an expanding web of conversations and continuous learning with other constituencies in the larger system?*

Juanita: That's one of the questions, certainly, but another that I saw in the data from the Café hosts raises an even deeper question. Our colleagues from Denmark have been the most sophisticated in framing this challenge. It's what Finn Voldtofte calls the challenge of displaying the "collective mind screen" in ways that can help move the inquiry forward and deeper. Let me see if I can clarify it.

- *If one of our goals in Café learning is for collective intelligence to become aware of its Self at increasing levels of scale, then how do we actually make the knowledge and wisdom of the collective visible and available to its Self as it evolves and grows?*
- *What does the reporting out of the intelligence of a collective look like? Is it different from the report modalities we're familiar with in organizational settings?*
- *What role can innovative methodologies like interactive graphics, theatre, poetry, artistic expression, and interactive technology tools play in this type of holistic representation of the evolution of collective learning and knowledge?*

As you know, I described earlier a whole range of ways in which this is happening in Café settings. However, I agree with the other Café hosts that, along with framing powerful questions, this is one of our biggest learning edges. Our learning approaches have been so shaped by an individualistic mindset that we're just beginning to discover what tools might support the functioning of a "social brain," particularly in very large group settings or within a larger system as the conversations ripple out. New collaborative technologies hold great promise in this area.

Bo: That's at the heart of using dialogue as a way to access collective intelligence and surface new ideas that can help address the really tough issues.

The Nature of Collective Intelligence

Juanita: This raises an even more fundamental question that is still a subject of great debate in some circles. In working with the World Café as integrated praxis, we operate from Bohm's and others' assumption that there is a deeper collective intelligence that can be accessed through collaborative dialogic inquiry. Whether this can be proven through the methods of Western analytical science is still open to question. However, in designing our work based on this assumption, we are seeing very positive outcomes, even at this early stage of our World Café inquiry and practice. But we have a lot still to learn about such questions as:

- *How does a collective think together? Are there different principles underlying the development of collective insight versus the development of individual insight alone?*
- *How can we further develop the art of thinking together about complex questions that affect our common future?*

Bo: These questions go to the heart of my own inquiry about the dynamics of the relationship between individual and shared mindsets. Perhaps the Café is a structure for dialogic inquiry that allows knowledge to be discovered collectively even though it is held individually. No individual could have discovered that knowledge by themselves. Yet, at the same time, the collective knowledge that is evolving becomes part of each individual's mind and heart. It's an interesting paradox. That raises another question from the Café hosts:

- *What does it mean for our work as facilitators when we place intention and attention on collective learning and shared meaning rather than on people's individual learning process? What different kinds of intention and attention might that require of us?*
- *What different outcomes do you achieve by focusing at the collective level versus at the individualistic level of learning and knowledge evolution?*

Juanita: In my view, this is one of the biggest and most exciting learning areas to emerge from the Café work. It has implications far beyond the World Café itself to how we engage all forms of collaborative learning, knowledge creation, and collective wisdom on behalf of positive futures.

I'm excited because I do think that we're making a unique contribution to this arena with the simplicity and impact of our World Café discoveries. We're still at an early phase here. I heard an interesting comment not too long ago that the next messiah will be revealed as a group rather than as an individual because we can't address the global problems we have at an individual level. To me that's where the deeper relevance of the World Café lies.

Talk and Action

Juanita: These questions bring up a different set of Café hosts' reflections which challenge our entire modern view of how change happens and how we bring forth the future.

Bo: What do you mean?

Juanita: Well, let's imagine that the World Café is a mirror or at least an organizing image that helps us become more aware of the ways in which we co-evolve our common futures through conversational exchange. It challenges the

ways most of us think about how we arrive at what we call results in organizational and community life. For example:

- *If we really did see conversation as a core process through which we co-evolve our common future, then what might that mean to our understanding of the relationship between talk and action?*

Bo: Several Café hosts brought up the way many leaders believe we should "stop talking and get to work"—as if talk and action were two separate things. As you know, I've done a good deal of research on mindsets and this is one that we hold quite strongly to in the Western world.

Juanita: That's been one of the most interesting conversations I've had with the World Café community of practitioners. There have been big "aha's" for all of us in this area. For example, in our conversation with the Danish Café hosts several said, "One of the big dilemmas is that there are two different social processes that we're working with. One is the Café process for discovering and deepening our shared understanding in relation to a particular question or issue. But there's a different social process than the Café process involved in organizing for action. The Café enables action because it builds a common platform of mutual understanding. However, you need a different process for planning the action itself. You have to leave "Café mode" if you want to move from shared understanding toward shared action."

Then someone said, "What if there really weren't a difference between the talking/understanding phase and the action phase? What if, when the conversations are alive, highly energized, and relevant you are already *in* the action phase? What if it's not talk followed by action in the normal linear way we in the West think about things?"

One person asked, "What if it's all the same process? Maybe when you

achieve that level of collective understanding and knowledge evolution people can't help but organize and act? They will do that naturally. They will *want* to act and they are *already* acting as they participate in the whole cycle of conversation itself."

Holding this assumption would suggest that when the conversations are alive, people will organize themselves to do whatever has to be done—talking and learning together every step of the way. Maybe it's the mutual discovery and knowledge sharing itself—the "knowing together"—that's the action force, not the normal action planning, objectives, time lines, and formal assignments. Often those are a de-energizing way of approaching what we call "action planning."

Maybe this whole distinction between talk and action is counterproductive. Maybe the talk *is* the action. Maybe it's all part of a single cycle of the way life works. I'd love to figure out some ways to explore these ideas further. I wonder if an evolutionary biologist like Humberto Maturana would frame things this way if he were talking to a general audience rather than to other scientists.

Bo: That is really interesting. I've actually experimented with this at the Round Table Cafés sponsored with Jan Wallinder at Telia and Ericsson around sustainable futures. Jan told the story of this effort in Chapter IV. We bring stakeholders together in a Café format who are often at odds with each other. In the Café we explore questions relevant to sustainability and the future.

What I'm starting to see (and this needs further research) is that during a Café, people discover each other's underlying assumptions and the way they view critical questions. They find overlaps with their own assumptions and views. They don't have to come to consensus. By knowing how others are

thinking they can then go home and create value from this knowledge for their own organization. They don't do action planning while they are together. Once they've shared each other's world views they naturally begin to act in different ways, both with each other and in their back home settings. They don't have to set up complicated programs or action plans. Suddenly they see choices they didn't have before and they begin to make them—but it's not a linear thing. It's built on the relationships and understandings that emerge naturally in the Café conversations.

I think the learning questions here are something like:

- *If the conversation is alive enough and relevant enough to what's important to people, will the action that's appropriate to the situation naturally emerge?*
- *What enabling support can nurture this natural tendency for humans to organize endeavors of greater richness and complexity as they learn and make meaning together in their ongoing flow of conversation?*

Juanita: Before the Industrial Age, were these linear planning techniques imposed on people's organizing efforts? How did the Native Americans know how to make their tents or go hunting and bring home the food? When they reached a shared understanding, it was obvious what to do. Then things happened, right? Great cathedrals got built before we ever had management by objectives or formal action planning sessions!

Bo: Doesn't what we what we call "action" also have continuous conversation and shared meaning-making as its core process?

Juanita: Our Café research, as well as other dialogue research, is showing that this distinction between talk and action may be an obsolete dichotomy, especially in a knowledge era. My hope is that the phrase "*Stop* talking and get to work" would be replaced with "*Start* talking because that *is* the

work!"

The problem is not the talking itself. The problem is talk that's not alive or conversations that don't really matter deeply to the participants. Of course, under those circumstances, it *will* be all talk and no action!

Leadership Implications

Bo: Well, let's imagine that the talk *is* the work. And let's also assume that conversation *is* the core process for an organization to create new knowledge and co-evolve the future. As I was reading the material from the other Café hosts, a number of people asked a critical strategic question for organizational and community leaders.

What might holding this point of view mean for the choices leaders make in terms of strategy, organization design, learning infrastructures, the unique contribution of leaders, etc?

Juanita: Frankly, I think the implications are quite dramatic. As you know, my partner, David, and I wrote an article entitled "Conversation as a Core Business Process" for *The Systems Thinker* where we began to explore this question. From our conversations with executives as well as Café hosts, we've begun to identify what using the World Café as an organizing image might mean for organizational leaders. It might mean:

- Learning to craft and focus collective attention on strategic questions that can attract the system's own energy for learning and discovery.
- Creating time and infrastructures for system-wide reflection and conversation on critical questions.
- Learning to host and convene conversations that matter rather than meetings that don't.

- Making visible the larger contexts of meaning that enable people to see where their thinking together can contribute to the whole.
- Engaging a fundamentally different process for strategy evolution that connects insights across diverse knowledge sets and uses the organization's informal networks of intelligence gathering.
- Nurturing communities of practice including the networks of conversation and social learning that these informal learning communities use to create sustainable value.
- Changing the physical design of workplaces to create hospitable spaces for collaborative knowledge work.
- Designing training and professional development to use collaborative conversation in addition to formal teaching as core processes for learning and knowledge acquisition.
- Using interactive technologies and other infrastructures that enable the system to see and use its own collective knowledge.
- Recognizing that it is not only measurement but also meaning that stimulates sustainable performance and the results most leaders seek.

Bo: I'm thinking of the period when I was president of Phonogram, a Phillips subsidiary in Sweden, and my years in other key executive positions. I might have worked with those organizations a lot differently had I seen them through the World Café lens. In fact, if I'd just held the World Café idea in my mind as I was doing my ongoing work, I'd begin to make different practical choices on a day to day basis.

Juanita: That's right. If the World Café as an organizing image can help leaders see new aspects of how their organizations are already functioning, they can make simple but important strategic choices to focus and leverage what is already there! It's more that these underlying dynamics are simply invisible to us, even though they're happening naturally all the time. We're like fish swimming in water. We can't see what's there because we're so immersed in it. My hope is that the World Café can help people notice and utilize in a

more conscious way the very process of conversation—a process so familiar it often goes unnoticed, unexamined, and underutilized.

Bo: You're pointing to another question that many Café hosts had: "Is it necessary to be conscious of the Café's conceptual underpinnings and how it serves as a metaphor for these larger processes or can we just live the Café experience and allow what unfolds to unfold?"

Juanita: You're right. That's been a subject of ongoing conversation. For example, Café hosts are exploring the following questions as the next stage of this work evolves:

- *Is it important for people to have a lived experience of these networks of conversation and collective meaning-making in a Café event and, in addition, to reflect on its larger implications for their lives and work?*
- *If it is important to reflect on the experience, then what are the best ways to share the World Café as a metaphor for value creation and co-evolving positive futures in organizations and communities?*
- *How can we help people see beyond their Café experience and achieve a more deliberate understanding that these networks of conversation and social learning are the deeper source of our wealth—wealth in all dimensions?*

I'm one of those who feel is it very important to make these ideas a conscious part of our popular culture. To me, that's the meaning of integrated praxis. It's not either theory or practice, but both simultaneously.

The theory underlying the World Café has many practical implications. I think we'd live our daily lives very differently in all arenas if we could see that conversations really do matter. If each of us understood how and why that were so—that every conversation we participate in is connected to a larger web of collective meaning and action–then we'd act in ways that

were more mindful of the future we were creating together.

As a leader, I might make very different strategic choices based on my understanding that conversation was the core process at every level of system. Here's an example of a leadership question where it could be very important to have the world Café theory in mind:

- *How would you scale up the operating principles underlying the Café pattern from 100 or even 1,000 people in a room and move it up to 10,000 or 100,000 people globally?*
- *What different design considerations are involved when you scale up Café operating principles and reach beyond a single event out into larger systems?*

I think it's the community organizer in me that still wants people to be empowered to act choicefully in ways that make a difference to large-scale systems change.

However, there are also those in our World Café community who come from a viewpoint emphasizing collective consciousness rather than community organizing. I understand their perspective as well.

These colleagues ask, "Why is it so important that people 'get it' at a conscious level? Why can't we just allow the deeper meaning and larger implications of the Café work to emerge intuitively? People will naturally know how to carry their Café learning into other dimensions of their lives. Conscious understanding and reflection on the experience just separates the participants from the aliveness of the experience itself and diminishes rather than enhances its power."

Bo: That's an interesting set of perspectives. This area needs further exploration. There are no right or wrong answers. Maybe it's more a question of appropriate timing and context. For some people, seeing the Café as a

metaphor will make a real difference to their strategic choices. For others, it may be more useful just to have a great Café learning experience without conscious awareness of the metaphor at work.

Juanita: This is a learning edge in the World Café community of practice. I think that each Café host will need to make the choice depending, as you pointed out, on the context and their purpose.

It's also a question of clarifying what kind of dialogue work you are most comfortable doing. For example, in the dialogue field practitioners disagree about what type of conversation constitutes "real" dialogue. Yet, there are many wonderful ways of approaching this conversational work—women's circles, salons, wisdom circles, council process, Bohmian dialogue, healing circles, study circles, and many forms of public dialogue. Other approaches to conversational learning are coming from the organizational development tradition, including Future Search, Open Space, and Appreciative Inquiry, among others. There are many different doorways into the common courtyard of Dialogue and dialogic learning.

It's like the particle/wave paradox I described in the earlier part of the dissertation. Once we, as practitioners, discover our passion for this conversational work, we can choose where to focus our attention. Any choice we make highlights certain aspects and makes others less visible. It is important, however, to understand the operating assumptions and theory base underlying our choice.

I deeply believe that all of us working in the dialogue field have an opportunity to discover the things that unite us—for example, our common belief that it is through authentic conversations that we will discover the paths toward a sustainable future for our children and our grandchildren.

Bo: Thanks for a great conversation, Juanita. I've really enjoyed being a part of it and look I forward to continuing the journey!

Closing Reflections

It is dusk as I sit in my cozy writing room surrounded by the artifacts of this learning journey—World Café theory maps lining one whole wall, overflowing bookcases lining another, big notebooks filled with learning conversations on the couch, radio on my cluttered desk playing soft jazz, multi-colored Mexican woven tapestry hanging on the wall in front of my computer, and the bare outlines of the front garden still visible outside my window.

Each of these are symbols of the journey—theoretical considerations, conversations with authors and Café hosts, Café music, a tapestry woven from our mutual learning—and the garden outside, a living reminder that as humans, we are simply one embodiment of nature's way.

Today is also my birthday. Today I received two special gifts. One was from Myron Kellner-Rogers, co-author with Margaret Wheatley, of *A Simpler Way*, an evocative book exploring living systems principles applied to organizations. Myron was with us when the World Café was born at our home in Mill Valley and was one of the first to see the promise of this work. He sent me the following e-mail today. I wept as I read it.

> I'm in Alaska, then to Los Angeles next week with Unocal. Cafés now being used in Unocal Indonesia, Unocal Philippines, and of course in the U.S. Multi-cultural Cafés on many topics. These are mostly self-starting,

> self-generating. All began with one exposure to Cafés two years ago when I worked with 100 leaders. Many people took it out into their work. Unstoppable once it begins! Here in Alaska, a simple Café process I set in motion in October, now known as the Alaska World Café, has caught fire and is self-replicating. Lots of life, vibrancy, authentic conversation. Imagine! Cafés are now happening on oil rigs. Wow.

Myron reflects my own fondest hopes for this work—life, vibrancy, and authentic conversation; multi-cultural Cafés; Cafés happening on oil rigs—unstoppable once it begins! You see, I am a populist at heart. I deeply believe that we have the power collectively to create futures that are worthy of our best effort. And I know down to my bones that through participating in courageous conversations about questions that matter we have the capacity, together, to discover the paths forward.

I would like to end this dissertation with a poem I also received today from our dear friend, colleague, and World Café partner, Nancy Margulies. Nancy has not been able to participate as actively in the dissertation conversation as we both wanted because of health considerations. I dedicate the next stages of our ongoing inquiry to the love and spirit that are embodied in her closing words.

At The World Café

Trusting the strength
that lives in the space between us
filled with images and thoughts
that give meaning to our lives

Experiencing
your words echoing in my thoughts
as questions finding their answers

Noticing
it's always been this way
Conversation enabling us to find meaning
connecting across imagined boundaries

I give the gift of listening
Asking, I discover more than I knew
Meaning emerges from our shared
sense of what is and what could be

Becoming
a larger Self that knows its capacity
Together, we create a future worth living

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Possible Areas to Explore in learning conversations
with World Cafe "Hosts" (Practitioners)

Note:—*This was not formal "interview guide" but rather a set of questions developed to help support focused learning conversations with Café hosts.—Not all questions were covered in all conversations. At times, more interesting dimensions than those considered in the original interview questions became apparent.*

- Intro and context setting … why I'm hosting these learning conversations.
- What my hopes are in having these conversation together.
- Who are you, your background, current affiliations etc.?
- Permission to quote and/or confidentiality issues?
- How were you introduced to the Cafe learning ideas/experience?
- What was your personal experience like the first time you participated in a Cafe conversation?—(share a personal story and their own lived experience as a participant)
- What was it about the Cafe experience that held "life" for you personally.—What drew you to doing more of this work?
- What are the ways in which you have used Cafe learning approaches in your life and/or work?
- Pick one (or more) of the stories where you have been a "host" to explore in more depth:

- What was the specific situation that called for the Cafe approach—that made you decide to use it?
- What was the initiating question(s)/ issue that you were exploring.
- What helped the Cafe work well?
- What was the most exciting, promising thing you experienced/witnessed as you helped to host the Cafe?
- What challenged or surprised you?
- What were your personal learnings as a Cafe host in this situation?
- What outcomes/results did you see
- When a Cafe is going really well, what do you think is actually going on?
- What enables that to happen?
- When a Café—works less well, why do you think that is?
- How do you see the role and use of questions in the Cafe work?
- What makes a powerful question (examples of questions and contexts in which they've been used)
- What deeper design or operating principles are at play when the Cafe work is going well?
- What assumptions/beliefs/values do—you see that underpin the World Cafe?
- Is your way of working—becoming simpler or more complex as you experiment more with this work?—How?
- Do you see the Cafe experiences you have had as "mirrors" of the ways life just naturally operates? If so, how?
- What might be different if leaders saw their organizations as "Cafes"—networks of conversation in which the organization was always learning and evolving its future.
- As you look overall at your World Cafe experiences, what do you see as the larger possibilities inherent in this work?

- Some see the World Cafe as a metaphor for engaging collaborative learning/collective intelligence at increasing levels of scale—at any level of system. … How do you see this?

- How have you, if at all, engaged people in collective reflection about their process of—collaborative learning in the Café?

- What question, if answered, could enhance your own understanding of the Cafe experiences you have had?

- What questions, if answered, do you think could enhance the practice of Cafe learning as we all move into the next phases of it's development?

- Any other reflections you think are important?