

**CRAIG AND PATRICIA NEAL**  
with Cynthia Wold

# THE ART OF CONVENING

**AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT  
IN MEETINGS, GATHERINGS,  
AND CONVERSATIONS**



Foreword by Richard J. Leider, author of  
*The Power of Purpose*

An Excerpt From

*The Art of Convening:  
Authentic Engagement in Meetings, Gatherings, and Conversations*

by Craig Neal, Patricia Neal, and Cynthia Wold  
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# INTRODUCTION

*The role of the Convener is to gather  
and hold the people*

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**IT WAS A REMARKABLE MEETING** of senior-level women executives, gathering to explore the notion of convening as a leadership competency. I was the Convener, but it was clear from the onset that these women were used to running their own show. Many had grown into their leadership in results-dominated environments, driving definable goals and outcomes, where listening skills and vulnerability were not often appreciated or wanted.

As the Convener, I had done a considerable amount of preparation, internal and external—but I have to admit, I was nervous. Most of those present were not familiar with Heartland’s work and had never experienced the Art of Convening—and many were cutting-edge leaders in their own right, with very defined ways of doing things. I knew I would be challenged in this practice.

After the introductions and context setting, we gathered in a large circle. I reminded myself that my intention here was to bring authentic engagement to the gathering and to set aside any other motives that could interfere with that intention. Then I asked that each woman in turn speak to an important question she was dealing with as a leader. As each spoke, their responses deepening with each voice, I was reminded of why I love to do this work.

A few common themes emerged: “How do I have to change to bring about the change I want to see in my organization?” “How do

I create authentic connections with my people when I rush from meeting to meeting?” “I’m tired of doing things the same old way, but don’t know what else there is.”

Once everyone had spoken, the majority welcomed the opportunity to take a deeper dive into their challenges. The room had become electric with energy. A window had been opened to a conversation of meaning and personal consequence. And some of the participants showed palpable discomfort.

There were many competing agendas in the room, and midway through the afternoon I lost my internal focus and lost my way, getting off-track from the agenda. At this point, a key leader left the room without comment, obviously disturbed. A flash of anxiety swept over me as my stomach tightened. Would the group be able to hold together? Would we be able to complete the day?

After years of witnessing the phenomenon of group breakdown, I knew that I had to stay present. I focused again on my intention to bring authentic engagement, and suspended my judgment of others in the room and, more important, of myself. I was back on track to complete the day’s agenda. The group’s comfort level gradually increased, and “ahas” and nuggets of wisdom emerged. The group seemed to feel an understanding and appreciation for being together in authentic conversation.

What many of us began to see was a vision of leadership that is enhanced by the capacity to slow down for authentic engagement, and to create authentic relationship, which is at the core of why convening with intention matters.

—*Patricia Neal*

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In 1995, Craig and Patricia Neal founded Heartland Inc., an organization offering a different kind of service—connection. As the mission states: *Heartland convenes conversations, programs, trainings, and communities of engagement to practice the skills of the intentional leader, dedicated to creating a world that works for all.*

Heartland has created and developed, among other programs, the Thought Leader Gatherings, a membership-based community of engagement for leaders since 1998; Heartland Network, a global online social media leadership community; and a suite of the Art of Convening (AoC) Trainings offering the principles, practices, and applications of convening. This book is the first public sharing of the AoC model.

Often, *convening* is used as a synonym for facilitating gatherings and meetings. Heartland has been differentiating convening from facilitating and leading meetings since its founding. By definition, *facilitation* is “the process of making something easy or easier,”<sup>2</sup> whereas *convening*, for Heartland, has come to mean the art of gathering and “holding” people, in a safe and generative

ONE WAY to encapsulate the leadership required to create an alternative future is to consider the leader as primarily a convener—not leader as special person, but leader as a citizen, sometimes with legitimate power, willing to do those things that can initiate something new in the world. In this way, “leader” belongs right up there with cook, carpenter, artist, and landscape designer. All of us can develop this ability with a small amount of teaching and an agreement to practice—the ultimate do-it-yourself movement.

—Peter Block<sup>1</sup>

space, for the sake of authentic engagement each time we invite people together, whether virtually or in person.

After many years of hosting national conferences and meetings and convening scores of Thought Leader Gatherings, we realized that we needed to write the “recipe” for how to convene. This book examines the art and practice of gathering people for the sake of authentic engagement, which we believe produces better outcomes than could be obtained otherwise—whether for fun, profit, alignment, dispute resolution, insight, wisdom, brainstorming, or problem solving. It addresses the essential principles and practices for those called to convene and lead meetings and gatherings, as well as for those of us who don’t seek to lead all the time but wish to serve in the best way possible when leadership is called for.

## APPLICATIONS OF CONVENING

Although the Art of Convening was developed as a leadership model, many other applications have emerged. Once we learn how to be a Convener, we may constantly find opportunities to bring authentic engagement not only to our work lives, but also to our neighborhoods, book groups, friendships, families, and personal relationships.

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**MY HUSBAND PLANNED A** family birthday party at our house for my 15-year-old stepson. There were eight of us at the dining room table, including the two teenage brothers, engaged in three or four simultaneous conversations—teen one-upping a prominent one. In our family, attempts to be in charge are often met with great resis-

tance, both overt and covert, so stepping in can be risky. I wondered, though, whether my learning about being a Convener could help us have a different kind of interaction and connection.

Through dinner I thought about how I would like to be in relationship with the people at the table. I clarified my intention while planning how to ask for a change in the usual family free-for-all to a more intimate way of being together. It was important to me that my motives be pure. Was I acting out of annoyance with the teenagers, a desire to assert my authority, or something hidden or unkind that could bring about a result I didn't want? I consciously set aside any ulterior motive I could think of and focused on the intention to bring authentic engagement to the group. That was all.

I finally asked everyone if it would be OK if we went around the table, each expressing our favorite thing about my stepson as a way to honor him on his birthday. The immediate and unequivocal response from the birthday boy, however, was "NO! I don't want to do that."

Knowing that proceeding in a way imposed by me wouldn't accomplish what I wanted, I let it go, cheerfully saying, "OK." But my intention was out there, and surprisingly, that wasn't the end of it. Someone suggested that perhaps I could say what I was thinking about the birthday boy without requiring everyone else to do so. Everyone listened politely while I expressed, sincerely, what I really appreciated about my stepson, and I wished him a happy and satisfying day. It was a different kind of talk. Then I let it go, again.

The intention I had clarified moments before seemed to get legs and a life of its own at that point. Another family member said, "Hey, I'd like to say something, too."



One by one, everyone around the table honored my stepson with a sincere expression of appreciation for something they liked about him. When we finished speaking, there was a noticeable shift in the energy of the group, leaving us together in a different, more connected way.

This is a precious gift of the Art of Convening.

—Cynthia Wold

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## TECHNOLOGY OF RELATIONSHIPS

At the foundation of the Art of Convening is a “technology of relationships.” If you hold as true that each interaction with another human being is an opportunity for authentic engagement or relationship, that interaction is enhanced. *The Art of Convening* is a guide to help us integrate our personal values into positive relationships that make possible the best outcomes for our gatherings, whether for communities, organizations, or the world.

We use a Convening Wheel model to explore the convergence of the inner and outer worlds of Conveners—those who engage others in meaningful meetings, discourse, and conversations. The integration of the personal practices of the Convener with the practical concerns of convening meetings and gatherings is the unique realm of the Art of Convening.

## INNER JOURNEY

We discovered while developing the Convening Wheel that the outer, physical, design-oriented delivery considerations in con-

vening always seem to follow the same path as the inner life of the Convener. That is why the inner considerations are so prominent in our convening model. We believe that the Convener is a leader whose power and effectiveness are rooted in personal development, integrity, and coherence. When we tap into the generosity inherent in most people, the wealth of knowledge and wisdom in any gathering is revealed.

To illustrate the concepts of the Art of Convening, we've developed the Convening Wheel model.

## THE CONVENING WHEEL

The Convening Wheel is the form we use to visualize the inner and outer considerations of the Convener. The parts or phases of the Convening Wheel, the center and eight outer points around the perimeter, are called *Aspects*. We start at the center with *At the Heart of the Matter* and then move up, or north, to *Clarifying Intent*, then travel clockwise all the way around to *Commitment to Action*. We follow a path that reflects both the *presence* and *action* of the Convener. The Wheel reveals an intuitive, logical progression of actively engaged relationship.

You may ask, "Do I really have to do all of these steps?" The short answer is: to get the best result, yes; to see an improvement, no. Begin where it makes the most sense, with a commitment to try following the Wheel as your understanding and practice grow.

Despite our best intentions to use the whole Convening Wheel model, we understand that in our everyday world, sometimes an impromptu conversation or gathering surprises us. Sometimes our active lives deliver us to a gathering unprepared;

or we did not call the meeting, so we arrive feeling that nothing can be done to modify or change the meeting form.

Even so, the power and capacity of the Art of Convening will continue to grow and permeate our gatherings as we utilize and practice it when we can. Every time we practice the Art of Convening, we strengthen the habit, much like learning how to drive a car. After a while, our bodies and minds operate in such a way that the doing of it takes less and less of our conscious thought, but we become more and more proficient.

Here are the nine Aspects of the Convening Wheel, with a definition of each:

*At the Heart of the Matter.* Who I am in relationship with others.

*Clarifying Intent.* The alignment of our intention with the purpose of our engagement.

*The Invitation.* A sincere offering to engage that integrates purpose and intent.

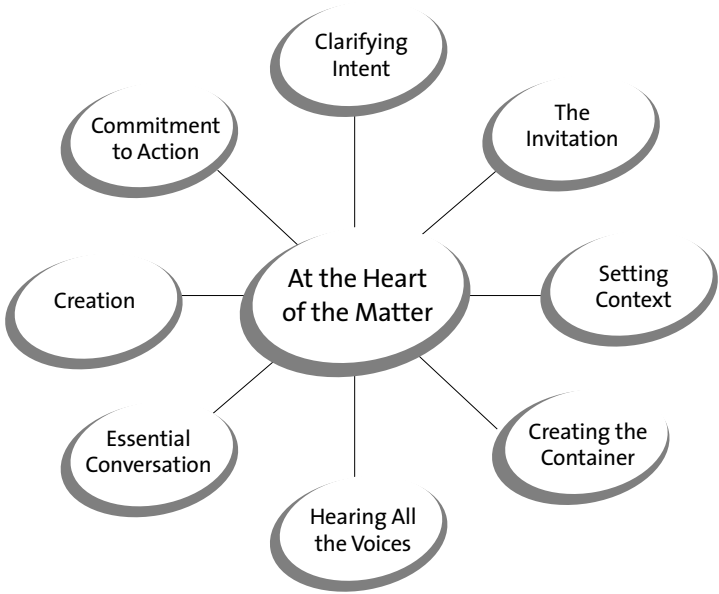
*Setting Context.* Communicating the form, function, and purpose of our engagement and intent.

*Creating the Container.* Creating the physical and energetic field within which we meet.

*Hearing All the Voices.* Each person speaks, is heard, and is present and accounted for.

*Essential Conversation.* Meaningful exchange within an atmosphere of trust.

*Creation.* Something new that emerges from engagements of shared purpose and trust.



***Commitment to Action.*** An individual and/or collective agreement to be responsible and accountable for the way forward.

The structure of the Convening Wheel illustrates the various Aspects of convening as a whole. As we progress through the Aspects around the Wheel (whether tentatively, fitfully, or gracefully), we cycle through the steps and considerations using this circular form to guide our way of being and doing.

The Convening Wheel is flexible. Rather than being limited to a sequential progression, we are able to correct our course at any juncture along the path. As in our individual lives, we at times need to hit the “reset button” to refocus or step back a few paces to a place of balance and equilibrium. This is also

true in our relational lives as leaders and Conveners. The path of the Convening Wheel isn't rigid or static any more than are our relationships.

Each of the nine chapters in this book covers an Aspect of the Convening Wheel. Each Aspect builds on the previous and provides a bridge to the next, creating a cycle of wholeness in our relationships and engagements. We examine each by looking at three core elements: the possible Challenge we may face in implementing it, the core Principle behind it, and the Essential Questions that shape our understanding. We also include a "Making It Real" discussion that explores common situations we've come across when engaged in an Aspect of the Convening Wheel.

Here are the definitions of the core elements of each Aspect to further your understanding:

***Challenge.*** The fundamental barrier that we must see in order to continue to the next Aspect.

***Principle.*** The foundational value that informs an Aspect of the Wheel.

***Essential Questions.*** Questions one asks in an Aspect of the Wheel that illuminate the core Principle.

Each chapter concludes with helpful reminders that summarize the major ideas and themes, including the sections "Aspect-Strengthening Exercises" and "Journaling Questions" for active engagement and practice.

The Art of Convening can produce breakthrough outcomes that are satisfying and extraordinary for the participants as well

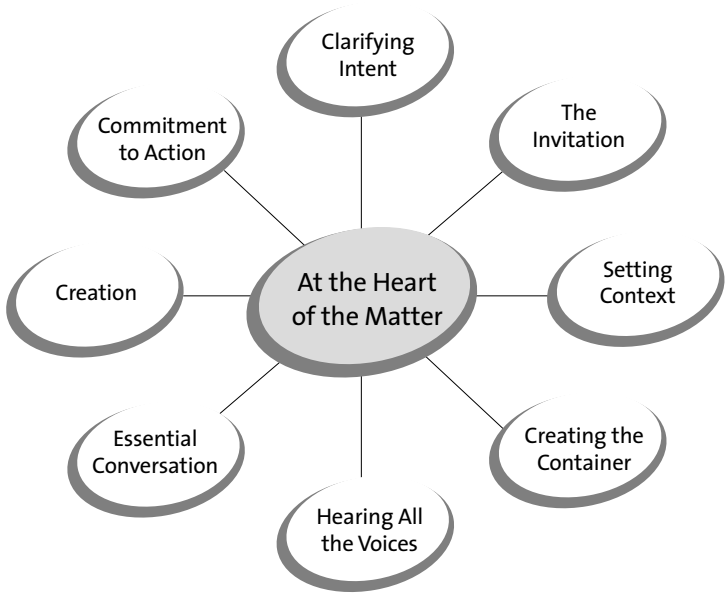
as their organizations and communities. The guidelines in this book are for those of us seriously engaged in and committed to making a life-changing difference in our own lives and the lives of those we gather.

Through the principles and practices of the Art of Convening, anyone can learn that meaningful connection and engagement are not only possible but also imperative for obtaining sustainable, satisfying results in our businesses, organizations, communities, families, and personal relationships.

The chapters that follow take you through the Aspects one by one while exploring each in detail.

Our gratitude goes out to you for your willingness to step forward with us on the Convener's journey.

*—Craig and Patricia Neal*



# 1. AT THE HEART OF THE MATTER

*Who I am in relationship with others*

## WHAT IS AT THE HEART OF THE MATTER?

The place to start when we convene meetings, gatherings, and conversations is with ourselves. If we are to lead into authentic engagement, it is important to be genuine. Knowing who we are as human beings helps us to bring this genuineness forward. Additionally, our ability to frame, embody, and model authentic engagement is improved when we explore how we will be in relationship with others.

AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT  
*A genuine expression of what is true for us, and an attentive listening to what is true for another, or others.*

We call this first, central Aspect of the Convening Wheel *At the Heart of the Matter*.

This is where we practice knowing ourselves as human beings and enter an awareness of how we will be in relationship with others. It is a big subject, and a lifelong quest and journey for many of us.

The idea of knowing oneself is the foundational premise of countless leadership books and trainings, as well as other self-



improvement, motivational, and spiritual literature. There is a reason for that. It is important. Approaching the principles and practices of the Art of Convening without getting at this core Aspect, one way or another, would be like trying to make a wheel without a hub; it can be done, but, well, that's one wobbly wheel. This central Aspect serves as a stabilizer and calibrator for our convening practice; we return to it again and again.

Many of us are on a continuing journey of self-reflection. What we have learned, and will learn on that journey, will serve us well as Conveners. If we are just beginning a journey of knowing ourselves, a convening practice is one place to start. A difference between *At the Heart of the Matter* and many other journeys of self-reflection is that we also examine how we will be in relationship with others. When we think of these things, we get at the heart of our relationship with the participants of our gathering.

## CHALLENGE

### *Staying connected*

Do we choose to open ourselves to relationship, or do we choose to close?

In times of high stress, we can be distracted from our connection to who we are. Convening, for Heartland, is the art of gathering and "holding" people, in a safe and generative space, for the sake of an authentic engagement that works for all. We consider each gathering to be an entry into a relationship with others. Staying authentically connected to others is, ultimately, all about being connected to ourselves. If we are not in touch with ourselves and the core of our intent, how can we maintain a genuine connection to other people?

*there is a journey  
of the heart  
that calls to those  
who are seeking  
something  
more*

*beyond the well traveled  
roads of repeated platitudes  
and long held beliefs  
there awaits a plentitude  
of new ideas yearning  
to be explored*

*out there somewhere  
in the realms of what we  
don't even know we don't know  
lies a vast  
vista of possibilities  
open to discovery . . .*

—Minx Boren<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of *At the Heart of the Matter* is to increase our clarity, confidence, and sense of belonging so that, come what may, we are able to hold others in the safest, most generative container possible. Although personal and internal, this Aspect is a powerful touchstone, and precursor, for thoughtful intention and design of our meetings. Some of the exercises in this book will help us get started or continue to reveal to ourselves who we are,

which will increase our ability to stay connected and open to our relationships with others.

## PRINCIPLE

*Knowing who I am allows me to be  
in authentic engagement.*

Our undertaking to connect with other human beings in a genuine, meaningful way is what authentic engagement is all about. But unless we are willing to reflect on who we are, we don't give others something real to connect to. Expecting to authentically

engage with others when we don't know ourselves is like believing that we can physically grasp a hologram or lean on the mist; it seems as if there's something there, but when we try it out, we learn differently.

The journey of self-reflection that we begin or continue with this Aspect of the Convening Wheel provides something solid for us and others to connect to.

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### FORGING THE INNER HEART

The first container that required attention was the one shaped in my own interior. I needed, for my own sake and for the sake of the whole, to make sure there was a connection between my stated desire for real community and authenticity and my own life. In order for me to lead with integrity, I needed to close the gap between my exterior persona and my interior reality.

In preparation for an important meeting I was to convene, I spent many hours attending to my own fears, assumptions, hopes, freedoms, and limitations. I took long, meditative walks; I journaled; I consulted with colleagues (including my AoC partners). When it came time for the meeting, I was able to hold the group with a sense of nonanxious presence. I cannot overstate how important that was for me and for the gathered whole. I have learned that what happens in the days and hours before the meeting is at least as important as what takes place in the meeting.

Because I attended to my interior container, I was more prepared to help shape an outer container—in the context of the meeting—large enough to hold the charged emotional engagements of the group.

—By Terry Chapman<sup>2</sup>

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## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

*Who am I as a human being?*

*How will I be in relationship with others?*

When we have thoroughly explored these questions, the connection of ourselves in relationship to others makes more sense and tends to flow more naturally. When we practice mindful reminders through reflective practices, we bring ourselves back to our basic humanity.

These are internal reflections. Whether we share our discovery with others is not as important as truthfully addressing these questions for ourselves. Our discovery will be *At the Heart of the Matter*. The journaling questions and exercises at the end of the chapter will help focus our internal vision in order to explore these questions.

Through this internal inquiry, we have the opportunity to experience the core of *who we are* and *how we will be* in relationship with others. When we understand the nature of why we desire to be in relationship with others, our gatherings tend to have an integrity that goes beyond the sole reliance on form and technique. This quality allows for the possibility of authentic connection.

As Terry pointed out in "Forging the Inner Heart," spending hours attending to his own internal condition was essential. This enabled him, when the time came, to be centered, grounded, and able to "hold the group with a sense of nonanxious presence."

## MAKING IT REAL

There is a lot of pressure in our lives to go, go, go all the time—to drive results and spring into action, often before the action's

optimal time has come. It's counterintuitive to take the time to reflect on how we will be in relationship with others. In a way, we have to slow down and do the internal due diligence to know what results we really want to drive and when it is time to take an action.

This Aspect of the Convening Wheel is all about remembering who we are—perhaps recalling the person we forgot we were, in all the hubbub of life and work.

Some of us may already have a practice that sufficiently serves the purpose of spurring self-examination and self-knowledge. If we

TRUE LEADERSHIP  
*is an inside job.*

—Michael Bush<sup>3</sup>

don't have a practice or want to add to what we already do, there are practices, both ancient and modern, that can help us remember. An ongoing practice of self-reflection, of any kind, is a potent tool for getting *At the Heart of the Matter*, and can enable us to be better prepared in whatever conditions we convene.

Practices of remembering, such as meditation, prayer, reflection, journal keeping, walks in nature, and contemplation, are very helpful. When we begin to lose our self-awareness, find ourselves in a state of stress and confusion, or want to reinforce what we already know, we can strengthen *At the Heart of the Matter* using them. These practices help to focus our thoughts and strengthen our sense of presence in the moment, allowing us to enter into authentic engagements with confidence.

***Mindfulness:*** Mindfulness and meditative practices are designed to bring the mind, body, and emotions to relaxation, thus allowing us to approach whatever

is next refreshed, present, and fully awake. A mindfulness exercise is included at the end of this chapter.

**Prayer:** Prayer is expressing our relationship with a higher power, and there are as many ways to pray as there are religions and belief systems. The contemplative nature of prayer has an effect of bringing one closer to one's true self.

**Conscious reflection:** Creating time, no matter how busy or distracted we may be, to focus our attention on the positive aspects of our lives is conscious reflection. Taking time to consider, with gratitude and appreciation, is a competency that can bring us to a more generative mindset.

**Journal keeping:** The act of journaling often reveals our own wisdom. It can be helpful to journal (or write by hand, computer, or other device) our thoughts at particular times when we are moved or when we want to discover something inside ourselves.

**Contemplation:** To contemplate something is to focus our thoughts exclusively on that thing. We use this practice to turn down the noise and see the main subject of our thoughts clearly.

**Spending time in nature:** In this context, the purpose of being in nature is to immerse ourselves in the biological world, where we all come from and to which we all belong. Often the beauty and presence of nature enables us to become more fully aware of our connections to life.

We take a “time in” when we use the practices above to make room in our minds and hearts for an awareness of what is *At the Heart of the Matter* to emerge. We may draw on any number of practices at various times until we are satisfied with the outcome.

When we enter into relationships with those we gather, from the firm ground that comes from self-reflection, we have confidence, courage, and a sense of what is possible. Our capacity for authentic engagement is increased as we frame, embody, and model this kind of connection, and give others something real to connect to.

This is the beginning of our journey around the Convening Wheel. We complete this Aspect by exploring who we are and how we will be in relationship with others. Each interaction with another human being is an opportunity for relationship; awareness of that fact creates a shift in our interactions. The journey that begins here is a powerful way to bring authentic engagement to meetings, gatherings, and conversations because knowing who we are in relationship with others is a sustaining force that keeps the Convening Wheel together.

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### ELEPHANTS AND AUTHENTICITY

I convened a gathering of 150 executives at a state social services agency. The initial request was to facilitate a daylong offsite retreat, to engage in a five-year visioning process, that would create a high level of participant input, feedback, and agreement on a way forward, in difficult times, for the agency. The desired outcome would be a five-year vision statement to be distributed throughout the organization.

A week before the event, a series of dramatic budget cuts, personnel changes, and presenter shifts were made. It was decided that we would go ahead with the retreat in the midst of these changes. However, our initial design of this event had been figuratively ripped away.

How would I proceed now that this additional emotional stress and uncertainty factor had been added to the equation?

I began to look to others for guidance—to tell me who I needed to be for this gathering and how I could be in relationship with the people there when emotions might be running exceptionally high. I found that the more I looked to others for the answer, the more confused I became.

Several days before the retreat, I consciously engaged in a series of reflective practices that helped focus my energies and get *At the Heart of the Matter*. Setting aside some time alone to meditate, I visualized the gathering and imagined the best possible outcome. This practice of envisioning myself and others authentically engaged allowed me to see my way forward step by step. I wrote in my journal to put substance to my thoughts, intents, and outcomes, which made my vision more real to me—and enabled me to share some of my discoveries with others. These practices allowed me to articulate who I am as a human being and how I would be in relationship with others, grounding my emotions and enabling me to imagine the most powerful and beneficial outcome possible with the other designers for the retreat.

By grounding myself through a self-reflective process, I returned to the core of why I had entered the agreement to convene this session. Once I embodied the truth of what was *At the Heart of the Matter*, a sense of confidence, purpose, and courage to step into the unknown guided me forward.



I came to a place of nonjudgment where trusting myself was the important touchstone that would carry my relationship with the others at this gathering and would bring much-needed authenticity to this retreat.

What had come to me out of this process was that before we could envision the way forward, we needed to speak honestly and clearly about the present condition, which had yet to be done.

As I entered the room that morning, my intuition told me that the day would flow seamlessly. The design and production teams and those that came early seemed to sense this positive energy right away. I gathered the design team about an hour before the start of the retreat to say that we had a very powerful design and that all we needed to do now was to welcome people and tell the truth as we knew it.

There were several elephants in the room, known as budget cuts, layoffs, and wholesale destruction of the department. At my request, we began by having the two core presenters agree to speak openly and honestly about three questions: what did they know that they could say, what would be the impact on the department, and, more important, how did they feel at this moment—how did this affect them?

We had chosen to remain open to relationship with the people in that room. The presenters were willing to authentically engage. We were all willing to say what was true for us. You could feel the cloud lifting, the stress leaving the room, the space opening to authentic possibility, and a visceral leaning forward of each person to take part in an active way because they felt an invitation to be real.

—By Craig Neal

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## **WHERE WE ARE ON THE CONVENING WHEEL**

1. *At the Heart of the Matter*—We have explored who we are and how we will be in relationship with others.

We have started the journey. Now we are ready to proceed to an exciting and crucial Aspect for the gathering at hand, *Clarifying Intent*.

### **Things to Remember**

**Challenge:** *Staying connected—Do we choose to open ourselves to relationship or do we choose to close?*

**Principle:** *Knowing who I am allows me to be in authentic engagement.*

#### **Essential Questions:**

- Who am I as a human being?
- How will I be in relationship with others?

### **Aspect-Strengthening Exercises**

#### **Checklist for the Gathering at Hand**

- Who am I in relationship to this gathering?
- What is my relationship to the people of this gathering?
- What is the purpose of our gathering?
- What does success look like?
- Have I centered myself (noticed my preferences, judgments, and certainties)?
- Am I ready to move on? (If not, why not?)

#### **Practices-of-Remembering Exercises**

**Mindfulness:** Choose a quiet, dark, or softly lit place to sit, either in a chair or on the floor/ground. Close your eyes or gaze softly at an object ahead. Now, shift your attention to your breath and simply notice the thoughts that come up and the sounds around you while letting them pass by. Allow yourself a few minutes at first; you may wish to increase the time as it suits you.

For more on mindfulness practice, see *Mindfulness Meditation: Cultivating the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind*, by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Nightingale-Conant, 2002).

*Prayer: I like to start my day with a walking prayer of about one hour. The first 15 minutes or so, my mind wanders to the things of the coming day that draw my attention. Then I enter a time when I am able to gently let go and just be with what is. I notice the surroundings, my own breath, and I begin to feel the rhythm of the walk. Often, other thoughts come to mind: mostly gratitude for life, gratitude for the beauty of creation, and a sense of grounding. As my mind and body open, people come to mind. I hold them there in this place of nonanxious presence and think about their lives, sending them love. Some may call this a prayer of intercession. For me, it is an opening into my essential self, which then creates a posture of being present to the world.*

—Terry Chapman<sup>4</sup>

### **Conscious reflection:**

1. Find a comfortable place to sit with your feet on the floor and hands in your lap.
2. If you're comfortable to do so, close your eyes and notice your breathing. Otherwise, just soften your gaze.
3. Shift your focus away from your mind to the area around your heart.
4. Imagine yourself breathing through your heart. It may help to put your hand on your heart.
5. Keep your focus there for 10 seconds or more.
6. Now, recall a time in which you felt appreciation for someone or something and attempt to reexperience it.
7. Notice the feeling.
8. When you're ready, open your eyes.<sup>5</sup>

*Contemplation: To contemplate is to find a place in one's being for stillness. This does not come easy for busy people. But with practice, one discovers a place of stillness, just under the surface of our often frenetic lives. The 20th-century Jewish mystic Abraham Heschel wrote of such a place: "In the tempestuous ocean of time and toil there are islands of stillness where we may enter a harbor and reclaim our dignity." At the*

*end of the day, in a quiet, spacious place, consider the movements of the day. Reflect on times when you felt a tightness in your chest, anxiety, cynicism, or even fear. Name those experiences and gently let them go. Then also intentionally recall moments in the day when you felt peace, joy, centeredness, and attunement. Give thanks for those moments and hold them for a while in your mind. This practice of sifting through the moments of the day can help focus the heart and mind so that one can let go of that which may be harmful, and hold on to that which brings more life.*

—Terry Chapman<sup>6</sup>

## EXERCISE 1: WHAT DO I STAND FOR?

### *The set-up:*

*You can do this in 20 minutes.*

Find a quiet place to write, and close the door so that you won't be interrupted.

Write by hand (or computer if you must) in your journal. Any notebook will do as long as you know it will remain private.

**Step 1.** Who are the people who most influenced your life—positively or negatively? List them by name and by their relationship to you. You may wish to express why they are influential; however, this is not required. Once you've finished, pause to reflect on each before moving on to Step 2.

**Step 2.** *What are the core nonnegotiable values that guide your life and work?* Ask yourself about the bedrock values that guide you in your life and work. List key words first, noticing how they feel. You may have only a few; don't worry. It's more important that you find those that are not open to negotiation to you and that reflect how you live your life.

**Step 3.** *Share those values with someone as soon as possible.* Start by saying, "I stand for [the values you've written down] in my life and work."

**Step 4 (optional).** *Write a short narrative story that is declarative.* It starts with "I" and goes on from there. Something like this: "I stand for integrity and love in all my relations. My family is

sacred to me. Truth, humor, and play are essential to my daily life. My body is my temple and I take care of it . . .”

### EXERCISE 2: A PERSONAL CREATION STORY

Personal creation stories are a powerful tool to attract what we desire to create in our lives. When we can envision our future, we are more likely to create the changes, put forth the effort, and acquire the skills necessary to achieve it. This is also a good way to explore who we are and how we will be in relationship with others.

*What to do:* Write a one-page creation story for yourself as a Convener, a gatherer and holder of people, for the next two years.

**Step 1.** Find a quiet place to reflect and write with no distractions. Allow yourself at least 30 minutes for each writing session.

**Step 2.** Once seated, ask yourself these simple yet potent questions:

- What is next for my life, and how can I consciously create what I want? (List events, things you want to accomplish, changes you wish to see for yourself, and so on.)
- What do I need to leave behind in order to do that? (List those things that are in the way of your actualizing what you desire.)

**Step 3.** Now imagine yourself two years out: What do you see for yourself? What are you doing? Write a one-page story or narrative to yourself in the first person. For example, “I am happily living in \_\_\_ with \_\_\_, having just made a decision to pursue my passion by \_\_\_ (date or time),” and so forth.

Some focusing questions to help you get started:

- What is the story that I tell others about myself as a Convener?
- Who am I in relationship with others, and why do I authentically engage?
- What calls me to convene?

## **Journaling Questions**

- What are my relationships now, and how do I serve?
- What is my vision for myself as a Convener? Write the story of your life two years out. List accomplishments and/or milestones. Be specific.

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