

the **POWER** of  
**COLLECTIVE**  
**WISDOM** and the  
trap of  
collective  
folly



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Foreword by Peter Senge

An Excerpt From

***The Power of Collective Wisdom:  
And the Trap of Collective Folly***

by Alan Briskin, Sheryl Erickson, John Ott & Tom Callanan

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# Welcome

This book is intended for people who seek more effective and satisfying ways of working with others. It is for people who are working to make their communities, neighborhoods, and organizations more inclusive, effective, and wise. Everyone who participates in groups has something important to contribute and something further to learn. As authors, we bring to bear our learning from decades of convening groups and participating in large-scale change efforts in business, health care, education, mental health, criminal justice, conflict resolution, and global initiatives. Ten years ago, we founded and have since shepherded the Collective Wisdom Initiative, an informal network of practitioners and scholars from around the world who are bringing together a body of research, theory, and practice into a field of study that we have come to call *collective wisdom*.

Collective wisdom refers to knowledge and insight gained through group and community interaction. At a deeper level, however, it is about our living connection to each other and the interdependence we share in our neighborhoods, organizations, and world community. Supported by the Fetzer Institute, a private operating foundation in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the Collective Wisdom Initiative shares with Fetzer a common conviction: that efforts to address the world's critical issues must go beyond political, social, and economic strategies to their psychological, spiritual, and cultural roots. Behind our shared conviction lies a belief that human

survival depends upon our recognizing that we have a stake in each other's well-being, and that groups have potential for being sources of extraordinary creative power, incubators of innovative ideas, and vehicles for social healing.

*The Power of Collective Wisdom* is the result of a collaboration involving dozens of contributors and hundreds of people from our network and beyond. Stories fill the book, telling of collective wisdom's emergence in diverse settings, across different cultures, and in earlier times. Our book outlines the commitments and convictions that aid collective wisdom's emergence in groups. It also sketches a larger worldview, one encompassing the reverence for life associated with wisdom and the importance of a collective perspective. Throughout these pages, readers will be guided toward a deeper understanding of the conditions that make wisdom possible in groups and the characteristics that underlie many successful group methodologies.

We also offer a caution. We need to be alert to wisdom's opposing potential. One of the main messages of the book is just how easy it is to fall into the trap of *collective folly* instead of collective wisdom. This happens when groups, organizations, or communities become so polarized that they can't see the consequences of their collective actions. Similarly, false or forced agreement in groups can lead to tragic consequences. The power of collective wisdom is furthered when we learn how to navigate skillfully between the shores of polarization and false agreement.

We see our efforts as part of a larger social movement. Everywhere we look, we see groups, networks, and communities rising up to address common challenges. What all of us

share is a collective outlook and a desire for wise action. We seek what human beings have always sought: to find what is best in ourselves and what is best in and for the group. Our intent in the following pages is to articulate some of the key ideas of this search and to provide a foundation for the field of collective wisdom's further development.

## Use of Terms

COLLECTIVE — A number of persons or things considered as one group or whole; marked by connection among or with the members of a group.

FOLLY — Lacking good sense or normal prudence and foresight, a continuum of behaviors ranging from personally foolish behavior to criminality, evil, and depravity.

POWER — The ability, strength, and capacity to do something, including the capacity to bring about change.

TRAP — Something by which one is caught or stopped unawares; a position or situation from which it is difficult or impossible to escape.

WISDOM — Exercising sound judgment; reflects great understanding of people and of situations. Considerate of multiple perspectives and forms of intelligence. Wisdom in groups is demonstrated by insight, good sense, clarity, objectivity, and discernment rooted in deep caring and compassion.





## *Collective and Wisdom Makes the Difference*

It started with a bolt of lightning in an area of wilderness known as Mann Gulch in Montana. In a telling case study of collective failure, twelve young smokejumpers and a forest ranger lost their lives battling the flames that erupted. Everything that could have gone wrong that tragic day seemed to, including the final moments when an action was taken that might have saved them. Wagner Dodge, who headed the crew, came up with a brilliant tactic. As the flames from the fire whipped their way toward the men, he bent down and lit a fire to the grass in front of him. As the fire spread, it burned in a widening circle. Standing in front of this wall of flame, he stepped through onto a small charred patch of ground that

allowed him to “hide” within the larger body of the blaze. This was not a *backfire*, in which an area of ground is burned in front of an oncoming blaze to create a firebreak. There was no time. This was simply a case of an in-the-moment reaction.

From within the burned-out patch of ground, Dodge beckoned the two men closest to him to follow him in. They could not hear him amid the sounds of exploding trees and screaming winds, but they could see him frantically waving, motioning them to follow him inside the circle. Instead, they glanced his way and kept going. And then the rest of the men passed by, not one of them following their crew chief into the safety of the circle. With the exception of Dodge and two men who miraculously stumbled into an area barren of vegetation, everyone perished. It was the worst disaster in Forest Service history.

There were certainly lessons here about leadership, especially in this particular circumstance, which later documented failed relationships among the crew and a command-and-control style of leadership. There were also lessons about the need for cooperation, trust, teamwork, and coordination, lessons the Forest Service took seriously and which transformed their ways of preparing teams rather than just individuals.<sup>1</sup> Yet, at a deeper level, there is a more fundamental question. What allows us, in groups and larger collectives, to find solutions amid complexity and daunting circumstances, to make wise choices and work together, as opposed to splintering apart and failing to see what opportunities arise? How can we *together* find solutions to pressing and bewildering problems that face us every day? How

can we know when and how to join with others, stepping through fire if necessary?

The failure at Mann Gulch was not due to any one element alone; the science of firefighting was at an early stage, wind direction is always unpredictable, and bad luck played its part. We all understand how external conditions can dictate the outcome of a situation. What stood out, however, from the studies that followed was something internal to the group. There had been an assumption, which proved tragic, that men individually trained, put on a plane without even knowing each other, and given orders to obey their crew chief without question would know what to do when their circumstances changed dramatically. There had been precious little understanding about how to prepare groups to improvise when necessary and trust in each other.

The lessons learned from Mann Gulch were not a call for just any change, but for a change in thinking about how to save lives. The tragedy moved the Forest Service in the direction of thinking collectively: how to train men together and create greater collaboration among the various disciplines involved with fire safety. They dedicated themselves to the question of how best to make sound judgments as teams and to cultivate the intelligence that existed from the bottom up, from the smokejumpers and firefighters who fought the fires. It is a lesson we must now learn on a much larger scale.

*The Power of Collective Wisdom* is a call for people to come together to think collectively about the circumstances they face. It is a guide to reclaiming our participation in groups as positive, necessary, and hopeful without sugarcoating the external challenges we face or the internal obstacles that prevent

us from seeing new possibilities. Wisdom reflects a capacity for sound judgment, discernment, and the objectivity to see what is needed in the moment. Collective wisdom reflects a similar capacity to learn together and evolve toward something greater and wiser than what we can do as individuals alone. This book emerges from a deep conviction that we have a stake in each other and that what binds us together is greater than what drives us apart.

### *THE NEED FOR THIS BOOK*

We must find insight and ways to cooperate with each other at a depth and scale that is unprecedented. We see this need appearing everywhere—on the front pages of our newspapers, in our organizations, and even within our network of family and friends. If we cannot find legitimate ways to join together, to cooperate and to understand each other, we will not find solutions to the dysfunctionality and messes that seem to be growing all around us, let alone to the largest problems that beset us as nations and as a world community, such as global warming, poverty, and war.

We cannot any longer

- kill our way out of it,
- deny that it is happening, or
- rationalize that this is just the way it is.

If we do not turn the temperature down, literally and figuratively, on the global challenges we face and the polarization and fragmentation we live with on a daily basis, we will

be staring down a path of untenable choices. Are we willing to gamble our future and our children's future on more of the same?

Change happens on a macro systems level but also on a micro level—one conversation at a time, one group at a time, one new idea spawned among a group of committed people, setting off a chain reaction of new possibilities. We believe this kind of transformation not only is possible but has always been the way change happens. Transformation, even on a large scale, has a personal dimension, and each individual matters. We believe such transformation involves a fundamental shift in our thinking, and an understanding and embodiment of collective wisdom.

We believe our capacity for collective wisdom is innate and its emergence in groups catalyzed by awareness of a compelling need and a higher purpose. The global crises we face, ranging from economic instability to resource sustainability, are each day encroaching more on our personal lives. There is a clear rationale for collective action. We see the beginnings of a social movement, grounded in wisdom, percolating up through social networks in the business world, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and cross-cultural affiliations. In every community and organization are those whose uncommon behaviors are empathic, collective in their orientation, and far-reaching in their vision. We already have the human resources necessary to make a difference. Amid the crises we face is also an opportunity for seeking fresh perspectives on a grand scale. This book provides a framework for that search and a name for that movement.

Mark Gerzon, a leading conflict resolution facilitator and leadership trainer, and the author of *Leading Through Conflict*, wrote to us, “Humanity is hungering for wisdom. That is the word I hear most: not *compassion*; not *love*; not *peace*; not *kindness*—but *wisdom*. The other words all have deep meaning and their own unique power. But wisdom is the one that seems to magnetize people across the broadest spectrum around the world. I found myself drawn to this word because it is a cross-cutting theme in so many of the very diverse settings in which I am traveling.”<sup>2</sup>

### DEFINING OUR TERMS: COLLECTIVE, WISDOM, AND THE TRAP OF FOLLY

The dictionary defines *collective* as denoting a number of persons or things considered as one group or whole, marked by connection or similarity among or with the members of a group. In general, we use the term to designate a larger wholeness that may not be visible to the individual. For example, in groups we may be hardly conscious of being part of a collective because we see the world through an individualistic orientation. It is sometimes only in extreme circumstances or crisis that we recognize just how critical it is for groups to form a joint identity or combine and coordinate their diverse elements, or to become united behind a common purpose.

More often than not, we have a tendency to treat everything as separate and divisible. We analyze organizational structure and break it down into departments and functions. We diagram workflow and break it down into processes. We

evaluate people and break them down into skills or job classifications. In a hospital setting, people can become diagnostic categories or simply dysfunctioning organs, such as “the bad kidney in room 6.” We are so used to breaking things down into parts and pieces that we forget to look for what binds us together.

We must learn to shift our perspective back to what makes people and groups whole, to find what connects us together as a family, an organization, a nation, a world. Yet to do so requires a special kind of awareness. Collectivity without vigilance can come at a great cost. The collective can rob us of our distinctiveness, force upon us conformity, and rally us to war against an “other” who is not seen as part of our designated group. The collective can easily become synonymous with mobs, groupthink, and the lowest common denominator of group consensus, sacrificing anything original or even relevant to the circumstances that need to be addressed. Our book recognizes this in the form of collective behavior that leads to folly.

We define *folly* as lacking good sense, prudence, and foresight, a continuum of behaviors ranging from personally foolish behavior to criminality, evil, and depravity on a mass scale. Folly lacks discernment of fundamental human values and is a refusal to accept existing reality or to foresee the inevitable consequences of its actions. The result of folly can be mildly disconcerting or reach a scale of utter destruction and tragedy. It is a trap that all groups may find themselves in at some time and, once they’re caught, difficult to extricate themselves from. Our book presents folly as a potentiality of every group and often the consequence of two related yet

opposing dynamics: One is the movement in groups toward polarization, and the other is the movement toward false or forced agreement among the members.

We offer an alternative that is both hopeful and grounded in our research of groups. We believe the alternative is the human potential for finding ways to constructively work together and pursue wise action. By wise action, we mean the ability to exercise sound judgment, demonstrate good sense, and reflect a depth of understanding about people and situations. Wisdom in groups is demonstrated by insight, clarity, objectivity, and discernment rooted in deep caring and compassion.

By definition, wisdom is associated with accumulated philosophic or scientific learning but is distinguished by qualities of reverence and respect for life. *Wisdom*, as we use the term in this book, reminds us that we are part of something greater than ourselves alone. At a personal and group level, we link wisdom with thoughtfulness, an ability to reflect deeply on personal experience, and a capacity for applying discretion and intuitive understanding. Wisdom is a form of knowledge marked by our ability to discern the inner qualities and relationships of a situation. Considerate of multiple perspectives and forms of intelligence, wisdom often shows up in flashes of insight and new ways of understanding a situation. In groups, this can come in the form of *emergence*, something original or unexpected that moves the whole group forward or ties together disparate aspects of a situation.

When we join together the terms *collective* and *wisdom*, we reach a whole new synthesis of insight and revelation. Like binocular vision, in which both eyes are used at once, joining



collective with wisdom is a way of seeing with added dimension and depth. The collective eye can pick up patterns of order, variation, and connections; wisdom can detect meaning and human values that arise spontaneously from a particular situation. We achieve, to paraphrase the words of the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, an ability to weave together the slender threads of a fractured whole into a firmer pattern of meaning. To share collective wisdom with others is to make meaning from disparate threads and weave together a fresh understanding.

### *THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE WISDOM*

So why should collective wisdom matter to us personally? Real change comes from an awareness of our deep connectedness. For some, this may mean a spiritual awakening, a transformation that begins with the human heart. For others, it may be a more intellectual process, coming to see anew the need for addressing an emerging environmental ethic and related social issues involving business, health, education, and the disparity of wealth within and between nations. However we come to this new awareness, the promise of wisdom offers something unique that is often absent from more traditional approaches to innovation, change, and progressive ideas. Wisdom offers greater meaning regarding the value of life for oneself and others. Wisdom teachings invariably draw our attention back to the indivisibility of the whole and the immediacy of the moment.

At the collective level, wisdom holds the key to redefining communities in the service of alternative futures that are

life giving and sustainable. Collective wisdom invites us to think about the necessity of networks of people operating at the grassroots level to improve, invent, and discover new ways of enacting positive results. The outcome of a collective process that is wise is more likely a sound decision that goes beyond partisan concerns, and speaks instead to the aspirations of what is best in us and best for the circumstances at hand.

Collective wisdom helps us transcend the duality of self and others because it is a reminder that we are part of a larger framework from which we act out our role. As Shakespeare recognized, alone we are merely players, each with our exits and entrances, but as members of something larger, we become something extraordinary. “Consider,” another wise poet said, “how the stars that shine more brightly manage to combine in constellations, get a name.”<sup>3</sup> So too with collective wisdom: When we are in service to that which is life affirming and needed, we become something greater in combination with others.

The power of collective wisdom is to elicit new perspectives that reflect our common humanity and heal the divisions that keep us separated. Our ability to contribute to a better world, locally and globally, is magnified when we do it effectively with others. Similarly, dysfunction and divisions limit our contribution and lead us collectively into paralysis and negativity. Groups can be avenues for wisdom or unwittingly fall into traps of collective folly that foster false agreement and destructive polarities. The contribution of this book is to help readers navigate change that is alert to the potential of both wisdom and folly.

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*THIS BOOK AT A GLANCE*

When human beings gather in groups or in communities, a depth of awareness and insight, a type of transcendent knowing, becomes available to us that can inform wise action and extraordinary results. We call this type of knowing *collective wisdom* and believe it to be a potential of *all* groups as an innate human capacity.

In chapter 1, we discuss what collective wisdom is and the qualities associated with the experience. Collective wisdom, as the phrase suggests, is not of the individual alone or purely an insight of the intellect or mind. Sometimes spontaneous in groups, sometimes the outcome of an extended period of time and attention, collective wisdom is a potential of all groups and is marked by an experience of deepening connections: within ourselves, with each other, and to larger natural forces involving nature, spirit, and our place in the cosmos.

While collective wisdom can have positive, even dramatic effects on our efforts in groups, we cannot will it to arise. The appearance of collective wisdom is unpredictable and often difficult to put into words, which reflects both its quality of immediacy and its deeper underlying purpose. The power of collective wisdom lies in its ability to be an emergent phenomenon—from uncertainty, inquiry, and dialogue come new meaning, learning, and unanticipated ways to move forward. Although we cannot will collective wisdom to arise in groups, we can make preparations that encourage it to emerge.

In chapter 2, we discuss six stances that can deepen our capacity for wise action and prepare us for collective

wisdom to arise—illustrated with stories from diverse settings and times in history. We learn that we can increase the likelihood that collective wisdom will arise through the quality of how we listen and the conscious effort we make to suspend our personal certainty and seek diverse perspectives. We have the ability, personally and in groups, to read between the lines and listen with the wisdom of our heart.

In chapter 3, we explore these stances more fully by seeing how our internal perspective and external actions constitute a worldview. Through reflection on how our reality is shaped, we become better able to see the contours of a new consciousness, one that is more likely to create a positive future with others. The root meaning of the word *wisdom* involves seeing truths hidden from the casual observer. We bring attention to alternative worldviews that suggest we may be part of a larger collective consciousness, and why.

Being alert to wisdom, however, includes a necessary vigilance. In chapters 4–6, we discuss the pitfalls of an opposing potential—*collective folly*. Collective folly is a trap that all groups find themselves in at times, existing on a continuum from misguided or foolish behaviors to large-scale acts of depravity. As with collective wisdom, we believe that collective folly is a potential of *all* groups and is amplified by group dynamics involving polarization and false agreement. Every day, human beings commit small acts of foolishness and injustice, as well as unspeakable acts of violence and cruelty, within our families, among our friends, and against groups of strangers small and large that we deem as “other.” By being alert

to the potential presence of collective folly, we become more adept at cultivating a group wisdom that is realistic and tangible—unleashing extraordinary potential for innovation and change.

In chapter 7, we tell stories of groups and their capacity for innovation and change that reveal the power of collective wisdom for healing, creativity, and conflict resolution. Collective wisdom occurs most reliably when group members feel both safe and challenged to find what is best in themselves and what is best in and for the group. From such a vantage point, it becomes possible to heal old and current divisions, to experience true belonging to a vital community, to act creatively, and to feel hope about the larger world. When groups come together like this, a new threshold of co-creative power is reached.

In chapter 8, we learn how to embody the power of collective wisdom in acts of mindfulness. We learn how to continually return to the immediacy of our circumstances, create safe spaces for inquiry, and cultivate our transformative powers in the context of groups. Mindfulness keeps our attention on the present moment even as we must learn to act strategically and from a long-term perspective. Sometimes mistaken simply for a way to solve problems, the power of collective wisdom is in its ability to alter the way we pay attention to what will help us solve problems together. It is an affirmation of the common humanity we share with others.



## *What Is Collective Wisdom and How Does It Show Up?*

Central Washington University and Western Oregon University were playing each other for a spot in the NCAA Division playoffs in women's softball. Up to the plate stepped Western Oregon's Sara Tucholsky, their five-foot-two right fielder, with two runners on base in the second inning. On the second pitch, the light-hitting outfielder blasted the ball over the center field fence for an apparent home run. Looking up to see the ball clear the fence, she missed first base as she rounded toward second and had to stop abruptly to return and touch it. But something in her right knee gave way and she collapsed on the base path. "I was in a lot of pain," she reported later. "Our first-base

coach was telling me I had to crawl back to first base. 'I can't touch you,' she said, 'or you'll be out. I can't help you.'" Sara crawled through the dirt in obvious agony as her teammates and spectators watched her.<sup>1</sup>

The Western Oregon coach rushed onto the field and conferred with the umpires. They were clear that a player could not be assisted by her own teammates and that she would be credited with a single but not a home run. The Western Oregon coach did not know what to do; this was a crucial game, and it was Sara's first home run in four years.

Then Mallory Holtman stepped in. She was Central Washington's star first baseman and the player that other teams feared most. She offered a simple solution. If Sara's own teammates could not help her round the bases, what if Central Washington players did? The umpires concluded that there were no rules against an opposing team assisting. Mallory and her shortstop picked up Sara and resumed the home run walk, pausing at each base to let her touch her uninjured foot to the bag. Mallory recalled that they were laughing when they reached second base and wondered how this would look to others. When they reached home, they found out. The entire Western Oregon team was in tears. "My whole team was crying," Sara recalled. "Everybody in the stands was crying. My coach was crying. It touched a lot of people."

Western Oregon won the game 4-2, but that is not what Mallory Holtman took away as her lesson. "In the end, it is not about winning and losing so much," she reflected. "It

was about this girl. She hit it over the fence and was in pain and she deserved a home run. . . . This is a huge experience I will take away. We are not going to remember if we won or lost, we are going to remember this kind of stuff that shows the character of our team. It is the best group of girls I've played with. I came up with the idea, but any girl on the team would have done it."

Mallory Holtman is a fine human being. When the moment came for her to act, she did not hesitate. Nor did she wonder whether her teammates would hesitate. *It is the best group of girls I've played with.* Indeed, her impulse to help was not seen as separate from her teammates: *I came up with the idea, but any girl on the team would have done it.*

The story of Sara and the aid she received from Mallory and her teammates flew over the Internet. It was as if in a sea of distress, evidence of human kindness was news. Yet it was news not because it was beyond our imagination, though the details were unusual, but because it was a reminder of what is common and decent in all of us. Yes, many would have left Sara to fend for herself, rationalized that the rules dictated the outcome, and felt justified, even fortunate, in her turn of bad luck. But Mallory Holtman did not hesitate to help, and her team backed her up.

How can we awaken to a world more like that? We see the results of a world in which the urge to dominate is everywhere, and even conversations can be competitive battlegrounds for winning and losing. How can we be part of settings, and help create settings, where the company we keep is more in step with human kindness, more likely to give others consideration and a helping hand?



FOUNDATIONAL QUALITIES AND  
CHARACTERISTICS OF COLLECTIVE WISDOM

Collective wisdom is about how we come to make sound judgments with others, touched by what is common and decent in all of us. It is an insight or action recognizing that what happens to one happens to all. As such, it is not solely an analytic decision, a compromise, a vote, or even a win-win situation. Mallory knew enough about herself and enough about her teammates to act with a high degree of empathy that extended beyond her own group. This was no small feat regardless of its simplicity or the seemingly minor consequences at stake. *She hit it over the fence and was in pain and she deserved a home run* is a statement that has metaphoric power. We are capable of treating others, even those outside our own group, as we would want to be treated. We are capable of recognizing pain in others and responding to them. More often than we realize, we are adept at acting in the immediacy of the moment when something of real importance and value is at stake. These are characteristics that extend beyond the individual to groups, and they have real significance.

"I've been collecting stories about collective wisdom," cross-cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrien told us. "One was in Montana, where a Jewish family had a menorah in the window, and their home got completely trashed. The next morning, word got out, and by that evening, all the people in that community put a menorah in their window. That's an example of stopping violence in a collective, a unification that stopped violence."<sup>2</sup> It's the same message that Mallory Holtman conveyed in her actions with her team, but now

set up in reverse: If it's done to one, it'll have to be done to all. Mallory Holtman saw beyond two separate teams, and the townspeople in Montana saw beyond two separate religions, both recognizing the larger humanity in which we are joined.

Reduced to its essence, collective wisdom evokes experiences of connection—an understanding that arises with others of right action and on behalf of a larger purpose. It is a form of knowledge that is not solely intellectual or based entirely on the knowledge of one person. This is what makes wisdom collective, though individuals often play a major part in collective wisdom's occurrence.

Collective wisdom is reflected in group behaviors that show human decency, social justice, and spiritual awareness. The effects of such behaviors result in surprising and positive outcomes that often cannot be ascribed to a simple or singular cause. Sometimes quite ordinary, other times quite profound, collective wisdom is what can happen when people find themselves in situations that invite new perspectives and evoke higher aspirations. Often, its emergence is grounded in a different way of listening and bringing attention to the immediacy of the moment.

## A Silence on the River

I WAS IN A GROUP of about fifty people preparing to take our rafts into the water. There was a guide, a park ranger, who was Native American. His name was Vincent. We mostly didn't know each other. There was a lot of nervous energy in

the group. People were chatting, checking their gear, eating. Some were expecting Vincent to speak and get the trip going. He didn't seem to be in a hurry. He sat quietly as the group bustled about. Finally, as the group energy settled, he began to talk. I don't remember him going through a long list of dos and don'ts about rafting, though I'm sure he shared with us the essentials of what we needed to know. What I remember instead was that he shared a bit about himself and why he worked as a ranger. He talked about the land we were on, and how his ancestors once lived here. He mentioned that there were times when he sat by himself that he could feel the presence of his ancestors still, and hear their voices in the wind and on the river.

When he finished, there was a noticeable calm that came over the group, and we began moving into the water, almost silently. It was really quite beautiful, as if we too might hear something in the sounds of the water and the wind.<sup>3</sup>



One of the essential qualities of collective wisdom is a palpable sense of connection with each other and to larger forces that is found, for example, in nature, in relationship to our ancestors, and even in relation to a physical place. Often these experiences are grounded in group members' understanding of the sacred, however defined by the individuals and the group. Carol Frenier, an author and an active participant in the Collective Wisdom Initiative, was interviewed

by Craig Hamilton several years ago for an article about the growing interest in this phenomenon. During her interview, Frenier observed: “In these group experiences, people have access to a kind of knowing that’s bigger than what we normally experience with each other. . . . You feel the presence of the sacred, and you sense that everybody else in the group is also feeling that.”<sup>4</sup>

People who talk about their experiences of collective wisdom often report a sense of openness and awareness of something larger than themselves. The ability to communicate seems broader, and people are often astounded by the creativity that comes forward. “You have a sense,” Frenier observed, “that the whole group is creating together, and you don’t quite exactly know how.”

This experience of connection, when it arises, often expands or dissipates our experience of boundaries—boundaries between different parts of ourselves, between ourselves and other members of the group, between our group and others outside of the group, between what is personal and what is universal. In a second interview conducted by Hamilton, a woman observed: “In the group, I experienced a kind of consciousness that was almost a singularity, like a dropping of personalities and a joining together where there was no sense of conflict. Nobody was in opposition and everybody was just helping each other. It became obvious that we weren’t responding to individual personalities but were responding to something much deeper, much more real in each other that was collective, something that we shared—a commonality, really.”<sup>5</sup>

Such experiences of connection, when they arise, can feel mystical, almost magical. But they are also quite *natural*. Certain kinds of conversations and collective endeavors, our colleague Meg Wheatley has written, take us to

the wisdom we possess [in groups] that is unavailable to us as individuals. The wisdom emerges as we get more and more connected with each other, as we move from conversation to conversation, carrying the ideas from one conversation to another, looking for patterns, suddenly surprised by an insight we all share.

There's a good scientific explanation for this, because this is how all life works. As separate ideas or entities become connected to each other, life surprises us with emergence—the sudden appearance of new capacity and intelligence. All living systems work in this way. We humans got confused and lost sight of this remarkable process by which individual actions, when connected, lead to much greater capacity.

To those of us raised in a linear world with our minds shrunken by detailed analysis, the sudden appearance of collective wisdom always feels magical.<sup>6</sup>

Wheatley's last point may seem surprising: The emergence of collective wisdom can feel magical—somehow extraordinary or even unreal—because we have become so focused on the rational (“our minds shrunken by detailed analysis”) that we have lost touch with other ways in which new capacity and intelligence come into being. Sometimes conversations and writings about collective wisdom can, perhaps unintentionally, reinforce this perception of the extraor-

dinary nature of the phenomenon, intimating that collective wisdom is available only to the initiated.

This is not our view. We maintain that collective wisdom is a potentiality of *all* groups, not just of so-called healthy or enlightened ones. This premise is not some declaration of naïve faith or a wistful prayer; we believe that collective wisdom is a potentiality of all groups because, as Wheatley writes, this is how *all* life works. New capacity and intelligence emerges through connections: from cell to cell, dendrite to dendrite, human to human, group to group. As extraordinary and mysterious as the experience of profound connection—and of collective wisdom emerging—may feel in the moment, collective wisdom as a phenomenon is natural, even potentially ordinary.

This does not mean that collective wisdom will emerge in every group, only that it can, whether the group is a women's softball team, a rural town, a one-time rafting expedition, a shared moment of profound awareness—or a team of hard-edged engineers and consultants confronting concrete challenges of sustainability. Peter Senge, who is often identified with the lessons that living systems have for organizational life, offered a story to us about this last kind of group as an example of boundaries expanding and dissipating, of deeper connections emerging.

## For the Sake of Our Children

THE SOCIETY FOR ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING has organized a Sustainability Consortium, a group of diverse people, including researchers, consultants, and executives from companies, who

are embracing environmental and social sustainability as a cornerstone of their business strategy. This consortium works together through diverse action projects; its members meet together about twice a year.

One of the theories the consortium has explored was developed by John Ehrenfeld, director of the MIT Program on Technology, Business, and Environment. Ehrenfeld posits that building sustainable enterprises will require embracing three often-competing perspectives: the rationalistic, the naturalistic, and the humanistic. Some years ago, consortium members had a firsthand experience of the convergence of these three perspectives.

Xerox was hosting the meeting, and throughout the first day, members learned about Xerox's corporate philosophy of design for remanufacture. The company accounts for at least \$250 million in cost savings due to remanufacture and waste reduction, a compelling illustration of the rationalistic perspective.

The group also toured the Document System 265 assembly area and saw firsthand what a "Zero to Landfill" work environment looks like. The production facility mimics nature by creating no waste—a powerful realization of the naturalistic perspective.

But at the end of the first day of meetings, the role of the humanistic perspective in Xerox's change effort was still only implicit. It was late in the afternoon, and consortium members were packed into a noisy, stuffy meeting room adjacent to the Document System 265 assembly area.

A young woman, one of the lead designers on the Xerox team, was talking about how meaningful it had been for her

to be part of such an innovative effort when she was interrupted with an unusual question. A Consortium member from Ford, a veteran of many organizational learning projects, asked, "Helen, I understand what a great opportunity this was, and how exciting it was for you. I work with engineers and I know the intellectual excitement of pushing the technological envelope. But what I really want to know is: *Why* did you do this? What I mean is, what was the stand you took and *who were you* taking that stand?"

Helen looked at him for a long time in silence, and then, in front of many peers and a few superiors, she began to cry. "I am a mom," she said.

We all knew the team's motto, "Zero to landfill . . . for the sake of our children." But now we were in its presence. I suspect many of us will never forget the deep silence that filled the room. Another consortium member, a vice president from Ford/Visteon, turned to me and whispered, "seamlessness."<sup>7</sup>



In the story that Senge tells, a unifying element pulled together the different strands of the rational, naturalistic, and humanistic domains. There was a rational utilitarian benefit from remanufacture and waste reduction. There was the marvel of engineering skills that can mimic nature by creating no waste. There was a designer who was personally fulfilled by the challenge and possibilities of this effort. Yet, beyond these elements, there was something additional, something



unexpected: a question that lifted the group to another level. It was a very personal question that elicited a very personal answer. “I am a mom,” she answered, and her eyes welled up with tears. She did this in front of her peers and supervisors. There was risk involved. She was at once exquisitely vulnerable and quietly beautiful in her honesty. It had the effect of deepening the silence that began when she listened to the question and took it seriously, pausing to find within herself the most direct answer.

With Helen’s answer, there was a convergence of varied perspectives. The company’s motto—*Zero to landfill . . . for the sake of our children*—stopped for a moment being just a motto and became something real and alive. It was a memorable moment, one that Senge felt was unlikely to be forgotten. This is common in our conversations with people about such moments—there is something vital, something that just feels so alive that it wants to burst out on its own. Seamlessness. An experience of a larger whole emerging as boundaries expand and connections grow stronger: within an individual group member, within a project team, within a business model, within an industry, within a world.

Collective wisdom is often revealed as people and world-views mix and collide, sometimes beautifully as in Senge’s tale, and sometimes with turbulence. Often, a catalytic moment—in this case, the question and response that expressed authenticity and vulnerability—moves the group into a new space or territory of understanding. In spiritual traditions, such as Zen Buddhism, this might be understood as a shift away from duality, erasing the concreteness of something having to be true or not true and moving instead toward a larger truth inclusive

of multiple perspectives. However we might want to understand it, the higher aspiration that was indicated by the simple statement “I am a mom” drew into focus the richness of the group’s collective efforts and the meaning for a better life that the higher aspiration held for them and others.

*BEYOND THE INTELLECT, BEYOND THE INDIVIDUAL*

While some writers speak of collective intelligence, we use the term collective wisdom to reflect a quality of group understanding that is neither of the intellect alone nor of any individual alone. When this knowing and sense of right action emerges, it does so from deep within the individual participants, from within the collective awareness of the group, and from within the larger field of spiritual, cultural, and institutional forces that surround any group activity.

Many people who describe experiences of collective wisdom describe a physicality to the experience, a feeling of discernment in their personal body and an awareness of permeability with others. In another interview by Craig Hamilton, a woman said this of her group experience: “When someone else spoke, it felt as if I was speaking. And when I did speak, it was almost egoless, like it wasn’t really me. It was as if something larger than me was speaking through me. The atmosphere in the room felt like we were in a river. . . . We started to say things that we had never thought before . . . something would be revealed, and that would open up something else to be revealed.”<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes this quality of understanding can manifest in a sudden and shared sense of what to do next, a know-

ing that extends beyond words and amplifies a shared sense of connection and purpose with others. Often, this knowing can emerge from uncertainty, a “not knowing” that requires added personal reflection and listening to divergent perspectives. We become less “expert” but more open. The cognitive scientist Francisco Varela explains how this can be true because at the “moments of breakdown, that is, when we are *not* experts . . . we become like beginners seeking to feel at ease with the task at hand.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, it is at just those moments when our world is less familiar to us that we have the chance to see in new ways and embody new actions.

One of the paradoxes of collective wisdom is that such insights are far more likely to arise when the group is willing to risk, or admit, not knowing. Juanita Brown recalls this moment experienced by a group that reached a point of surrender to not knowing.

### I Don't Know, but Maybe We Do

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 grower of table grapes in the nation. Many new workers are frightened, already indentured by the company who paid their way from Mexico and now living in DiGiorgio's labor camps. They support their brothers and sisters in the United Farm Workers who are seeking a better life, but they have children to feed and 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 interned 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 conversations with the workers inside—barred from discussing the workers' democratic rights 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 AM as the trucks leave for the fields, passing small informational leaflets through the slats of the trucks. The growers have permitted informational leafleting.

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 to those gathered, realistically, honestly, without artifice.

Cesar says he has no answer to the dilemma. If there is no way to engage in 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 through.

People share ideas, many ideas. None are rejected. Everyone is asked not to 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 was something . . . I had 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. 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, 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. . . .”

As the person who translated the old woman’s words from Spanish, I think somehow the energy of her presence, the power of her simplicity, and the sigh of *Yes* that emerged from the collective in the room will remain forever etched in my own being.<sup>10</sup>



What is this community struggling for? For the right to have conversations, for the right to gather with farm workers and engage them in dialogue about how the United Farm Workers might help them. The mood is somber; everyone knows what's at stake. The UFW is a fledgling organization in 1966. It has just recently launched the grape boycott. A setback in these fields would be devastating not only for the workers here but for the larger movement as well.

Cesar Chavez calls the group together, not to ratify a plan he has already developed, but to confess that he does not know what to do. No one else does, either. So they gather: not to debate, not even to decide, but to listen to "every voice that wants to be heard." Everyone is needed because no one individual, not even the leader, has the answer. Many people speak; none are rejected. And then, from the back of the room, an old woman who wonders if she is even qualified risks sharing an idea. She changes the very nature of the question: If we can't go to them, can we invite them to us? In a place of past and present imprisonment, can we extend an invitation that allows them freedom to choose? For Juanita Brown, the energy of this woman's presence and the simplicity of her profound questions shifted the trajectory in the room. Suddenly, there was a way forward. Yes. *The sigh of Yes that emerged . . . will remain forever etched in my own being.*

How is this possible? How does it happen that from a place of not knowing, of even hopelessness, a way forward emerges? A first response might be to appreciate the mystery of collective wisdom's emergence. An additional response, however, might point to what becomes possible when we

authentically confess to not knowing. In such moments of surrender, we may open to a knowing that transcends the intellect alone, a knowing that is beyond any one of us, a knowing that may not have been possible when the certainty of the mind crowded all else out. The “small idea” put forward by the old woman seeded new possibilities; she is the set breaker, in systems language. As with Mallory Holtman’s role in the opening story, a certain logic that shackled the group was released. If we cannot gain access by pushing our way in, would it be possible to draw people out? The group is “lifted up” by the possibilities of a new approach.

*PERCEPTIBLE, POSITIVE, OFTEN SURPRISING EFFECTS*

So what happened after the community meeting? A day or so later, the group parked Chavez’s old station wagon across the road from the camp gates and erected a small altar in the back. At first, only a few workers came, then many, and then many more. When the election was held, the workers voted to have the UFW represent them.

Collective wisdom is a transformative shift that affects both inner awareness and outer behavior. These effects can benefit individuals within the group; the whole group; and individuals, groups, and larger collectives impacted by the group’s work. They are also positive to the extent that they serve the larger social impulses for wholeness, fairness, compassion, and justice.

Sometimes the shifts are dramatic, as in the election that certified the UFW to represent the DiGiorgio workers. Sometimes they are subtle, as in the designer’s ability to

embody a collective vision of “Zero to landfill—for the sake of our children.” Sometimes they are subtler still, as members began to move in concert and support each other as they embarked on a rafting trip.

Collective wisdom emerges when people open to it and don’t try to control and will it into being, so its effects are frequently surprising and in some cases unimaginable before they unfold. We doubt that anyone went into the UFW community meeting thinking, “I know: an altar on the back of a Chevy!” The effects are surprising because they are not predetermined; they arise through the connections and conversations that unfold within the group. Wisdom arises in the gaps between what is known and unknown, in the small openings that allow new meanings and perspectives to take hold.

#### SUMMARY: SOUND JUDGMENT AND REVELATION

Collective wisdom is about the nature of sound judgments made with others, reflecting a deep understanding of people and situations. It often involves an insight or revelation that what happens to one happens to all. Accordingly, we feel an instinct for ethical and constructive action in the moment. Collective wisdom shows up in our ways of being together—sometimes experienced as sacredness; or being part of a flow state; or feeling an expansion and dissipation of boundaries with others, nature, and spirit.

Throughout this chapter, we have also pointed to some of the paradoxes of collective wisdom. It is a mystery that has



predictable patterns. It is an understanding beyond the intellect; it is a knowing that emerges from not knowing. The experience of collective wisdom can be extraordinary, and it is natural, even common, in groups. Collective wisdom depends on conversation and is most powerfully felt in the silences that arise within those conversations. Collective wisdom is experienced in groups, yet it is often catalyzed by or reflected in the behavior of an individual. Finally, collective wisdom has positive, even dramatic effects on group cohesion and action, yet it cannot be willed into existence, controlled, or even planned for. What can we do to bring it forth?

We believe we can prepare for it and increase the likelihood that it will emerge. The commitments and convictions instrumental for preparation are the focus of our next chapter.

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