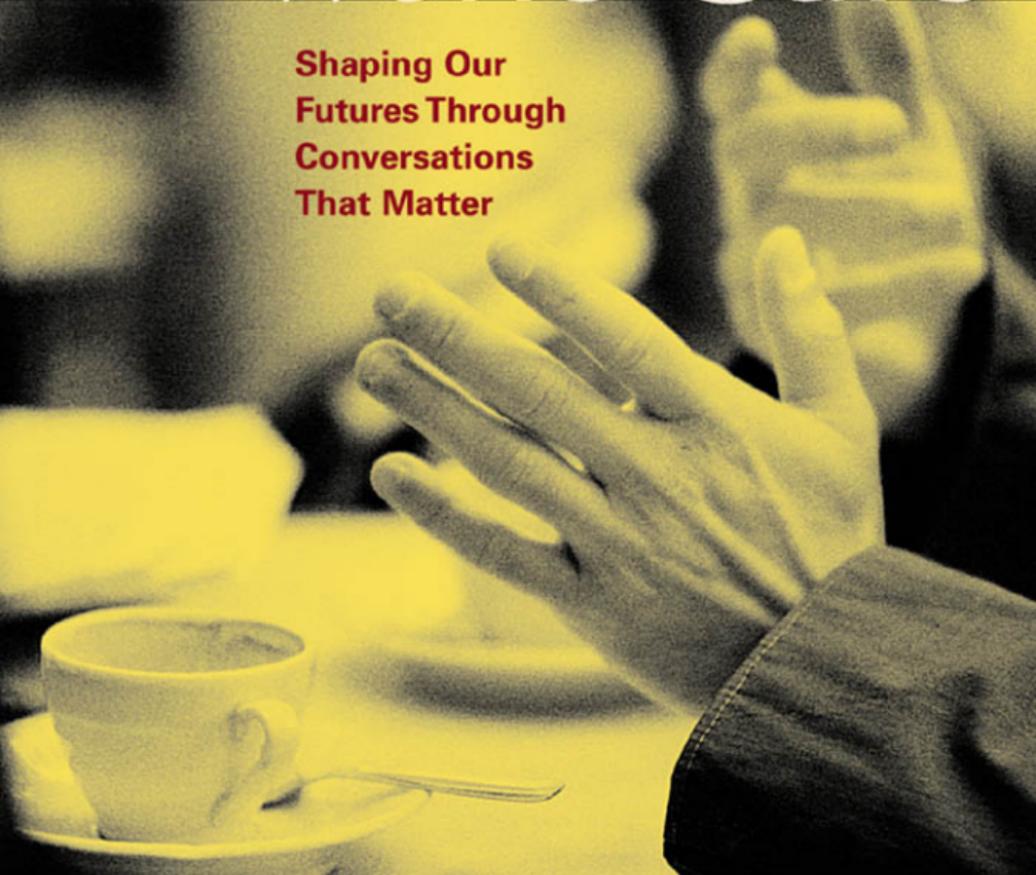




The World Café



**Shaping Our
Futures Through
Conversations
That Matter**

Juanita Brown with **David Isaacs** and the **World Café Community**

Foreword by **Margaret J. Wheatley**

Afterword by **Peter Senge**

an excerpt from

***The World Cafe:
Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter***

by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs
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FOREWORD

We Can Be Wise Only Together

By Margaret J. Wheatley

In this troubling time when many people are so disconnected from one another, I keep searching to find those ideas, processes, and behaviors that can restore hope for the future. The World Café does just that. The stories told in these pages by its practitioners from all over the world demonstrate that it is possible for people to find meaning, even joy, in working together. And that through our conversations, as we work together, we discover a greater wisdom that reveals our path forward.

The World Café reintroduces us to a world we have forgotten. This is a world where people naturally congregate because we want to be together. A world where we enjoy the age-old process of good conversation, where we're not afraid to talk about things that matter most to us. A world where we're not separated, classified, or stereotyped. A world of simple greeting, free from technology and artificiality. A world that constantly surprises us with the wisdom that exists not in any one of us but in all of us. And a world where we learn that the wisdom we need to solve our problems is available when we talk together.

This world has been forgotten by us, but it has never abandoned us. For several years, David Isaacs, co-originator of the Café process, has said that our work is to remember this world, that we don't need to create it. From what I observe in many places, however, it appears that our memory of how to work together in healthy, productive ways has been nearly extinguished by the creeping complexity of group work, facilitation techniques, obscure analytic processes, and our own exhaustion. People are more polarized, more overwhelmed, more impatient, more easily disappointed in others, and more withdrawn than ever. We're frustrated by the increasing number of problems that confront us and our impotence to resolve even the most simple ones. And no sane person wants to participate in yet another meeting or get

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involved with yet another problem-solving process, because these things only increase our frustration and impotence.

Perhaps the most pernicious consequence of this memory loss is our growing belief that humans are a difficult, self-serving species and that we cannot trust each other. As this negative belief grows stronger, we remove ourselves and focus only on work that we can do on our own. We pay attention to the work in front of us, and thus lose any appreciation of the whole system. Isolated and alone, we lose courage and capacity; our work loses meaning and we end up with unending fatigue and loneliness.

The World Café process reawakens our deep species memory of two fundamental beliefs about human life. First, we humans want to talk together about things that matter to us. In fact, this is what gives satisfaction and meaning to life. Second, as we talk together, we are able to access a greater wisdom that is found only in the collective.

The World Café in Action

As you read the stories and counsel in this book, you will see these two beliefs brought to life in the Café process. In order to provoke your exploration of them, I'd like to underline some of the dimensions of the Café process that bring these beliefs into vibrant, healthy reality.

Belief in Everybody

The World Café is a good, simple process for bringing people together around questions that matter. It is founded on the assumption that people have the capacity to work together, *no matter who they are*. For me, this is a very important assumption. It frees us from our current focus on personality types, learning styles, emotional IQ—all the popular methods we currently use to pre-identify and pre-judge people. Each of these typologies ends up separating and stereotyping people. This is not what was intended by their creators, but it is what has happened.

The Café process has been used in many different cultures, among many different age groups, for many different purposes, and in many different types of communities and organizations. *It doesn't matter who the people are—the process works*. It works because people *can* work well together, *can* be creative and caring

and insightful when they're actively engaged in meaningful conversations around questions that count. I hope that these stories inspire us to move away from all the categories and stereotypes we currently use about who should be involved, who should attend a meeting—all the careful but ill-founded analysis we put into constructing the “right” group. We need to be focused on gathering the real diversity of the system, but that's quite different from being absorbed with these other sorting devices.

Diversity

It's important to notice the diversity of the places and purposes for which the World Café is used, and the diversity of participants who are encouraged to attend World Café gatherings. These pages contain a rich illustration of a value I live by: *we need to depend on diversity*. Including diversity well is a survival skill these days, because there's no other way to get an accurate picture of any complex problem or system. We need many eyes and ears and hearts engaged in sharing perspectives. How can we create an accurate picture of the whole if we don't honor the fact that we each see something different because of who we are and where we sit in the system? Only when we have many different perspectives do we have enough information to make good decisions. And exploring our differing perspectives always brings us closer together. One Café member said it well: “You're moving among strangers, but it feels as if you've known these people for a long time.”

Invitation

In every World Café, there's a wonderful feeling of invitation. Attention is paid to creating hospitable space. But the hospitality runs much deeper. It is rooted in the host's awareness that everyone is needed, that anyone might contribute something that suddenly sparks a collective insight. Café facilitators are true hosts—creating a spirit of welcome that is missing from most of our processes. It's important to notice this in the stories here, and to contrast it with your own experience of setting up meetings and processes. What does it feel like to be truly wanted at an event, to be greeted by meeting hosts who delight in your presence, to be welcomed in as a full contributor?

Listening

When people are engaged in meaningful conversation, the whole room reflects curiosity and delight. People move closer physically, their faces exhibit intense listening, and the air becomes charged with their attention to each other. A loud, resonant quiet develops, broken by occasional laughter. It becomes a challenge to call people back from these conversations (which I always take as a good sign).

Movement

In the World Café process, people generally move from table to table. But it's much more than physical movement. As we move, we leave behind our roles, our preconceptions, our certainty. Each time we move to a new table, we lose more of ourselves and become bigger—we now represent a conversation that happened among several people. We move away from a confining sense of self and our small certainties into a spaciousness where new ideas can reveal themselves. As one participant describes it: "It's almost as if you don't know where the thought came from because it has merged so many times that it has been molded and shaped and shifted with new dimensions. People are speaking for each other and using words that started somewhere else that they hadn't thought of before."

We also move into a greater awareness as we look for connections amongst the conversations, as we listen to voices other than our own. Patterns become apparent. Things we couldn't see from our own narrow perspective suddenly become obvious to the entire group.

Good Questions

World Café dialogues, like all good conversations, succeed or fail based on what we're talking about. Good questions—ones that we care about and want to answer—call us outward and to each other. They are an invitation to explore, to venture out, to risk, to listen, to abandon our positions. Good questions help us become both curious and uncertain, and this is always the road that opens us to the surprise of new insight.

Energy

I've never been in a World Café that was dull or boring. People become energized, inspired, excited, creative. Laughter is common, playfulness abounds even with the most serious of

issues. For me this is proof positive of how much we relish being together, of how wonderful it is to rediscover the fact of human community. As one host from a very formal culture says: “My faith in people has been confirmed. Underneath all the formal ways of the past, people really want to have significant conversations. People everywhere truly love to talk with each other, learn together, and make a contribution to things they care about.”

Discovering Collective Wisdom

These are some of the Café dimensions that bring out the best in us. But this is only half the story. World Café conversations take us into a new realm, one that has been forgotten in modern, individualistic cultures. It is the realm of collective intelligence, of the wisdom we possess as a group that is unavailable to us as individuals. This 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 analyses, the sudden appearance of collective wisdom always feels magical. I am fascinated by the descriptions given by Café participants of this emergence. Here are a few quotes from them. Notice how unusual these descriptions are:

“The magic in the middle.”

“The voice in the center of the room.”

“The magic in experiencing our own and other people’s humanity around whatever the content is.”

“Something coming to life in the middle of the table.”

“What joins us together—a larger whole that we always knew was there, but never really appreciated.”

For me, the moments when collective wisdom appears are always breathtaking. Even though I know such wisdom is bound to appear, I'm always stunned with delight when it enters the room. And the appearance of such wisdom is a huge relief. We actually *do* know how to solve our problems! We can discover solutions that work! We've just been looking in the wrong places—we've been looking to experts, or external solutions, or to detailed, empty analyses. And all this time, the wisdom has been waiting for us, waiting for us to enter into meaningful conversations and deeper connections, waiting for us to realize that we can be wise only together.

One last comment. One of the wonderful things about this book is that it is designed to give an enticing taste of a World Café experience; as much as is possible, it embodies what it describes. In these pages, we are introduced to many strangers, diverse people we don't know who may be doing work very different from our own. They relay stories of their many experiences in using the World Café. Their stories are compelling, and it's possible to feel as if we're sitting with them at an intimate café table, exchanging tales, learning from each other, moving closer. Then our gifted host, Juanita, enters and warmly invites us to another level of learning. She speaks in the World Café voice, inviting, curious, inquiring. With her guidance, we can see things that weren't clear, or discover concepts and tips that we can use in our own work. And as stories and learnings weave together, we can begin to notice patterns and insights that weren't available to us before we opened the book. In the end, we too may experience broader insight, wider wisdom, and the magic of collective thinking.

I hope you will enjoy this book for all that it offers. I hope you will read it, savor it, use it, and begin to host Café conversations yourself. If enough of us do so, we can reintroduce many people to a world where people enjoy working together, where collaborative conversation yields true insight and new possibilities for action, where work and life are revived with meaning and possibility. In this way, we truly can restore hope to the future.

Seeing the Invisible: Conversation Matters!

It's never enough just to tell people about some new insight. Rather, you have to get them to experience it in a way that evokes its power and possibility. Instead of pouring knowledge into people's heads, you need to help them grind a new set of eyeglasses so they can see the world in a new way.

—John Seely Brown, *Seeing Differently: Insights on Innovation*



What if humans are in conversation
the way fish are in water?

DISCOVERING THE WORLD CAFÉ: THE INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL PIONEERS

As Told By

David Isaacs

David Isaacs, my partner in life and work, is a co-origina-tor of the World Café. In this story he shares the serendip-ity surrounding the birth of the World Café and its com-munity of practice, along with our early musings about what was at play in Café dialogues. Our initial Café experience also set the stage for unexpected discoveries about the powerful role that conversation plays in shap-ing our futures.

*J*anuary 1995. It is a very rainy dawn at our home in Mill Valley, California. A thick mist hangs over Mt. Tamalpais as I look out beyond the massive oak tree that borders the patio outside our living room. We have twenty-four people arriving in half an hour for the second day of a strategic dialogue on intellectual capital. Juanita and I are hosting the gathering in collaboration with Leif Edvinsson, vice president of intellectual capital for the Skandia Corporation in Sweden. This is the second in a series of conver-sations among the Intellectual Capital Pioneers—a group of cor-porate executives, researchers, and consultants from seven countries who are at the leading edge of this inquiry.

The field of intellectual capital and knowledge management is still in its infancy. No books have yet been written. No maps exist. We're making them as we go. Last evening we were in the midst of exploring the question: *What is the role of leadership in maximizing the value of intellectual capital?*

Juanita is worried. As she sets out the breakfast and prepares the coffee, she's concerned about how we can create the right setting for the day's agenda if the pouring rain continues and no one can go outside on the patio to visit when they arrive. Then I have an idea. "Why don't we set up our TV tables in the living room and just have people get their coffee and visit around the tables while we're waiting for everyone to arrive? We'll then put away the tables and begin with our normal dialogue circle."

Juanita breathes a sigh of relief. As we set out the small tables and white vinyl chairs, our interactive graphics specialist, Tomi Nagai-Rothe, arrives and adds, "Those look like café tables. I think they need some tablecloths!" She improvises, draping white sheets of easel paper over each of the paired TV tables. Now it's getting kind of playful. We've stopped worrying about the rain, which is coming down in sheets. Juanita decides we need flowers on the café tables, and goes for small vases downstairs. In the meantime, Tomi adds crayons to each of the tables, just like those in many neighborhood cafés. She makes a lovely sign for our front door—*Welcome to the Homestead Café*—playing off our address, Homestead Boulevard, which is actually a narrow road up the side of a mountain.

Just as Juanita places the flowers on the tables, folks begin to arrive. They are delighted and amused. As people get their coffee and croissants, they gather in informal groups around

the café tables and begin to talk about last night's question. People are really engaged. They begin to scribble on the tablecloths. Juanita and I have a quick huddle and decide that, rather than have a formal dialogue circle to open the gathering, we will simply encourage people to continue to share what's bubbling up from their conversations that could shed light on the essence of the relationship between leadership and intellectual capital.

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

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

And so it continues. The rain falling, hard. People huddling around the TV tables, learning together, testing ideas and assumptions together, building new knowledge together, adding to each other's diagrams and pictures and noting key words and ideas on the tablecloths. Juanita and I look up and realize that it is almost lunchtime. We have been participating in the café conversations ourselves and the hours have passed as if they were minutes.

The energy in the room is palpable. It is as if the very air is shimmering. I ask the group to wrap up their conversations and gather around a large rolled-out piece of mural paper that Tomi has placed on the rug in the middle of the living room floor. It looks, in fact, like a large café tablecloth spread on the floor. We invite each small group to put their individual tablecloths around the edges of the larger cloth and then take a "tour" to notice patterns, themes, and insights that are emerging in our midst.

As Juanita and I watch our collective discoveries and insights unfold visually on the large mural paper in the center of the group, we know something quite unusual has happened. We are bearing witness to something for which we have no language. It is as if the intelligence of a larger collective Self, beyond the individual selves in the room, had become visible to us. It feels almost like "magic"—an exciting moment of recognition of what we are discovering together that's difficult to describe yet feels strangely familiar. The café process somehow enabled the group to access a form of collaborative intelligence that grew more potent as both ideas and people traveled from table to table, making new connections and cross-pollinating their diverse insights.

• • •

After that breakthrough meeting, David and I, along with Finn Voldtofte, a close colleague from Denmark who had participated in that initial gathering, spent the next day trying to understand what had happened. We looked at each of the components of the day, examining how it had contributed to the living knowledge that emerged. We considered what had occurred when people entered the house and saw the colorful and inviting Homestead Café in our living room. Was there something about the café itself as an archetype—a familiar cultural form around the world—that was able to evoke the immediate intimacy and collective engagement that we experienced? Did the positive associations that most people make with cafés support the natural emergence of easy and authentic conversation that had happened, despite the lack of formal guidelines or dialogue training among the participants?

We considered the role and use of questions to engage collaborative thinking. Was there something in the way we had framed the conversation around a core question that participants cared about—“What is the relationship between leadership and intellectual capital?”—that affected the quality and depth of collective insight? Then there was the cross-pollination of ideas across groups. Did carrying insights from one group to another enable the emergence of an unexpected web of lively new connections among diverse perspectives? We mused on the function of people writing on their tablecloths and later contributing their collective insights to the common tablecloth as we explored our discoveries together. What was the importance, if any, that people could literally see each other’s ideas on their tablecloths, similar to a hurried sketch or an idea scribbled on a napkin?

As we tried to illuminate our experience, we were reminded of how many new ideas and social innovations have historically been born and spread through informal conversations in cafés, salons, churches, and living rooms. We realized that what we had experienced in the café conversation in our living room was

perhaps a small-scale replica of a deeper living pattern of how knowledge-sharing, change, and innovation have always occurred in human societies. We recalled the salon movement that gave birth to the French Revolution, as well as the sewing circles and committees of correspondence that foretold America's independence. Finn reminded us of the widespread network of study circles that fostered the social and economic renaissance in Scandinavia during the early twentieth century, and we realized that David's and my early experiences with social movements, including the farmworkers, followed the same pattern of development. Founders of major change efforts often say, "Well, it all began when some friends and I started talking."

The evolving web of conversations in our living room seemed to allow us to experience directly the often invisible way that large-scale organizational and societal change occurs—what we have since come to call "nature's strategic planning process." Are we as human beings so immersed in conversation that, like fish in water, conversation is our medium for survival and we just can't see it? Had we somehow stumbled onto a set of principles that made it easier for larger groups to notice and access this natural process in order to develop collaborative intelligence around critical questions and concerns? Might this awareness support leaders in becoming more intentional about fostering connected networks of conversation focused on their organization's most important questions?

Out of this conversation, the image of the World Café emerged as a central metaphor to guide our nascent exploration into the possibilities that we had tapped into that rainy day. Many of us who were at that initial gathering began to experiment with the simple process that we had discovered. We began to host World Café conversations in a variety of settings and to share our learnings with each other as we went.

And then from a completely unexpected source, it became clear to me just how much conversation matters. *It matters a lot.*

Are we as human beings so immersed in conversation that, like fish in water, conversation is our medium for survival and we just can't see it?

Knowing Together and Bringing Forth a World

I was serving as co-faculty for a living systems seminar sponsored by the Berkana Institute, which supports new forms of leadership around the world. Fritjof Capra, the noted physicist and living systems theorist, who was also on the faculty, was giving a talk about the nature of knowledge. In his measured, professorial style, Fritjof began to share surprising ideas from the work of two Chilean scientists—evolutionary biologist, Humberto Maturana, and cognitive scientist, Francisco Varela. I won't be able to do full justice to the range and subtlety of their groundbreaking research, but I'd like to share one key aspect of it with you because I think it has direct relevance for how people see the world and how we choose to live in it.

Maturana and Varela's work reaffirms that as a species we humans have evolved the unique capacity for talking together and for making distinctions of meaning in language. This human gift for living in the braided meanings and emotions that arise through our conversations is what enables us to share our ideas, images, intentions, and discoveries with each other. Since our earliest ancestors gathered in circles around the warmth of a fire, conversation has been our primary means for discovering what we care about, sharing knowledge, imagining the future, and acting together to both survive and thrive.

People in small groups spread their insights to larger groups, carrying the seed ideas for new conversations, creative possibilities, and collective action. This systemic process is embodied in self-reinforcing, meaning-making networks that arise through the interactions that conversation makes possible. Maturana and Varela point out that because we live in language—and in the sophisticated coordination of actions that language makes possible—we “bring forth a world” through the networks of conversation in which we participate (1987, p. 234). We embody and share our knowledge through conversation. From this perspective, conversations *are* action—the very lifeblood and heartbeat of social systems like organizations, communities, and societies. As new meanings and the coordinated actions based on them begin

to spread through wider networks, the future comes into being. However, these futures can take many alternative paths. In a provocative seminar that Maturana later gave at the Society for Organizational Learning, he brought this message home:

All that we humans do, we do in conversation. . . . As we live in conversation new kinds of objects continue to appear, and as we take these objects and live with them, new domains of existence appear! So here we are now, living with these very funny kinds of objects called firms, companies, profit, incomes, and so on. And we are very attached to them. . . . Just the same, we are not necessarily stuck in any of the objects we create. What is peculiar to human beings is that we can reflect and say, "Oh, I'm not interested in this any more," change our orientation, and begin a new history. Other animals cannot reflect, as they do not live in language. We are the ones who make language and conversation our manner of living. . . . We enjoy it, we caress each other in language. We can also hurt each other in language. We can open spaces or restrict them in conversations. This is central to us. And we shape our own path, as do all living systems (Maturana and Bunnell, 1999, p. 12).

Thus, from the perspective of human evolution, conversation is not something trivial that we engage in among many other activities. Conversation is the core process by which we humans think and coordinate our actions together. The living process of conversation lies at the heart of collective learning and co-evolution in human affairs. *Conversation is our human way of creating and sustaining—or transforming—the realities in which we live.*

Vicki Robin, my dear friend and colleague, is the founder of Conversation Cafés, an innovative small group dialogue approach that invites citizens to gather in cafés and other public places to explore key societal questions. Recently, she shared with me a vivid reflection of how this often invisible process works in everyday life.



We each then carry the meanings and possibilities we've created into other conversations

We talk to ourselves in our minds about our past, present, and future. Out of this self-talk, we talk with others about our pasts, present, and futures, generating personal and shared possibilities through lively exchanges of ideas and feelings. We each then carry the meanings and possibilities we've created into other conversations at home, at work, at church, in boardrooms, and bedrooms, and halls of power everywhere. A daughter talks to her father about her concerns for the future . . . and company policy changes. A father talks to his daughter about his concerns for her future . . . and a new life path unfolds, later impacting thousands. Line workers talk with their bosses . . . and a plant is redesigned. Citizens testify at public hearings . . . and new priorities for society emerge. We speak our world into being. A buzz develops—a kind of overtone of resonant ideas carried through multiple conversations—that tells us what's on our collective mind. Some among us put words on this buzz and new possibilities for us as a whole begin to enter our language, the vehicle of meaning-making. We see ourselves in their descriptions—"Ah," we think, "I never saw that, but yes, that is true." We talk about it . . . shaping again what we collectively imagine for ourselves. Our conversations shape the spirit and substance of our times.

Another colleague shared with me a wonderful story that provides a powerful example of the way we can shape the future through conversation. The story began with a dinner conversation among four friends over steak and Chianti at the home of a young businesswoman in Munich and evolved, in just a few weeks, into one of the largest mass movements in Germany since the end of World War II.

Over dinner, the four friends decided it was time for them to step out from the "silent majority" and show their repudiation of the rising number of neo-Nazi attacks on foreigners. By the time dessert was over, each agreed to call several friends and colleagues and share the idea of creating a silent candlelight vigil to bear witness to these injustices. Their first gathering drew one hundred friends to a popular downtown bar, each of whom agreed to call

ten others to encourage a larger turnout for a second event. Within days the “candlelight conversation” spread across the city through circles of acquaintances in businesses, schools, churches, and civic groups. The original group of friends—and the nation as a whole—were stunned when four hundred thousand people turned out in Munich for the vigil.

Inspired by the Munich gathering, citizens in other cities held conversations and created vigils over the following weeks. Over five hundred thousand turned out in Hamburg, two hundred thousand in Berlin, and one hundred thousand or more in Frankfurt, Nuremberg, and other cities. Many smaller towns joined in what became a national dialogue on the acceptability of neo-Nazi behavior. The seemingly endless chains of flickering candlelight became a powerful symbol of the nation’s collective commitment, born in conversation, to turn the tide against such behavior (Kinsler, 1992). And this happened prior to widespread use of the Internet!

Conversation as a Generative Force

I was excited to discover Maturana and Varela’s work on the power of conversation to shape our future and to encounter vivid examples of this power in action. For the first time, I could see that leading edge thinkers with backgrounds completely different from our own were discovering what David and I had intuitively sensed from our lived experience with social movements as well as with our early World Café experiments. As we looked at the picture painted by both scholars and practitioners in other fields of endeavor, a fascinating pattern began to emerge. Although their perspectives on the importance of conversation may have made up only a single piece in the larger puzzle each was exploring in his or her own work, when taken together these insights began to reveal the critical role of conversation in shaping our lives. I’d like to share a collage of these ideas to give you a flavor of what we noticed as we literally put the pieces together on a large wall-board. Please take a few minutes to read carefully, on the following pages, what these thought leaders from different fields have to say. I think you’ll find their ideas illuminating.

CONVERSATION MATTERS!

Learning Organizations

True learning organizations are a space for generative conversations and concerted action which creates a field of alignment that produces tremendous power to invent new realities in conversation and to bring about these new realities in action.

Fred Kofman and Peter Senge
“Communities of Commitment”
Organizational Dynamics

Politics

Democracy begins in human conversation. The simplest, least threatening investment any citizen can make in democratic renewal is to begin talking with other people, asking the questions and knowing that their answers matter.

William Greider
Who Will Tell the People?



Strategy

Strategizing depends on creating a rich and complex web of conversations that cuts across previously isolated knowledge sets and creates new and unexpected combinations of insight.

Gary Hamel
“The Search for Strategy”
Fortune

Information Technology

Technology is putting a sharper, more urgent point on the importance of conversations. Conversations are moving faster, touching more people, and bridging greater distances. These networked conversations are enabling powerful new forms of social organization and knowledge exchange to occur.

Rick Levine and others
The Cluetrain Manifesto

Education

Within communities that foster human growth and development, change seems to be a natural result of constructing meaning and knowledge together—an outgrowth of our conversations about what matters. Leaders need to pose the questions and convene the conversations that invite others to become involved. . . . In social systems such as schools and districts, one good conversation can shift the direction of change forever.

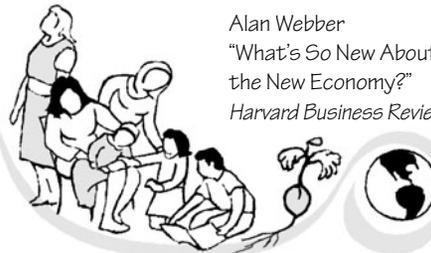
Linda Lambert and others
The Constructivist Leader



The Knowledge Economy

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

Alan Webber
“What’s So New About
the New Economy?”
Harvard Business Review



Family Therapy

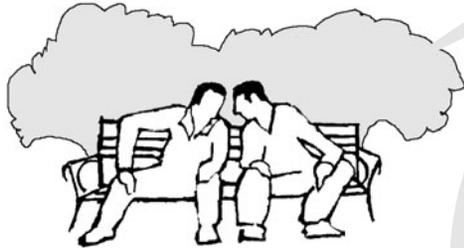
Our capacity for change lies in “the circle of the unexpressed,” in the capacity we have to be “in language” with each other and, in language to develop new themes, new narratives, and new stories. Through this process we co-create and co-develop our systemic realities.

Harlene Anderson and Harold Goolishian
“Human Systems as Linguistic Systems”
Family Process

Leadership

Talk is key to the executive's work . . . the use of language to shape new possibilities, reframe old perspectives, and excite new commitments . . . the active process of dialogue, and the caring for relationships as the core foundation of any social system.

Suresh Srivastva and David Cooperrider
Appreciative Management and Leadership



Collective Intelligence

Dialogue is the central aspect of co-intelligence. We can only generate higher levels of intelligence among us if we are doing some high quality talking with one another.

Tom Atlee, Co-Intelligence Institute
The Tao of Democracy



Conflict Resolution, Global Affairs

The reality today is that we are all interdependent and have to coexist on this small planet. Therefore, the only sensible and intelligent way of resolving differences and clashes of interests, whether between individuals or nations, is through dialogue.

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama
"Forum 2000" Conference, Prague

Executive Development

As the new business landscape continues to emerge, and new forms of organization take shape, our ability to lead will be dependent upon our ability to host and convene quality conversations.

Robert Lengel, Ph.D., Director
Center for Professional Excellence
University of Texas at San Antonio
Executive MBA Program

Futures Research

Conversation is the heart of the new inquiry. It is perhaps the core human skill for dealing with the tremendous challenges we face. The culture of conversation is a different culture, one that can make a difference to the future of the world. If we combine conversations that really matter . . . with the interactive reach of the Internet, we have a powerful force for change from the ground up.

Institute for the Future
*In Good Company:
Innovation at the Intersection of
Technology and Sustainability*



Consciousness Studies

I'm suggesting that there is the possibility for a transformation of the nature of consciousness, both individually and collectively, and that whether this can be solved culturally and socially depends on dialogue. That's what we're exploring.

David Bohm, *On Dialogue*

Evolutionary Biology

Our human existence is one in which we can live whatever world we bring about in our conversations, even if it is a world that finally destroys us as the kind of being that we are. Indeed, this has been our history since our origins as languaging beings—namely, a history of creation of new domains of existence as different networks of conversation.

Humberto Maturana and Gerda Verden-Zöller
The Origin of Humanness in the Biology of Love

What We View Determines What We Do

What if you began to shift your lens to see the power and potential of the conversations occurring in your own family, organization, community, or nation? What if you believed and acted as if your conversations and those of others really mattered? What difference would that make to your daily choices as a parent, teacher, line leader, meeting planner, organizational specialist, community member, or diplomat?

As Maturana and Varela point out, we live inside the images we hold of the world. It can be disturbing to “see differently” and to contemplate the practical implications of changing our lenses (Lakoff, 2003; Morgan, 1997). Yet as Noel Tichy, head of the University of Michigan’s Global Leadership Program, told me many years ago, “What we view determines what we do.” How we view the world around us, and how we act based on those images, can make all the difference.

As we enter a time in which the capacity for thinking together and creating innovative solutions is viewed as critical to creating both business and social value, many of us still live with the idea that “talk is cheap,” that most people are “all talk and no action,” and that we should “stop talking and get to work.” Lynne Twist, a social entrepreneur who has raised millions for improving life in developing nations, has a different perspective—one that you might want to play with as you read the stories and reflections that follow. “I believe,” she said, “that we don’t really live in the world. We live in the conversation we have about the world. . . . And over *that* we have absolute, omnipotent power. We have the opportunity to shape that conversation, and in so doing, to shape history” (Toms, 2002, pp. 38–39). As your host I invite you, just for the time you are reading this book, to put on a new set of glasses. See with new eyes the conversational landscape that has been here all along awaiting our personal attention and care. And begin to live a different future.

We live inside
the images we hold
of the world

Questions for Reflection

Consider the conversations you are currently having in your family, your organization, or your community. To what degree do they create frustration and fragment efforts or offer new insights and ways to work collectively?

If you were to accept the perspective that conversation really is a core process for accessing collective intelligence and co-evolving the future, what practical difference would that make in how you approached conversations, particularly in situations you care about?

Pick one upcoming conversation that matters in your own life or work. What one specific thing might you do or what one choice might you make that would improve the quality of that conversation?

this material has been excerpted from

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Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter***

by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs
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