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Book Review

Mia Urick

***The World Café: Shaping our Futures through Conversations that Matter*, Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, and the World Café Community, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2005.**

Conversation is the process humans use to think and manage together. The active process of conversation is at the core of creative activity and collective learning. It is the way human beings invent, change, and sustain our common experiences.

The World Café: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations that Matter is an ode to significant conversations. Through an explanation of how and why to organize and execute meaningful exchanges, Brown and Isaacs present a process for collaborative problem solving and innovative thinking.

Peter Senge, Senior Lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Founding Chair of the Society for Organizational Learning, writes extensively on the subject of collective learning. He provides the afterword essay for *The World Café*:

Café conversations are the most reliable way I have yet encountered for all of us to tap into collective creating. . . . I have been repeatedly struck by the ease of beginning a World Café-style dialogue—how readily people shift into heartfelt and engaging conversations. No formal instruction is needed to start, unlike most organizational development or group techniques. This suggests something important. The World Café is not a technique. It is an invitation into a way of being with one another that is already part of our nature . . . (It) is not only a reliable method for tapping into collective creating. It is also a powerful metaphor for transforming how we think about work in general and why organizations succeed or fail as vehicles for collective creating in particular (pp. 217–218).

As we come to understand and embrace the significance of synergy among groups of individuals, we realize all at once that the whole being greater than the sum of its parts is both simple and complex, a paradigm of paradox that allows us to sometimes forget its significance in its simplicity—or reject it for its intricacy.

The World Café reminds us of a “way” we might have forgotten or disregarded. It helps us remember that wisdom is in all of us, not only in one leader, but in all of us as leaders. It reminds us that the knowledge and in-

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sight we need to solve our problems is at hand in our conversations together.

The World Café presents an easy, flexible process for encouraging collaborative conversation, sharing ideas and knowledge, and planning achievable strategy. It creates dynamic networks (which can be very large in scope) of smaller conversations that can provide a vehicle to develop a group's collective intelligence around its most significant questions.

Margaret J. Wheatley, leaders' leader and author of books such as *Leadership and the New Science*, *A Simpler Way*, and *Turning to One Another*, writes in her foreword for *The World Café* about those significant questions:

World Café dialogues, like all good conversations, succeed or fail based on what we are 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. (p. xi)

This commitment to exploring “good questions” forms the platform for the World Café, strengthening both relationships and capacity for the process, which has the following principles:

It's important to set the context.

Setting the context clarifies the purpose and parameters for the conversation.

Create a hospitable space.

This ensures a welcoming environment and psychological safety.

Explore questions that matter.

Important questions focus collective, collaborative attention.

Encourage everyone to contribute.

When everyone contributes, there is a mutual experience of risk and receiving that bonds participants into a group.

Connect diverse perspectives.

Diverse perspectives focused on a common question enrich the conversational dynamic and explore more possibilities and connections.

Listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions.

This allows a shared attention and coherence without the loss of individual voice.

Harvest and share collective discoveries.

This is where the collective wisdom becomes “visible and actionable.”

The “how to” of the Café involves the group as a whole (of whatever size; some Cafés are extremely large and not even in the same building) splitting up into groups of four for about a half-hour to discuss identified important questions. Each table has ample materials for writing, sketching, doodling, and those notes are left in place at the table as fodder for whoever joins the conversation. At the end of the half-hour, most participants move to new tables/conversations, but one person—the “table host”—stays behind to bridge the conversation between the former and newer groups. This is repeated any number of times as the wisdom of the conversations is collected and shared. It is challenging to converse honestly, thoughtfully, and deeply about the questions, and it is helpful to have someone encouraging that level of conversation.

It is important to note that this is not a “how-to” book for World Cafés. Although it does include a guide called “The Art of Hosting,” the book is much more a reflection on the process than a prescription for the process. There is also an abundant “related resources” guide, as well as a handy web site (www.theworldcafe.com) with a number of good features, including a section on stories of how groups are using the Café process.

While conversation is at once a rich resource and fertile ground for creativity, it can also be difficult to facilitate effectively. The book helps us learn how to harvest the collective wisdom of any number of people around issues that matter to us. In addition, if we used this wisdom only for its strength in expanding our conversations from the small inner circles of our day-to-day lives, it would be worth the effort.

The book includes a wonderful story, as told by Harvard University Research Fellow Samantha Tan, called, “What does it mean to care? Creating a learning culture through dialogue: Singapore.” This is an excerpt:

No one thought Singapore would survive once it separated from Malaysia in 1965. We’re a tiny island with no natural resources except for a deep harbor and the collective talents of our 4.2 million people. That’s it. It’s a miracle that we survived, and a greater miracle that we are thriving. We have a good, strong government. And yet, our progress has taken its toll. The very drive, authority, and unwavering focus that got us through the most difficult times are tough to shift now that we want to become a learning nation that is entrepreneurial, innovative, and creative.

... As a people, we often rely on ‘someone higher up’ to solve our problems. Having worked in government, I often wondered, how can we build learning bridges between those in power and the other voices in our society so that some-

thing new can emerge? . . . This question was still in my heart when I learned that the World Café had been introduced to Singapore. (p. 198)

The successes of Singapore are inspiring and exciting, but more than that, amazing to consider in the context of circle upon circle of conversation melding collective wisdom together to affect a learning culture.

That is the power of *The World Café: Shaping our Futures through Conversations that Matter*.