

Conversation, Community, and Committed Action: Shaping Democratic Futures, Together

By
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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*¹

Three Short Stories

The Jefferson Club

I remember as a child in Miami, Florida our home was always alive with conversations. They weren't just *any* kind of conversations. They were conversations about the "big questions"—questions of justice, democracy, and civil rights. They were conversations about philosophical issues, social action, and campaigns to elect public officials who had integrity and guts. From those early conversations the civil liberties movement in Florida was born, nurtured, and grew into a potent force for decency and fairness at a time of great turmoil in the South.

How did that happen? How did my parents and a small group of kindred spirits find each other, begin to reflect on their democratic ideals, find the courage to survive cross-burnings, ostracism, and opposition, while nourishing friendships imbued with a spirit of community and commitment that have lasted a lifetime.

¹ Greider, William, *Who Will Tell The People?* (1992) New York: Simon & Schuster.

My dad, Harold Cowan, is 90 years old. My mom, Millie, is 87. They came to Miami in the 1940's from an immigrant ghetto in South Philadelphia. Recently we filmed them talking about those days and the seminal role in their lives of the "Jefferson Club," named for the Jeffersonian ideal of participatory democracy. My mom, Millie Cowan, spoke of the impetus for the Jefferson Club with the same passion she's demonstrated for more than half a century:

Right on the street in Miami where my sister lived they had signs that said No Negroes, Jews, or Dogs Allowed. And at the beaches there were signs that said all blacks had to get off the beach before dark or they would be subject to arrest. Can you imagine? We were very, very shocked and very incensed. It was also the McCarthy period and they were going after known liberals. We found out that the Unitarian Church had a social action committee, and we began to meet others who were also concerned about what was going on.

That's when the Jefferson Club started. It was primarily a discussion group that met every other week in various people's homes. We would assign a question or issue and people would bring in readings they thought illuminated the subject. It wasn't always political. Sometimes it was philosophical. We had questions like "What is happiness? But more often than not, it turned to the political things that were happening in Miami.

My dad continued:

Those conversations were very inspiring. They raised me to a different level of thinking. The Jefferson Club made me start thinking about things outside of my own survival. And, being very pragmatic I said, hell, let's start doing something about it! The Jefferson Club became a nucleus for social action in the community, so when an issue came up, you didn't have to form an organization. The people and the friendships were already there. All you had to do was make a few phone calls and you had a ready made organizing committee. We each supported the others' efforts. It was really a miraculous thing.

My mother added:

And it was during that period in the 1950's that we founded the first local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union in Florida. Today, fifty years later it's still going strong with a lot of brilliant and wonderful young people— young leaders who are working so hard to keep our democracy alive. We've seen tremendous social change take place over the years. All I can say is that we've had a lot of fun being involved with all these community betterment activities. We've enjoyed the most wonderful and meaningful relationships as a result of the Jefferson Club days with people who really had a lot of heart and cared about everyone having a voice.

That was a key theme of my youth.... the people's democratic voice and our responsibility as citizens to keep our democracy alive. From leafleting in political campaigns, to creating social and legal services for poor people, to enduring cross burnings on our lawn because my parents invited African-Americans to our home—I knew that the Jefferson Club readings and conversations I overheard in my parents living room, the thoughtful reflection that was integral to their discussions, and the committed actions my family and their friends took were because democracy was not a distant ideal. Rather democracy was a tender, vulnerable, living “being” that needed nurturing and protection by those who loved her.

The Farm Workers Movement

During the 1960's I became a community organizer with Cesar Chavez and the farm workers movement. It was in the thousands of house meetings—in conversations among those seated on tattered couches in ramshackle homes and labor camps that small miracles occurred. Though collective dialogue and quiet reflection, the underlying assumptions that had kept farm workers stuck for generations began to shift, slowly at first, tentatively. As workers shared tortillas and bean suppers, they shared the “if onlys” about their lives and imagined the impossible. With practice and encouragement, they began, through dialogue, to ask the “what if” questions. And from the “what if's” came the “why nots!”

Though many farm workers were illiterate and did not have access to the kinds of readings that stimulated my parents and their friends in the Jefferson Club, they had something just as powerful....the Friday Night Meetings and El Teatro Campesino—the Farmworkers' Theater.

The Friday night meetings were long but they were fun! Workers and volunteers from key locations throughout the U.S. called in each Friday morning to share grape boycott results, along with their latest learnings and current dilemmas, all of which provided rich sources of collective knowledge to draw on. This information, along with local farm worker reports and presentations were punctuated with music, jokes, and storytelling. Cesar Chavez, the leader of the farm workers' movement acknowledged set backs, and there were many, but the primary energy went toward the future. Its pull was alive! As the evening wore on people began to call out "*Teatro, Teatro!*" because they knew that the time was coming for El Teatro Campesino—the Farm Workers Theater—to perform.

El Teatro Campesino stimulated whole-hearted engagement and collaborative learning at its best. El Teatro had been birthed by the farm workers themselves, led by Luis Valdez, who had a special talent for vivid images and symbolic communication. Their only tools were themselves, their home made masks, small placards, a pair of sunglasses, a red bandanna and a great deal of imagination. El Teatro expressed with improvisation, humor and play the very essence of the farm workers efforts as they learned together to create a democratic future that was worthy of their best efforts. The people actively participated, adding their own lively improvisational voices to the scenes from "real life" that the actors created. In addition, the Teatro's traveling Puppet Theater, taken to dusty agricultural towns across the state of California and performed in local parks and on street corners enthralled and educated farm worker children and their parents alike.

El Teatro helped people see humor in even the most difficult times. El Teatro affirmed hope, and honored defeat as a learning experience. El Teatro demonstrated the

power of story and song, of drama and symbol, of poetry and art to mobilize the human mind, heart, and spirit across traditional cultural boundaries and to transform vision into action.

Without being theorists in democratic process, El Teatro intuitively understood and brilliantly engaged the arts to stimulate thoughtful reflection, powerful conversations and innovative learning about farm workers' rights and responsibilities in a democratic society. On the evening that the United Farm Workers won the very first election in the history of agriculture in our nation, it was El Teatro Campesino—serving as a powerful mirror with microphones—that helped the workers and their children see and reflect on their historic success.

The World Café

Thirty years passed since my days with Cesar Chavez and the grape workers in the mid-1960s. It's January 1995. I'm now part of the core research team of The Dialogue Project at the MIT Sloan School's Organizational Learning Center. I awake to a rainy dawn at our home in Mill Valley, California. We have 24 people from seven different countries arriving in half an hour to continue the second in a series of strategic dialogues among "Intellectual Capital Pioneers"—corporate executives, researchers, and consultants at the leading edge of this emerging field.

Last evening we were in the midst of exploring the question "*What is the role of leadership in maximizing the value of intellectual capital?*"

As I set out the breakfast and prepare the coffee, I'm 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 our patio to visit when they arrive. Then David, my partner, has an idea.

“Why don’t we put 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.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. As we put out the small tables and white vinyl chairs, our interactive graphics recorder, Tomi Nagai-Rothe, arrives and says, “Gee, those look like café tables. I think they need some tablecloths!” She improvises, draping white easel sheets over each of the paired TV tables. Now it’s getting kind of playful. I decide we need flowers on the café tables, and go for small vases downstairs. In the meantime, Tomi adds markers on each of the tables, just like those in many neighborhood cafés. She makes a sign for our front door—*Welcome to the Homestead Café*—playing off of our address, Homestead Boulevard, which is actually a narrow road up the side of a mountain.

Just as I place 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, continuing to reflect on last night’s question. People are really engaged. They begin to scribble and draw pictures on the tablecloths. David and I have a quick huddle and decide that, rather than having a formal dialogue circle to open the gathering, we will simply encourage people to continue to share and reflect on what’s bubbling up from their conversations that could shed light on the core question we’d been exploring regarding 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 throughout the room. Why don’t we leave one host at each table and have our other members travel to different tables, carrying the key ideas from the first

conversation— linking and connecting with the threads that are being woven at other tables?” There’s consensus that Charles’ suggestion seems like fun. After a few minutes of wrap-up, folks begin to move around the room.

The second 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, exploring together, testing ideas and assumptions together, building new knowledge together, adding to each others’ colorful diagrams and pictures and noting key words and ideas on the tablecloths. David 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 only a moment.

The energy in the room is palpable. 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. We ask each table group to put their individual tablecloths around the edges of the larger cloth and take a “reflection tour,” noticing in silence the patterns, themes and insights that are emerging in our midst.

As we gather around and Tomi begins to draw our collective reflections and insights 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 as yet have no language. It is as if a larger collective intelligence, beyond the individual selves in the room, has become visible to us. The improvised Café process has 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, continuing their collective reflections, drawing their ideas on the tablecloths, making new connections, and cross-pollinating their diverse insights—focused around the core question that had drawn them together.

Perspectives and Reflections

The experiences I've shared in these three vignettes span more than 50 years and have taken place in very different settings with different populations. Yet, each of these stories continues to this day. The early efforts of my parents and their friends helped to nurture a progressive movement for democratic participation and social change that is still alive and well in South Florida. The United Farm Workers continues its efforts to bring justice to the fields and is now active in the immigration debate. The World Café process which we discovered "by accident," now often enriched by theater, readings, music, and the meditative arts, is becoming a global phenomenon that amazes and humbles us. From nurturing the democracy movement in Thailand, to fostering indigenous rights in North America and New Zealand, to promoting civic engagement in cities in both the US and Europe, the World Café process is serving to stimulate authentic conversation, thoughtful reflection and committed action on behalf of life affirming futures across sectors on six continents.

What can we learn from these seemingly disparate stories? What wisdom might they hold for us as we consider ways to strengthen democracy? In each of these cases the humanities and/or the arts, as well as a focus on powerful questions have played key roles. In the Jefferson Club, core questions, coupled with relevant readings brought by participants themselves served as key catalysts for both reflection and collective engagement. In the farm workers' movement, El Teatro Campesino played a pivotal

role in helping workers respond to the core question—*How can life be better for our us and our families?* In the case of the World Café, not only the focus on core questions, and cross-pollinating ideas but also on visual language through tablecloth drawings and large-scale graphic murals accelerates the capacity for collective reflection and meaning making.

We could say that in each of these cases, the arts and/or the humanities played the pivotal role. However, I'd like to offer a complimentary perspective as I reflect on these stories. They raise for me the question, "Is it the arts or humanities alone that we should be focusing on? Or, might it also be important to situate these powerful modalities as doorways to understanding an even deeper core process that enables a democracy (or any other collective endeavor) to flourish—the core process of making meaning and coordinating action in human conversation that lies at the heart of our co-creative capacities as a species?"²

One image I hold of this rich territory comes from my experience as a teenager living with my adopted grandmother in a colonial town in Chiapas, Mexico. When you entered her home through the large carved wooden doorway, the first thing you saw was a large central courtyard with vivid bougainvillea, lush flowers and verdant trees in big clay pots with a large fountain in the center. You could enter the central courtyard by going through any of the multiple arched entryways that surrounded this open, flower-filled space in the middle of the house.

² Maturana, Humberto and Varela, Francisco, (1987), *The Tree of Knowledge*, Boston: MA., Shambhala Publications; Brown, Juanita with Isaacs, David and the World Café Community (2005) *The World Café: Shaping our Futures Through Conversations that Matter*; San Francisco: CA., Berrett Koehler.

For me entering the space of collaborative reflection and democratic dialogue is like entering this central courtyard in the spacious home of our common humanity. Art, music, song, poetry, theatre, literature, visual language—each of these are doorways that enable us to enter the central courtyard of human conversation as a core process and to discover a fountain of collective wisdom that can nourish our lives and the democratic futures we cherish.

It's for this reason that I hope we will focus not only on the role of reflection along with the arts and the humanities as doorways to democratic discourse, but also on the discovery of a broader and/or deeper set of core design principles that can create the conditions for powerful conversations and committed action across traditional boundaries around questions that matter to our common future on this fragile planet.