

CONVERSATIONS THAT SHAPE THE FUTURE

By

Tom Atlee, Founder, The Co-Intelligence Institute
Author: *The Tao of Democracy*

A review of

The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter

by

Juanita Brown, with David Isaacs and the World Café Community
Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, 2005

Juanita Brown's *THE WORLD CAFE* is a profoundly insightful and richly practical book, designed for evolutionary times. For me, it is already a classic.

One expects it to be a book about one conversational practice, the World Cafe, written by its co-founder. It is. And it isn't.

What it is—most of all—is an exploration of the power of **CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER**—ALL conversations that matter. It is also an exploration of the conditions under which **QUESTIONS THAT MATTER** can be deeply and productively explored.

The essence of true dialogue is the exploration of questions that are important to us, that shape how we think and what we do next. These questions are central; they are the channel through which our life-passion flows when we are evolving, deepening, and learning. When we do that together—in rich conversation—our passions can flow and evolve together, usually going deeper and wider than we tend to go alone.

In *THE WORLD CAFÉ*, this creative dance of conversations and questions is chronicled by more than 100 practitioners, each more articulate than the last, each leading us to another level of understanding about one more important dimension of the transformational magic of dialogue. Their voices are warm, engaged in the shared exploration, not lecturing.

Juanita includes all these folks quite intentionally and comfortably. She is being more than "author". She is being "host"—as in a café conversation in her living room—welcoming all voices, including her own, into a place of common learning and deepening.

I know—because I have experienced it—that she has a habit of interviewing

practitioners and thinkers who visit her, one by one, sitting on her couch, and collecting their recorded words. And then there is her library of beloved books and articles. In creating this book, *THE WORLD CAFÉ*, she has dived with friends down to these seabeds of accumulated wisdom, coming up with treasures, food, and exotic life from the depths, eager to share them with the rest of us. They read like poetry:

*Questions function
as open-handed invitations to creativity,
calling forth
that which doesn't yet exist.*

*What do we NOT know,
that if we DID know,
could transform this situation
for the better?*

*Human systems grow towards
what they persistently
ask questions about.*

*We contribute
because we are part of something
larger than our own lives and efforts,
but the form of our contribution
is based on our uniqueness
and our individuality.*

*One of the hard questions is
asking ourselves,
'Is this not working, or is it just uncomfortable?'
Sometimes the uncomfortable
is necessary
to break through
to new thinking.*

*Silence is the pulley,
similar to the rope in a well,
that enables members
to draw a deeper wisdom up
from the common well
of mutual exploration and experience.*

*A leader these days
needs to be a host—one
who convenes people,
who convenes diversity,
who convenes all viewpoints in creative processes
where our intelligence can come forth.*

*Pro-activism involves people
actively co-creating -
helping each other through dialogue
to be, as it were, in our dreams awake,
collectively shaping our future.*

*Every act
helps to repair some larger whole, but
the repair not only patches it,
it also modifies it,
transforms it,
sets it on the road to becoming
something else, entirely new.*

(These quotes are from Marilee Goldberg; Susan Skjei; David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney; Carol Ochs; Janet McCallen, Elizabeth Jetton, Kim Porto and Sean Walters; Juanita Brown; Margaret Wheatley; Samantha Tan; and Christopher Alexander, respectively.)

If I had any criticism of this book (it is fashionable, after all, to always have a criticism in a review), it would be that Juanita's specific practice—The World Café, as a methodology—is not adequately summarized until quite late. Hidden on page 4 are two sentences hinting at the mechanics of World Café, which slip by quickly as we toboggan into a vast and fascinating landscape of the principles underlying high quality conversation.

However, over and over along the way, we hear more about how actual World Cafés work, often through the many compelling stories of past Cafes. Then, in Chapter 10, we stumble on the amazing "World Café Hosting Guide" which - despite Juanita's disclaimer that "this book is not a how-to manual" - tells you pretty much everything you need to know to organize and host one.

Still, I would advise those unfamiliar with the core World Café process to read the short description at co-intelligence.org/P-worldcafe.html before reading the book. It will help ground you, providing something upon which to hang the sumptuous details you will soon discover.

(This may be a minor point: I am so familiar with the process that I had no problem with it. I don't know if anyone will ACTUALLY have trouble with the lack of early summary.)

As I made my way through THE WORLD CAFE, I found myself drawn into ever deeper understanding—of the process (World Café), of the larger patterns of conversation that World Café mimics (the social water through which we humans swim our lives), and of the underlying principles for juicy conversation which apply so broadly to so many diverse conversational techniques.

The seven principles of World Café are:

- * Set the context - Clarify the purpose and parameters of the conversation and its place in the larger environment in which it will happen.
- * Create hospitable space - Provide a welcoming, safe, life-serving environment.
- * Explore questions that matter - Invite collective attention into what's important to the participants.
- * Encourage everyone's contribution - Engage meaningful participation by each person, with real respect.
- * Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives - Facilitate juicy diversity and equally juicy interconnectedness.
- * Listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions - Help coherent group insight emerge naturally from the dance of individual perspectives and passions.
- * Harvest and share collective discoveries - Make the group's collective intelligence visible to itself.

In the seven chapters that form the core of THE WORLD CAFÉ, you will explore each of these principles, learning practical insights and many tools for applying each one. The blending of theory and practice is both seamless and visionary.

I guess this is what justifies Juanita's insistence that this is not a manual: It becomes increasingly clear that a comprehensive manual for World Café would be impossible. World Café is not a single, well-defined A-B-C process. It is an evolving and expanding family of processes emerging in the conceptual space created by those seven principles. Page after page I found more and more variations on those themes. By the time I was finished, I found myself quite awed by the symphony they made. I also felt freed—even encouraged—to make some music of my own, informed by a new deeper understanding of both harmony and dissonance.

I could go on for quite a while. There is so much to say. For example:

- * This book is filled with pictures and graphics that not only clarify major points, but themselves evoke deep understandings and feelings. I think they play a greater role in the overall effect than I realized before writing this review (the learning continues even after the book is done).
- * There are surprising insights into (for example) the role of flowers and art, the relationship between talk and action, "the magic in the middle", common sense, the power of setting, itself, to govern the quality of conversation, and—most important for me—the sources and dynamics of collective intelligence.
- * There are well over a hundred questions peppered throughout—I lost track at 120—providing ample models and stimulation for what may be the most critical skill of all—the creation of powerful questions—"What could a good school also be?" "What would this workplace be like if it were the kind of place I looked forward to getting up and coming to every morning?" "How can our laboratory

be not the best IN the world, but the best FOR the world?"

- * The resource section, bibliography, index, and the annotated acknowledgments collectively offer a useful and intriguing overview of the network of people and information from which this vibrant work has emerged.

I can't recommend this book highly enough. For anyone interested in process, in any kind of dialogue, or in the dynamics of emergence and collective intelligence, *THE WORLD CAFE* offers a fascinating adventure with helpful hints, profound insights and engaging stories dancing at each turn in the road.

And, for a world undergoing one of the most profound and complex evolutionary transitions of its four billion year life, this book offers a path—of both method and understanding—through which we can move, in the most natural way possible, into new forms emerging to meet these times. *THE WORLD CAFE* is a midwifery gift to a future struggling to be born.