

Reflections on *The World Café*

We are deeply grateful for the reflections of key colleagues around the world who have reviewed advance copies of this book and offered their diverse perspectives on its relevance for our readers.

After all these years, I can still remember my first World Café! Our success with the “Commons Café” would not have been possible without this groundbreaking work.

**Sharif Abdullah, founder,
the Commonway Institute, and author of
*Creating a World that Works for All***

World Café conversations are one of the best ways I know to truly enhance knowledge sharing and tap into collective intelligence. The few simple principles in this book can lead to conscious conversations with the power to change not only the individuals who participate, but also our collective future.

Verna Allee, author of *The Knowledge Evolution* and *The Future of Knowledge*

The wisdom of many voices speaks from these pages! May we take seriously their invitation to call forth what has heart and meaning in our world through conversations that matter.

Tom Atlee, founder, The Co-Intelligence Institute, and author of *The Tao of Democracy*

The capacity to see the world of the “other” sounds simple, but it is not. Yet it is the core of creating a new human history together. The World Café and this book serve as an inspiration to help make that possible.

**Lic. Esteban Moctezuma Barragan,
Mexico’s former Minister of
Social Development**

The prevailing wisdom is that talk is cheap and that it’s a poor, timid substitute for action. This warm and inviting book demonstrates that conversation *is* action, because it is the wellspring from which relationships and trust are generated and informed decisions grow.

**Thomas F. Beech, President and CEO,
Fetzer Institute**

The challenge of leadership in these times of breathtaking speed and exhausting complexity is to find creative ways to embrace the future, and let go of the past. World Café dialogue provide us the opportunity to do just that.

**Paul Borawski, Executive Director
and Chief Strategic Officer,
American Society for Quality**

Understanding the World Café’s fascinating model of a living social system is essential for the understanding of life and leadership in human organizations.

**Fritjof Capra, author of *The Web of Life*
and *The Hidden Connections***

The World Café couldn’t be more timely. It offers inspiration and practical guidance to those who want to convene groups—even very large groups—for conversations that stimulate hope, creativity, and collective commitment.

**Laura Chasin, founder and Director,
Public Conversations Project**

This book and the stories in it offer hope for addressing complex challenges and provide methods for strengthening family and community relationships. It is truly a work of art and a very important contribution.

**Rita Cleary, co-founder,
Visions of a Better World Foundation**

World Café conversations touch the heart of what “human being” or “being human” means. By cherishing and including diverse voices, this book models the very nature of collective knowledge that is the heart of the World Café approach to dialogue.

Sara Cobb, Director, Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, and former Executive Director, Program on Negotiation, Harvard Law School

The invention of the World Café approach to constructive conversation is a tremendous step forward. If it can be applied widely there is a good chance that this world will be a much happier and more productive place.

**Napier Collyns, co-founder,
Global Business Network**

What a great piece of work and contribution to the world! *The World Café* gives you the confidence to begin a new way of learning together—creating a safe environment to surface important questions and to make a real difference.

Kevin Cushing, CEO, AlphaGraphics, Inc.

This book lives its message of dialogue—with multiple voices that increase our mutual intelligence through its broad and deep insights into the magic of collective wisdom.

**Leif Edvinsson, Professor of Intellectual
Capital, University of Lund, Sweden**

Those of us who help lead cities and local communities must bring the World Café, with its creative way of having productive conversations, into our public discourse.

**Ed Everett, City Manager,
Redwood City, California**

The World Café is a practical, robust, and resilient approach for engaging with complex but important questions—creating outcomes that are seen as having deep legitimacy and therefore are more likely to be acted upon.

**Martin Fischer, Senior Leadership Advisor,
British National Health Service**

The World Café is a powerful process for catalyzing conversations that matter—and that can heal. This book shows you how to use that process—and then watch the sparks fly!

**Mark Gerzon, President,
Mediators Foundation, and
author of *Leading Beyond Borders: Tools for
Transforming Conflict Into Synergy***

In this groundbreaking book, Juanita Brown and the World Café community offer the world a gift: a simple, brilliant, beautiful process for creating quality conversations about important issues, during one of the most divisive times in our history.

**Sandy Heierbacher, Director, National
Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation**

The World Café is a remarkably efficient and natural way for “the system to see (and hear) itself”—a critical capacity in our complex world. It has helped our SoL community work on important current issues and build relationships that last for years.

**C. Sherry Immediato,
Managing Director and President,
Society for Organizational Learning (SoL)**

In the decade of dilemmas ahead we need more conversations that matter and fewer speeches that don't. We need to learn in new ways. *The World Café* is an immediate and practical resource for that learning.

**Bob Johansen, Senior Vice President and
Distinguished Fellow, Institute for the Future**

The World Café works like the window of a cathedral whose light reminds people to tap into their innate sources of natural wisdom. This book is a living story with many profound insights. It helps us create lives that matter through conversations that live.

**Rev. Jan Willem Kirpestein, founder, and
Johan Bontje, Senior Advisor, Encounter of
Worldviews Foundation, The Netherlands**

The principles for hosting strategic conversations shared in this book have been the foundation of our Executive MBA program. Why? Because they work!

**Robert Lengel, Associate Dean for
Executive Education and Director of the
Center for Professional Excellence,
University of Texas, San Antonio**

The World Café is such a dynamic process that I thought it would be impossible to portray what actually goes on in this verbal whirlwind of ideas and collective thinking. Yet this book captures the essence of this critical approach to “learning how to learn.”

Wit Ostrenko, President and CEO, Tampa Bay Museum of Science and Industry

The way *The World Café* brings to light the fundamental importance of conversation as a core process is both inspiring and exciting. It demonstrates that we are all more dependent than ever on listening and open conversation.

Mike Pfeil, Vice President, Corporate Communications, Altria Group, Inc.

If you are asking yourself: “What might I do to promote breakthrough thinking?”—here’s an approach that provides the essential ingredients. It’s practical, engaging, and applicable anywhere in the world.

Marjorie Parker, co-founder, Norwegian Center for Leadership Development, and author of *Creating Shared Vision*

This is a simple yet revolutionary, elegant yet practical way of digging deep and thinking big together.

Vicki Robin, co-founder, Conversation Cafes and Let’s Talk America; and co-author of *Your Money or Your Life*

The World Café is an innovative social technology that can access collective wisdom. It is a must-read and a must-practice for all researchers and practitioners of social transformation and organizational change.

Claus Otto Scharmer, Senior Lecturer, MIT Sloan School of Management and co-author of *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*

The World Café contains an astounding cornucopia of dialogic treasures, enabling us to appreciate and explore the ecology of systemic ideas and principles at the core of this important work.

Fred Steier, former President, American Society for Cybernetics

I love the way this book weaves in the scientific theory behind how dialogue and the World Café operate. The diverse voices who speak here also offer hope that we may yet evolve into true stewards of each other, all life, and the planet.

Barbara Waugh, co-founder, e-Inclusion; Director, University Relations, Hewlett-Packard; and author of *The Soul in the Computer*

We have used Café dialogues at our international and regional conferences with 1000 people and with small gatherings of 50. All come away with a deep and fulfilling connection to one another while having “conversations that matter.”

Rose Welch, Community Network and International Conference Director, Institute of Noetic Sciences

Conversations, circles, and community are the cutting edge of the 21st century, and *The World Café* provides a map to this uncharted territory. If you want to know where we’re headed, as a society and as a global culture, read this book!

Justine and Michael Toms, co-founders, New Dimensions World Broadcasting Network

The future performance of our organizations is directly related to the quality of conversations that happen there. The World Café gives us proven ingredients to cook up conversations that count. It is a must read for anyone aspiring to leadership in the 21st century.

Eric Vogt, President, International Corporate Learning Association (InterClass)

The World Café has been a key format in our international Systems Thinking conferences. It is an amazingly effective way to overcome the barriers that separate us and release our collective wisdom in service of more informed, more creative action.

Ginny Wiley, President, Pegasus Communications

The World Café

Shaping Our Futures
Through Conversations
That Matter

Juanita Brown

with

David Isaacs

and

The World Café
Community



BK

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To our loving parents and families, who have helped to shape who we are as people and professionals.

And to the World Café community for teaching us about the magic of collective wisdom and how it can express itself in so many practical ways.

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FOREWORD

We Can Be Wise Only Together

By Margaret J. Wheatley

Author of four groundbreaking books, *Leadership and the New Science*, *A Simpler Way*, *Turning to One Another*, and *Finding Our Way*, Meg Wheatley is a consultant, speaker, and president of the Berkana Institute, a nonprofit foundation dedicated to developing life-affirming leadership around the globe. In this reflection on the power of conversation and collective wisdom Meg shares her perspective on the unique contribution of the World Café to our common future.

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

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.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning the Conversation: An Invitation to the World Café

I am a child of the sixties. During that time of social and political upheaval, many of us were determined to *tell it like it is*, to see beneath the surface of things to what really mattered. That inner fire that fueled my early years as a social change activist is now tempered by a compassion born of more than thirty years of working intimately with the dilemmas and paradoxes of personal and institutional change in corporate settings. My self-righteousness and certainty have slowly given way to a humility developed out of a growing sense that there are many ways to tell it like it is—that any story worth telling can be experienced from multiple perspectives. It is with this awareness that I share with you the story of the learning journey from which the World Café has emerged and continues to evolve.

When I was growing up in suburban South Miami, Florida, our living room and dinner table were always alive with conversations. These weren't just any kind of conversations. They were passionate discussions about big questions—justice, democracy, and civil rights. From conversations like these in homes and churches, the civil liberties movement in Florida was nurtured and grew into a force for decency and fairness at a time of great turmoil in the South.

I remember, too, the spirited conversations we had at my adopted grandmother's home in southern Mexico when I was a teenager. Trudi Blom had been exiled from Europe during World War II, and there, in the remote state of Chiapas, she founded a global center for dialogue and action on environmental issues—much before it was fashionable to talk about sustainability. At her long dining room table, anthropologists, writers, scientists, and local travelers joined together for delicious meals with Lacandon Maya rain forest people and Chamula highland Indian guests. The diversity of the group always contributed to learning, discoveries,

and connections that never could have been anticipated. Today, half a century later, the Na-Bolom Center still serves as a place where diverse people and perspectives meet in dialogue around the dining room table.

During my early years as a community organizer with Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers' movement, it was in the thousands of informal meetings—conversations among those seated on tattered couches in ramshackle homes and labor camps—that small miracles occurred. Through dialogue and reflection, the underlying assumptions that had kept farmworkers stuck for generations began to shift. As workers shared tortilla and bean suppers, they also shared the *if-onlys* of their lives and imagined the impossible. With practice, they began to ask the *what-if* questions. And from the *what-ifs* came the *why-nots!*

Over the last quarter-century, my life has taken me to large corporations as a strategist and thinking partner with senior executives as they struggle to embrace the challenges of the knowledge era. In this world, my language and descriptions have changed to those of strategic dialogue and conversation as a core business process. My community-organizing emphasis has evolved to focus on and embrace the informal communities of practice that are the home for social processes of new learning and knowledge creation. But the essential threads of my life remain unbroken. It is still my deepest belief that it is through conversations around questions that matter that powerful capacities for evolving caring community, collaborative learning, and committed action are engaged—at work, in communities, and at home.

Conversations That Matter

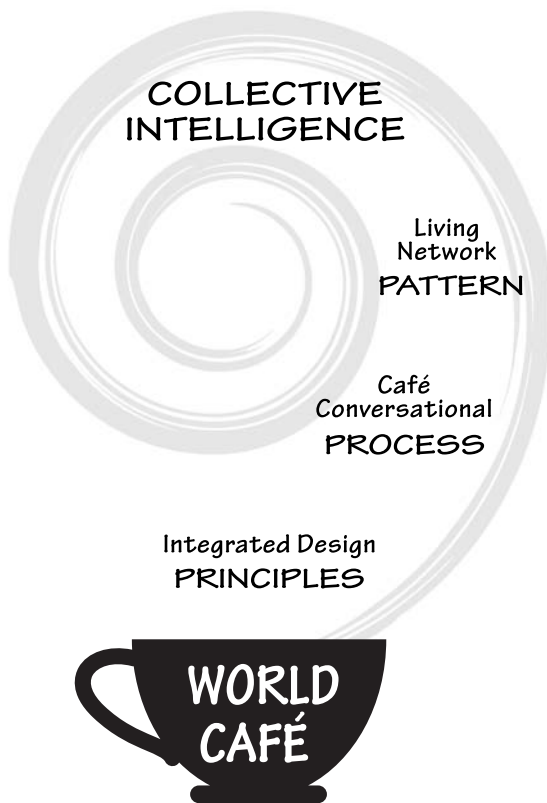
Through our conversations the stories and images of our future emerge, and never has this process been more critical. We now have the capacity, through neglect of the planetary commons on which our lives depend, to make this precious earth, our home, uninhabitable. We now have the capacity, through escalating violence and weapons of mass destruction, to make our precious human species, along with many others, extinct. Yet this is also a

moment of opportunity. We are connected as never before in webs of communication and information-sharing through the Internet and other media that make our collective predicament visible on a much larger scale than we could have imagined only a few years ago. And for the first time, we now have the capacity for engaging in connected global conversations and action about what is happening and how we choose to respond—conversations that are not under the formal aegis of any one institution, government, or corporation. It is time for us to engage in those conversations more intentionally. Our very survival as a human community, both locally and globally, may rest on our creative responses to the following questions:

- ▶ *How can we enhance our capacity to talk and think more deeply together about the critical issues facing our communities, our organizations, our nations, and our planet?*
- ▶ *How can we access the mutual intelligence and wisdom we need to create innovative paths forward?*

This book is the story of a personal and collective journey shaped by these questions. It is a story in which I have been an active participant, along with my partner, David Isaacs, and a lively global community of inquiry and practice. It is the story of the discovery and evolution of the World Café, a simple yet powerful conversational *process* for fostering constructive dialogue, accessing collective intelligence, and creating innovative possibilities for action, particularly in groups that are larger than most traditional dialogue approaches are designed to accommodate.

Anyone interested in creating conversations that matter can engage the World Café process, with its seven core design *principles* to improve people's collective capacity to share knowledge and shape the future together. World Café conversations simultaneously enable us to notice a deeper living *pattern* of connections at work in our organizations and communities—the often invisible webs of conversation and meaning-making through which we already collectively shape the future, often in unintended ways.



Engaging the World Café *process, principles, and pattern* in practical ways empowers leaders and others who work with groups to intentionally host World Café and other types of dialogue as well as to create dynamic networks of conversation and knowledge-sharing around an organization's real work and critical questions.

How Does a World Café Dialogue Work?

Café conversations are designed on the assumption that people already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges. The process is simple, yet it can yield surprising results. The innovative design of the World Café enables groups—often numbering in the hundreds of people—to participate together in evolving rounds of dialogue with three or four others while at the same time remaining part of a single, larger, connected conversation.

Small, intimate conversations link and build on each other as people move between groups, cross-pollinate ideas, and discover new insights into questions or issues that really matter in their life, work, or community. As the network of new connections increases, knowledge-sharing grows. A sense of the whole becomes increasingly strong. The collective wisdom of the group becomes more accessible, and innovative possibilities for action emerge.

In a Café gathering people often move rapidly from ordinary conversations—which keep us stuck in the past, are often divisive, and are generally superficial—toward *conversations that matter*, in which there is deeper collective understanding or forward movement in relation to a situation that people really care about. The seven World Café design principles, when used in combination, also create a kind of “conversational greenhouse,” nurturing the

conditions for the rapid propagation of actionable knowledge. These design principles are not limited to a formal Café event. They can also be used to focus and enhance the quality of other key conversations—enabling you to draw on the talent and wisdom of your organization or community to a greater extent than generally occurs with more traditional approaches.

World Café conversations simultaneously create a lived experience of how we naturally self-organize to think together, strengthen community, share knowledge, and ignite innovation. They allow us to see more clearly the importance of conversation as a living force so we can become more intentional about engaging its power. Café conversations demonstrate one innovative way to put living systems theory into practice.

The World Café, both as a designed conversational process and as a deeper living systems pattern, has immediate, practical implications for meeting and conference design, strategy formation, knowledge creation, rapid innovation, stakeholder engagement, and large-scale change. Experiencing a Café conversation in action also helps us make personal and professional choices about more satisfying ways to participate in the ongoing conversations that help shape our lives.

The World Café Goes Global

Since its inception in 1995, tens of thousands of people on six continents have participated in World Café dialogues in settings ranging from crowded hotel ballrooms holding twelve hundred people to cozy living rooms with just a dozen folks present. In a global consumer products company, executives from more than thirty nations used the Café process to integrate a new worldwide marketing strategy. Mexican government and corporate leaders have applied the World Café to scenario planning. Leaders from local communities representing more than sixty countries participated in Café dialogues during the Stockholm Challenge, which offers a Nobel-style prize for those creating technology for the common good.



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Faculty members in the United States and Europe are creating virtual, online Knowledge Cafés to conduct distance learning programs. In New Zealand and the United States, the World Café has inspired the creation of local venues for hosting Café conversa-

tions on key issues related to business futures, sustainable development, and community collaboration. The World Café has supported Conversation Cafés, Commonway Cafés, and Let's Talk America, key citizen initiatives that invite diverse groups to explore contemporary issues. Local churches and schools have used the World Café process on a smaller scale to build community and access the wisdom of their members.

Whether in business, government, health, education, NGO, or community settings, the World Café can make a special contribution when the goal is the focused use of dialogue to foster productive relationships, collaborative learning, and collective insight around real-life challenges

and key strategic questions. This is especially true when working with groups that are larger than most traditional dialogue circles are designed to accommodate.

A Community of Inquiry and Practice

The global World Café learning community—as well as this book—have evolved as colleagues from around the world experiment, document their work, share ideas, and learn from each other about the theory and practice embodied in the Café conversation approach.

I will serve as the primary narrator and your host for weaving together the stories, reflections, and conversations among World Café pioneers and others as we share with you our discoveries and the questions at the edge of our “not knowing.” In the Perspectives & Observations sections I'll share my own personal aha's and insights, and introduce you to others who are contributing to our learning.

All pioneering ventures are incomplete, reflecting the particular interests and ways of seeing of those who have been part of the journey, and who make the initial maps of the territory. I am but one among many colleagues who are furthering key aspects of this work. Yet I hope your travels with me through these pages will provide glimpses that stimulate new conversations about where to focus special attention and care in your own organizations and communities.

The research for this book and for my own earlier Ph.D. on the World Café (Brown, 2001) was conducted in the spirit of Appreciative Inquiry, an approach to organizational learning and development originated by David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western University (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider and others, 2003; Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Appreciative Inquiry deliberately focuses attention on what works, what brings life and vitality to an experience, and what's possible for its evolution. However, keep in mind that the same challenges that come up in any group can arise in a World Café conversation. At the same time, the World Café's focus on intimate exchange, disciplined inquiry, cross-pollination of ideas, and possibility thinking tends to create psychological safety and lessen inappropriate grandstanding and people's attachment to their own points of view. The very design of Café conversations often makes these common challenges easier to deal with than in many group settings.

What You'll Find Inside

Chapter 1 calls on insights from thought leaders across disciplines to reveal the critical but often invisible role of conversation in shaping our lives and our futures. Chapter 2 invites you to consider a new perspective on conversation as a core process—a fundamental means through which groups and organizations adapt to changing circumstances and co-create the knowledge necessary for success. It also briefly introduces the seven core design principles that are central to understanding the World Café approach to dialogue.

Chapters 3 through 9 share the seven core World Café design principles, with each chapter focusing on one of them. The stories that open these chapters reveal the creativity and imagination with which Café hosts from around the world are using these principles to foster conversations that matter. These real life “learning stories,” including the hosts’ dilemmas and discoveries, form the heart of the book. More than any abstract treatise, teaching, or training manual, they provide innovative ideas for how to craft a World Café approach adapted to your unique situation. Each chapter then grounds these experiences in a discussion of both the conceptual underpinnings of each design principle and their general application in a wide variety of settings.

Chapter 10 focuses on the practicalities of Café hosting that have not been covered in detail in the earlier exploration of the seven guiding principles. This chapter is designed to stand alone as a World Café hosting guide to help you plan Café dialogues in diverse settings. If you want an initial overview of the specifics of Café hosting, this is the place to start. It provides the information needed for someone with previous group experience to host a successful Café, particularly if you have attended a World Café dialogue yourself.

Chapter 11 begins with several short stories that illustrate ways leaders are using World Café approaches as part of their own conversational leadership—the capacity to engage the collaborative intelligence of their organizations and communities to meet real-life challenges. These form the backdrop for our exploration of both the organizational infrastructures and personal capabilities that conversational leaders can develop in order to nurture greater business and social value using dialogue as a core process.

Chapter 12 highlights the societal implications and the promise inherent in embracing and acting on the insights and practical experiences explored throughout the book. You are encouraged to become a part of the dialogue and deliberation community, sharing your insights and discoveries as you make your own unique contribution to creating a culture of dialogue wherever you may find yourself.

In the epilogue, octogenarian Anne Doshier, Ph.D., the elder of the World Café, shares the questions that have informed her own life's journey and why she has committed her remaining years to nurturing a culture of dialogue. Peter Senge, senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management and founding chair of the Society for Organizational Learning, then offers an afterword based on our experience together in hosting World Café gatherings with key global leaders.

If you want to learn more about other forms of dialogue, as well as key initiatives that are also making wonderful contributions to the field of dialogue and deliberation, take a look at "Resources and Connections" at the back of the book. And although this book is not an academic treatise, enough reference material has been included in the text to support you in "following the trail" to the conceptual foundations of the World Café and related areas of interest.

How to Engage with What's Here

Having a common architecture as this book unfolded has allowed diverse contributions in a shared framework, enabling you to engage with the material based on your own reading style and preferences. Each chapter begins with a quotation, an illustration, and a question that illuminate the essence of that chapter, so if you look only at the chapter openers you'll gain an overview of the book's main themes. Each chapter's learning stories highlight the way the chapter's core ideas are being put into real-world practice. These stories, although simply "snapshots in time" that continue to unfold, enable you to appreciate the many ways you might introduce and engage Café conversations in your own life and work. In the "Perspectives & Observations" sections that follow, I, as your host, will share multidisciplinary insights from leading edge thinkers as they inform our exploration of dialogue and Café learning. At the end of each chapter, you'll find "Questions for Reflection," a

Each chapter's learning stories highlight the way the chapter's core ideas are being put into real-world practice

series of questions to consider as you convene and host conversations that matter.

We've purposely included multiple voices and modes of expression as well as graphic illustrations to illuminate key ideas. We've also used the following terms—World Café, Café conversation, and Café dialogue—interchangeably throughout the text to describe the World Café process. In addition, you'll find Café names like Knowledge Café, Leadership Café, Strategy Café, and others that illuminate the many ways people are naming and adapting the basic World Café pattern and process in ways that meet their unique needs and constituencies.

Although this book is not a how-to manual or a detailed recipe for creating a World Café event, you'll find both key ingredients and practical ideas for hosting conversations that matter in many different organizational and community settings. We've discovered that one of the strengths of the World Café approach is its simplicity and versatility. In fact, if you have experience leading or working with groups, a careful reading of the stories that begin each chapter along with a close review of chapter 10 will likely give you enough information to get started. The seven World Café design principles and varied hosting practices you'll find here can be helpful in convening conversations for many different purposes, whether you use the Café format or not. Even if you are not planning to host Cafés personally, the book will provide you with enough perspective to determine if this approach is right for your own organization's meetings, conferences, or retreats.

As I mentioned earlier, "Questions for Reflection," posed at the end of each chapter, encourage you to consider your own experience and process of discovery about conversations that matter. Take a moment to ask yourself these questions now:

- ▶ *What drew me to this book?*

- ▶ *If I think of this book as a personal conversation with the authors, how will that affect how I approach what they have to share with me?*

▮ *What question, if I explore it during my time with this book, could make the most difference in my life and work?*

There is ample room for noting your own thoughts and reflections. Imagine yourself in a Café dialogue and think of these pages as Café tablecloths. Notice what connects to your personal experience and your own process of discovery. Jot down your insights about where to focus special attention and care as you engage conversations that matter in your own organization or community. Consider your own questions. Add your voice to the conversation.

In one of his wonderful poems, the Spanish poet Antonio Machado reminds us, “We make the path by walking on it.” By joining us on the path that David and I, with the World Café community, are walking, we hope you will find yourself as intrigued as we are by both the power of conversation and the promise of the World Café. We hope you’ll find the value generated from Café conversations around the world as an encouraging sign for the future.

Welcome to the World Café!

