



The Power of Talk

CONVERSATION IS THE CORNERSTONE of civilization, the very essence of culture and community. Face-to-face talk is the way humans have always connected with each other, from the ceremonial fires of tribal villages and the salons of Paris to the book clubs, bowling leagues, street-corner chats, and pillow talk of modern-day America.

Yet, as the pace and decibel level of society increases, engaged conversation is in danger of being crowded out from the center of our lives. Almost everywhere you turn today, there is a flashing TV screen, ringing cell phone, blaring music, or a friend hurrying away to her next appointment. This represents more than just missed opportunities for a chat. It also means dimin-

ished prospects for important ideas and projects. As Margaret J. Wheatley explains in our cover story, all significant social change arises from people sitting down to talk about what matters to them.

In the wake of September 11 and more outbursts of violence around the world, we need to talk now more than ever. And that's exactly what compels Wheatley, Conversation Café founder Vicki Robin, and others highlighted in this section to find new ways to cut through the clatter and get us all talking again. Good conversation is not only satisfying, it's the first step toward changing the world.


—Jay Walljasper

"Some friends and I started talking..."

All social change begins
with a conversation

BY MARGARET J. WHEATLEY

ILLUSTRATIONS
BY CECELIA WAXBERG



A Canadian woman told me this story. She was returning to Vietnam to pick up her second child, adopted from the same orphanage as her first child. On her visit two years earlier she had seen challenging conditions at the orphanage and had vowed this time to take medical supplies. "They needed Tylenol, not T-shirts or trinkets," she said to a friend one day. The friend suggested that the most useful thing to take would be an incubator. The woman was surprised (she'd been thinking bandages and pills), but she started making calls, looking for an incubator. Weeks later, she had been offered enough pediatric medical supplies to fill four 40-foot shipping containers! And 12 incubators. From a casual conversation between two friends, a medical relief effort for Vietnamese children emerged. And it all began when "some friends and I started talking."

Stories like this are plentiful. Nothing has given me more hope recently than to observe how simple conversations give birth to actions that can change lives and restore our faith in

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the future. There is no more powerful way to initiate significant social change than to start a conversation. When a group of people discover that they share a common concern, that's when the process of change begins.

Yet it's not easy to begin talking to one another. We stay silent and apart from one another for many reasons.

a system, when a few people notice something they will no longer tolerate, or when they respond to someone's dream of what's possible.

It's easy to observe this in recent history. The Solidarity trade union movement in Poland began with conversation—less than a dozen workers in a Gdansk shipyard in 1980 speaking to

If conversation is the natural way that humans think together, what gets lost when we stop talking? Paulo Freire, the influential Brazilian educator who used education to support poor people in transforming their lives, said that we "cannot be truly human apart from communication. . . . To impede communication is to reduce people to the status of things."

When we don't talk to one another in a meaningful way, Freire believes, we never act to change things. We become passive and allow others to tell us what to do. Freire had a deep faith in every person's ability to be a clear thinker and a courageous actor. Not all of us share this faith, but it is necessary if we are to invite colleagues into conversation. Sometimes it is hard to believe that others have as much to offer as we do in the way of concern and skill. But I have found that when the issue is important to others, they will not disappoint us. If you start a conversation, others will surprise you.

Near my home in Utah, I watched a small group of mothers cautiously begin meeting about a problem in the community: They wanted their children to be able to walk to school safely. They were shocked when the city council granted their request for a pedestrian traffic light. Encouraged by this victory, they started other projects, each more ambitious than the last. After a few years, they participated in securing a federal grant for neighborhood development worth tens of millions of dollars. Today, one of those mothers has become an expert on city housing, won a seat on the city council, and completed a term as council chair. When she tells her story, it begins like so many others: "Some friends and I started talking. . . ."

For conversation to become a powerful tool in society, we must take it seriously and examine our own role in making it successful. Here are some basic principles I've learned over years of hosting formal conversations

WORDS MEAN MORE THAN WHAT IS SET DOWN ON PAPER. IT TAKES THE HUMAN VOICE TO INFUSE THEM WITH SHADES OF DEEPER MEANING.

—Maya Angelou

Some of us never have been invited to share our ideas and opinions. From early school days we've been instructed to be quiet so others can tell us what to think. Others have soured on conversation, having sat through too many meetings that degenerated into people shouting, or stomping out angrily, or taking control of the agenda.

But true conversation is very different from those sorts of experiences. It is a timeless and reliable way for humans to think together. Before there were classrooms, meetings, or group facilitators, there were people sitting around talking. When we think about beginning a conversation, we can take courage from the fact that this is a process we all know how to do. We are reawakening an ancient practice, a way of being together that all humans intimately understand.

We also can take courage in the fact that many people are longing to converse again. We are hungry for a chance to talk. People want to tell their stories, and are willing to listen to yours. I find that it takes just one person to start a conversation, because everyone else is eager to talk once it has begun. "Some friends and I started talking. . . ." Change doesn't happen from a leader announcing the plan. Change begins from deep inside

each other about despair, their need for change, their need for freedom. Within months, Solidarity grew to 9.5 million workers. There was no e-mail then, just people talking to each other about their own needs, and finding that millions of fellow citizens shared their feelings. In a short time, they shut down the country, and changed the course of history.

To make important changes in our communities, our society, our lives, we just have to find a few others who care about the same thing we do. Together we can figure out the first step, then the second, then the next. Gradually, we grow powerful. But we don't have to start with power, only with passion.

Even among friends, starting a conversation can take courage. But conversation also gives us courage. Thinking together, deciding what actions to take, more of us become bold. As we learn from each other's experiences and interpretations, we see issues in richer detail. This clarity can help us see both when to act and when not to. In some cases, the right timing means doing nothing right now. Talking can be enough for the time being.

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We acknowledge one another as equals. One thing that makes us equal is that we need each other. Whatever any one of us knows alone, it is not enough to change things. Someone else is bound to see things that we need to know.

We try to stay curious about each other. I maintain my curiosity by reminding myself that everyone has something to teach me. When others are saying things I disagree with, or have never thought about, or that I consider foolish or wrong, I remind myself that I really can learn from them—if I stay open and do not shut them out.

We recognize that we need each other's help to become better listeners. The greatest barrier to good conversation is that as a culture we're losing the capacity to listen. We're too busy. We're too certain of our own views. We just keep rushing past each other. At the beginning of any conversation I host, I make a point of asking everyone to help each other listen. This is hard work for almost everyone, but if we talk about listening at the start of a conversation, it makes things easier. If someone hasn't been listening to us, or misinterprets what we say, we're less likely to blame that person. We can be a little gentler with the difficulties we experience in a group if we make a commitment at the start to help each other listen.

We slow down so we have time to think and reflect. Most of us work in places where we rarely have time to sit together and think. We dash in and out of meetings where we make hurried, not thoughtful, decisions. Working to create conditions for a true spirit of conversation helps rediscover the joy of thinking together.

We remember that conversation is the natural way humans think together. Conversation is not a new invention for the 21st century; we're restoring a tradition from earlier human experience. It does, however, take time to let go of our modern ways of being in meetings, to get past the habits that keep us apart—speaking too fast, interrupting others, monopolizing the time, giving speeches or making pronouncements. Many of us have been rewarded for these behaviors, becoming more powerful by using them. But the blunt truth is that they don't lead to wise thinking or healthy relationships.

We expect it to be messy at times. Life doesn't move in straight lines, and neither does a good conversation. When a conversation begins, people always say things that don't connect. What's important at the start is that everyone's voice gets heard, that everyone feels invited into the conversation. If you're hosting the conversation, you may feel responsible for pointing out connections between these diverse contributions, but it's important to let go of that impulse and just sit with the messiness. The messy stage doesn't last forever. If we suppress the messiness at the beginning, it will find us later on and be more disruptive. The first stage

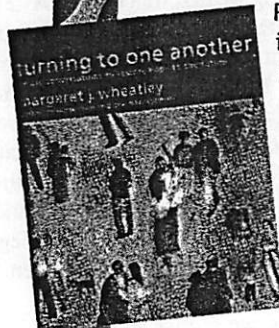


BEHIND THE STORY Margaret J. Wheatley

A celebrated organizational development authority who writes, teaches, and speaks about radical ways people can live and work together harmoniously, Margaret (Meg) Wheatley has been inspiring conversation—and creativity—for nearly 30 years. Her most recent endeavor, a community-building initiative called "From the Four Directions: People Everywhere Leading the Way," has organized community "conversation circles" in more than 30 countries to help grassroots leaders "name their hopes and challenges, learn from colleagues, and act courageously to move their hopes into reality." President of the

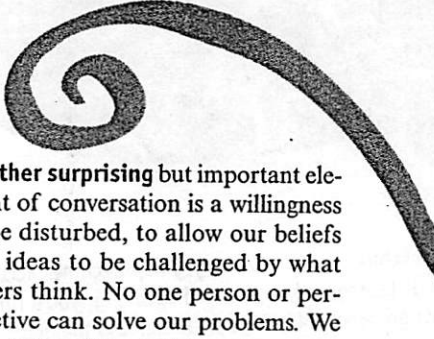
Provo, Utah-based Berkana Institute, Wheatley is the author of *Leadership and the New Science* (Berrett-Koehler, 1992) and (with Myron Kellner-Rogers) *A Simpler Way* (Berrett-Koehler, 1996), as well as *Turning to One Another* (Berrett-Koehler, 2002), from which the accompanying article is excerpted. She lives in the mountains near Provo.

—Craig Cox




is to listen well to whatever is being said, forgetting about neat thoughts and categories, knowing that all contributions add crucial elements to the whole. Eventually, we will be surprised by how much we share.

The practice of true talking takes courage, faith, and time. We don't always get it right the first time, and we don't have to. We need to settle into conversation; we don't just do it automatically. As we risk talking to each other about things we care about, as we become curious about each other, as we slow things down, gradually we remember this timeless way of being together. Our rushed and thoughtless behaviors fade away, and we sit quietly in the gift of being together, just as humans have always done.



Another surprising but important element of conversation is a willingness to be disturbed, to allow our beliefs and ideas to be challenged by what others think. No one person or perspective can solve our problems. We have to be willing to let go of our certainty and be confused for a time.



Most of us weren't trained to admit what we don't know. We haven't been rewarded for being confused, or for asking questions rather than giving quick answers. We were taught to sound certain and confident. But the only way to understand the world in its complexity is to spend more time in the state of *not* knowing. It is very difficult to give up our certainties—the positions, beliefs, and explanations that lie at the heart

For more ideas on the power of conversation see editor Jay Walljasper's column on p. 5, and Nina Utne's Letter from the Heartland on p. 9.

of our personal identities. And I am not saying that we have to give up what we believe. We only need to be curious about what others believe, and to acknowledge that their way of inter-

Deep Listening

The surprising pleasure of not talking

BY JAIDA N'HA SANDRA
AND JON SPAYDE

Listening is the foundation of conversation. Through hearing others carefully, we are able to step imaginatively and empathetically into their shoes, and to experience the world from an entirely different point of view, if only for a few moments. California salon enthusiast Shelley Kessler advocates listening "between the lines" as someone speaks, "hearing the feelings and the intentions as well as the words. It requires tremendous discipline."

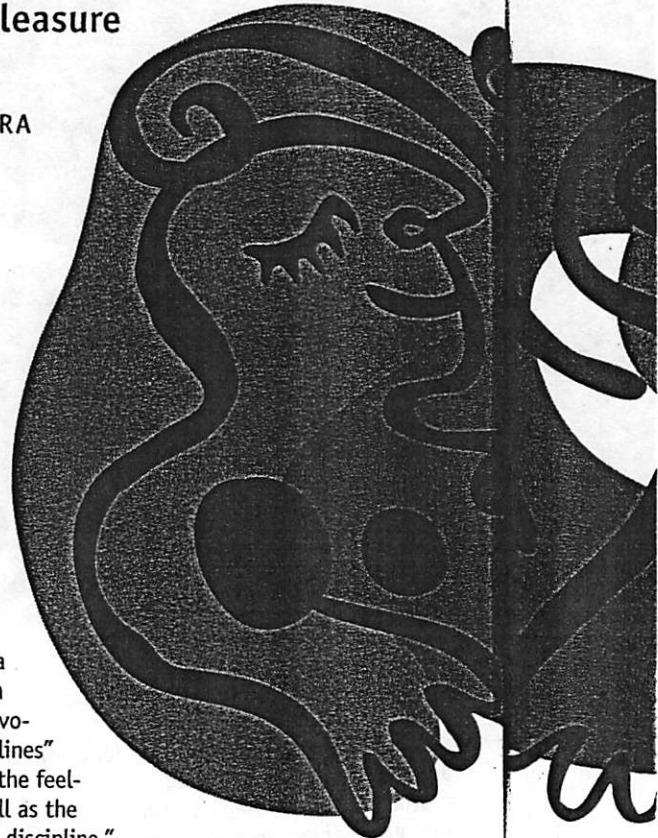
Active listening is not easy. For one thing, most people think about four times faster than they speak. When you're listening, it's easy to tune out a speaker while you turn over your own ideas. If you find yourself doing this, practice watching the person speaking as well as listening to what is being said. Note each word and nonverbal signal. If you regularly jump to conclusions about where someone is headed and then stop listening, discipline yourself to pay attention long enough to find out whether your assumption was correct.

Ask yourself how the person speaking feels about the subject, and whether her words are congruent with her body language and expressions. Notice which words trigger automatic reactions on your part. When you find yourself reacting merely because the speaker used a certain word, listen to determine whether the speaker is using the term the same way

preting the world might be essential to us.

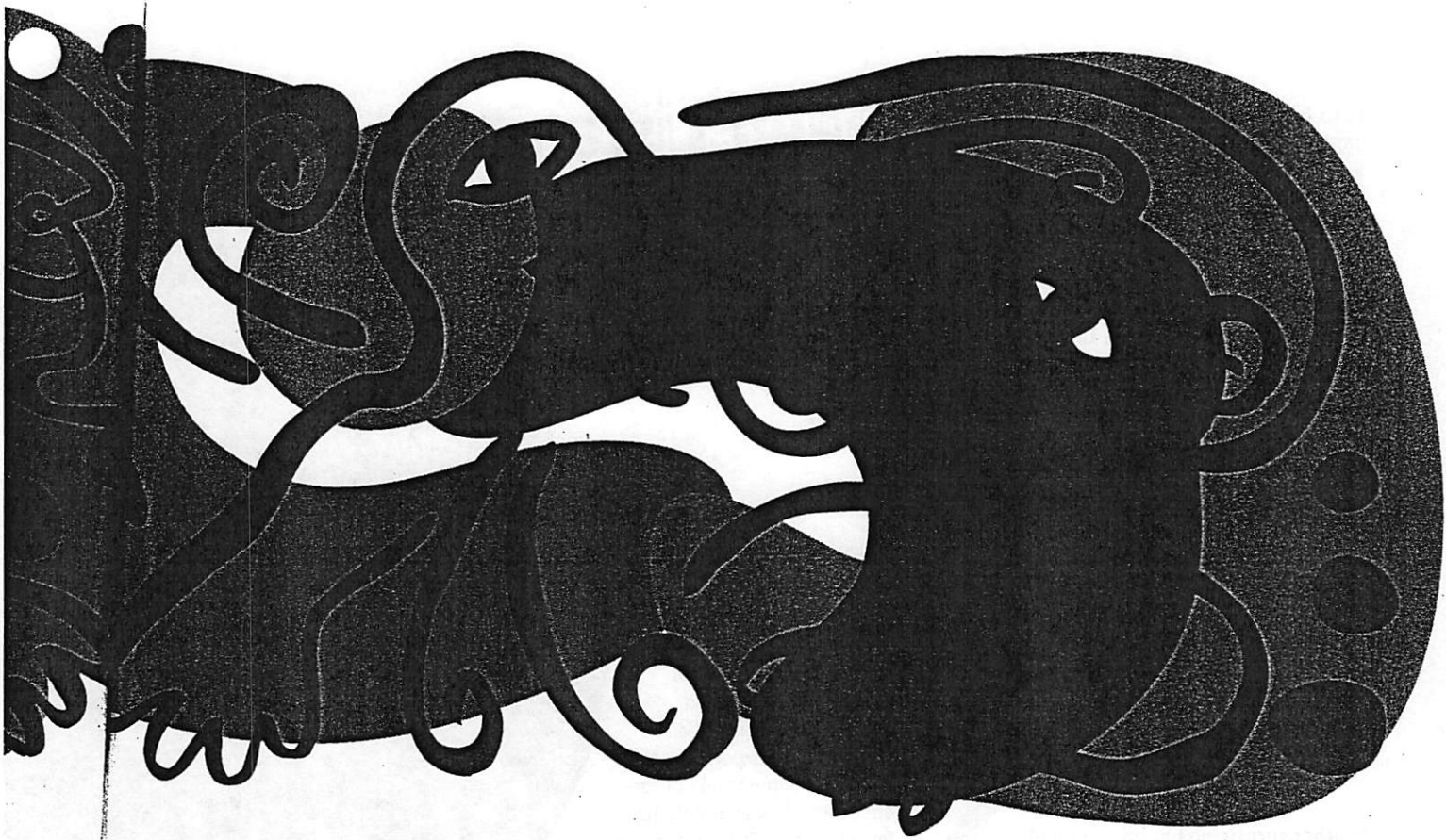
I think it's important to begin a conversation by listening as best you can for what's different, for what surprises you. We have many opportunities every day to be the one who listens, curious rather than certain. If you try

this with several people, you might find yourself laughing in delight as you realize how many unique ways there are to be human. But the greatest benefit of all is that listening moves us closer. When we listen with as little judgment as possible, we develop better relationships with each other.



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you use it. If you aren't sure, ask for clarification rather than arguing about what it means.

When you listen deeply to others, you may find yourself without anything clever or moving to say when your turn comes around. But this lack of preparation is a blessing in disguise: It gives you access to spontaneous and heartfelt words. When you're engaged in conversation, remember to take a deep, slow breath and to allow several seconds to pass before you speak. Restate the central issue in your mind so that you aren't limited by, or simply reacting to, the previous person's comments. Let go of the great thoughts you had while others were speaking. If nothing comes to mind, take another deep

Sometimes we hesitate to listen for what's different because we don't want to change. We're comfortable with our lives, and if we listened to anyone who raised questions, we might feel compelled to engage in new activities and ways of thinking. But most of us do see things in our lives or in the world that we would like to be different. If

that's true, it means we listen more, not less. And we have to be willing to move into the very uncomfortable place of uncertainty.

We may simply fear the confusion that comes with new ideas in unsettled forms. But we can't be creative if we refuse to be confused. Change always starts with confusion; cherished inter-

pretations must dissolve to make way for what's new. Great ideas and inventions miraculously appear in the space of not knowing. If we can move through the fear and enter the abyss, we are rewarded greatly. We rediscover we're creative.

As the world grows more puzzling and difficult, most of us don't want

breath, until something wells up. As any group becomes accustomed to active listening and unprepared speaking, you'll find everyone's words growing in feeling, meaning, and impact.

From Salons: The Joy of Conversation (New Society Publishers, 2001) by Jaida N'ha Sandra and Jon Spayde. Written in conjunction with the editors of Utne Reader, this book is a thorough guide to both the history and the practical elements of salons. Look for it at your local bookstore or order it directly from us at 800/880-UTNE.



Discuss deep listening in the *Salons* forum at Café Utne: cafe.utne.com

to keep struggling through it alone. I can't know what to do from my own narrow perspective. I need a better understanding of what's going on. I want to sit down with you and talk about all the frightening and hopeful things I observe, and listen to what frightens you and gives you hope. I need new ideas and solutions for the

Shall We Salon . . . Again?

BY LEIF UTNE

"Shall we salon?" That's the question we asked you—our readers—in a 1991 cover story, "Salons: How to Revive the Endangered Art of Conversation and Start a Revolution in Your Living Room." Almost as an afterthought, we included a little note offering to introduce readers to one another so you might launch salons in your community. We were blindsided by the response. We expected a few hundred, maybe even a thousand. But more than 8,000 of you took us up on the offer, and the neighborhood salon movement was born.

Word spread, and soon our readers had started more than 500 salons across North America. Some of these groups emphasized talk. Others evolved into book clubs, writing groups, study circles, musical jams, activist brigades, and creative play groups. Eventually we discontinued our formal salon-support organization, the Neighborhood Salon Association, but many of these groups—along with others influenced by our cover story but never connected to us—are still meeting today.

In 1995, when the fledgling World Wide Web had transformed the Internet from academic

curiosity into mass medium, we decided to explore the potential of online salons with Café Utne (<http://cafe.utne.com>). Billed as "a place in cyberspace where ideas and community intersect," the café was one of the first free virtual communities, and it quickly developed a reputation for thoughtfulness and depth. Over the past seven years, more than 125,000 people have registered for membership. Two to three thousand users log on each week to participate in thousands of conversations in more than 80 discussion forums ranging from spirituality to sports, politics to parenting, education, literature, food, humor, terrorism—you name it. In 2000, the Café won the new media industry's Webby Award for Best Community Site.

Many Café users have met face-to-face in regional gatherings around the country. And I know of at least six married couples who met at the Café. This "virtual" community has become a very *real* part of many people's social and civic lives.

Leif Utne is managing editor of Utne Reader Online.

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

Today, a decade after launching the neighborhood salon movement, we want to explore more ways to foster conversation, connection, engagement, and community involvement, both online and face-to-face. We're asking you to help us.

Please take a few minutes to fill out our salons survey online at www.utne.com/salons.

OUR TALK BEGAN WITH LUNCHEON, REACHED A CLIMAX AT TEA, AND BY DINNER WE WERE STAGGERING WITH IT. BY FIVE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING WE WERE UNCONSCIOUS BUT STILL TALKING.

—Margaret Anderson, legendary editor

problems I care about. And I know I need to talk to you to discover them. I need to learn to value your perspective, and I want you to value mine. I expect to be disturbed by what I hear from you. I know we don't have to agree with each other in order to think well together. There is no need for us to be joined at the head. We are joined by our human hearts.

Adapted from Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future (Berrett-Koehler, 2002) by Margaret J. Wheatley.

Want to explore the power of talk? Log onto the *Salons* forum at Café Utne: cafe.utne.com



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ALICE WHEELER

Conversation Au Lait

In Seattle coffee shops, people from all walks of life talk about what matters to them

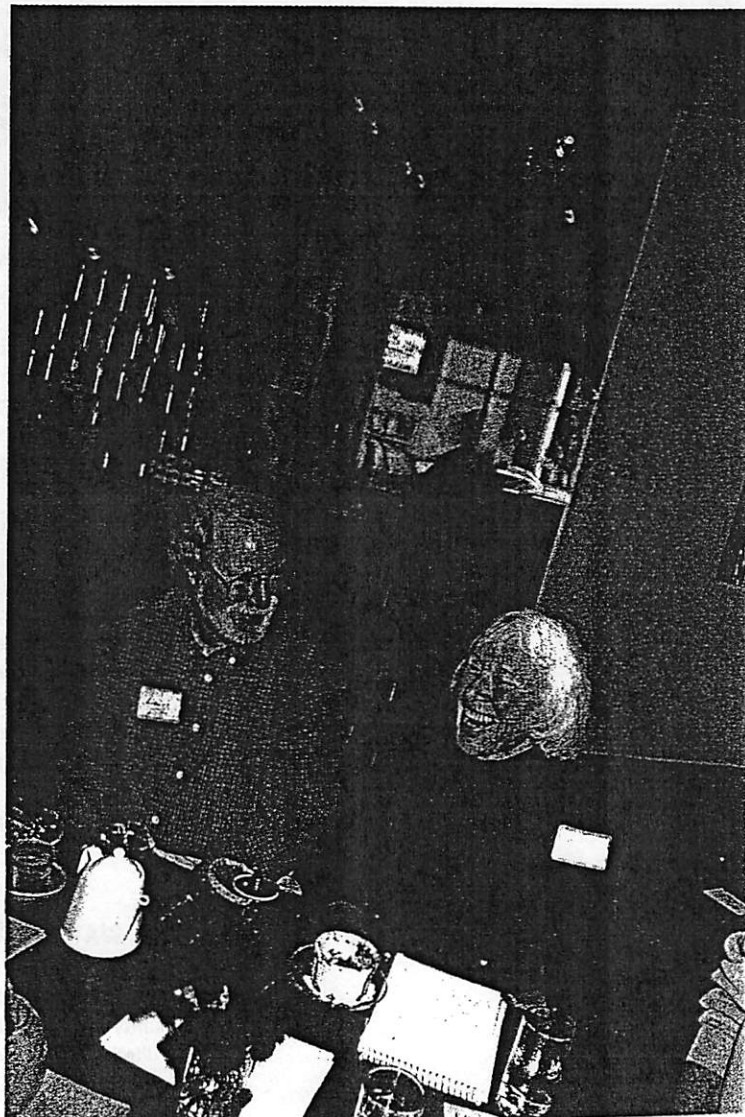
BY JOSEPH HART

The idea is simple: Strangers drop in at a Seattle coffeehouse, sit down at a table, and, following a few simple ground rules, talk about the issues of the day. Right-wingers exchange opinions with left-wingers and moderates—without Bill O'Reilly-style bullying or histrionics. Homeless people talk with lawyers, homemakers, and computer geeks. Mutual respect grows, friendships are fostered. Participants are encouraged to return to the café the next time a discussion is scheduled there—or to take part in many others around the city. It's an off-the-cuff, free-form salon that doesn't ask for any commitment other than good manners and heartfelt participation while you're at the table. And it could change the world, says Vicki Robin, who dreamed up the idea.

Robin, a Seattle-based pioneer in the voluntary simplicity movement, is probably best known as the co-author of *Your Money or Your Life*, a best-selling guide to living better by spending less. She says the idea for conversation cafés began as an attempt to take the ideas of personal transformation in the book to a new level. The nine-step plan outlined in *Your Money or Your Life* relies, in part, on simple strategies for saving and investing. But the most important steps in the plan, she says, call for deeper self-examination: "It's not so much about frugality as about reflecting on your behavior in light of your values. So how do you create a more reflective culture?"

Last summer, in her quest to bring about engaged self-reflection, Robin got together with some friends to experiment with ways to produce meaningful conversation. Eventually she hit upon the "conversation café" model, a convenient drop-in form of salon that she describes as a hybrid of the council (a Native American tradition in which participants speak in turn, without interruption) and a back-and-forth dialogue. Participants sign on to ground rules (bring genuine energy to the table, agree to listen closely, don't strive to "win") that promote honesty and active participation—and the conversation flows from there. "They're not there to market to each other, or organize each other into campaigns. They're not there to lecture," Robin says. Instead, they're encouraged to reflect, and to rethink their own assumptions. "That spaciousness to actually think—about your premises, your projects, and about what's important—opens up possibilities," she adds.

ALICE WHEELER



Each conversation café has a broad theme (community, war, or democracy, for example). Participants sit in a circle and take turns speaking; the first time around, telling their names and sharing “what is in their hearts and on their minds regarding the theme.” The second time around, each person goes a little deeper on the theme. From

conversation cafés turned out to be an ideal forum for people to sort out their feelings about the event. “People were so saddened and confused about how to move forward,” McCandless recalls. “There weren’t a lot of people who had a clear path, so they were open to a conversation in which joint exploration is the purpose.”

THERE ARE NO UNINTERESTING THINGS, THERE ARE ONLY UNINTERESTED PEOPLE.

—G.K. Chesterton, *English author*

there, the conversation takes off spontaneously and sometimes with surprising results.

For Keith McCandless, a 46-year-old business consultant who has participated in a dozen conversation cafés, it’s the sense of surprise and connection that keeps him coming back. At one café, he sat with a corporate lawyer, a bag lady, a small-business man from Iran, and an illiterate man who wandered in off the street. By the end of the evening they were cheerfully plotting to convince Martha Stewart to feature Afghan *birka*-making in her magazine. Other conversations, he says, are more profound—and more practical. But always, the meeting of disparate minds is at the heart of the experience. “At the end of the café,” he says, “people are in a state of euphoria. They hang around in the café or the parking lot and really don’t want to leave. Some connection occurs.”

A few months after Robin’s first experimental chat session, terrorists launched their attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. The con-

Attendance at the events soared as hundreds of Seattle residents sought clarity in the confusion. The broad range of new participants—including pro-war conservatives, staunch lefties, and a regular contingent of conspiracy theorists—put Robin’s methods to the test. Could diametrically opposing views be reconciled in a 90-minute conversation? In fact, says Robin, the format seemed to help people suspend judgment and “move from a polarized, blindered tradition to a more intelligent, textured, understanding of the whole.”


Seattle’s growing salon movement climaxed in January, when Robin organized Conversation Week, featuring several days of conversation events that drew participants from across the region and featured “celebrity guests,” including several City Council members. To date, Robin has trained more than 60 people to be café hosts, and the idea has spread to half a dozen locations, including Arizona, Toronto, Australia, and the United Kingdom.


As the atmosphere of self-reflection that gripped America after the September 11 attacks began to pass, conversation cafés have shifted their focus, becoming more stable, community-building groups that attract repeat participants. Today, there are 20 active cafés in Seattle, meeting weekly or monthly and addressing topics ranging from local leadership to sustainable living. Some members, like McCandless, are self-avowed “café junkies” hooked on the chemistry of conversation and the spirit of optimism fostered by the process. “People get up from the table with hope,” Robin says. “You feel less lonely, more supported, more aware. It increases hope, compassion, and intelligence about how to proceed.”

Can that renewed hope translate into concrete action that will change the world? Robin is convinced that it can. “People can use dialogue to make social change,” she says. “As people change their minds, those changed minds go out into their communities and function differently. Social change comes from that transformation.”

In other words, talk may be cheap (and that’s entirely appropriate for a practice with roots in the voluntary simplicity movement), but focused dialogue, active listening, and the clarity that comes from a new understanding of the world can result in profound changes outside the café.

Joseph Hart is a Minneapolis-based writer and journalist. His book, Down and Out: The Life and Death of Minneapolis’ Skid Row, will be published by the University of Minnesota Press in the fall of 2002.

 Discuss salons in the *Salons* forum at Café Utne: cafe.utne.com

 For more information and resources on salons, visit www.utne.com/salons

Mor



The Publ

Project
Laura Chasin, a 46-year-old writer, hit a home run in 1989 while participating in a debate about the Vietnam War. She used her experience in her first novel, *Overboard*, a controversial story.

During her time at the University of Washington, Chasin learned a technique called the “multiple method” of writing. Eventually, she published the novel *Overboard* with the University of Washington Press. Chasin is now a freelance writer and a thinking person’s writer.

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More Conversation Instigations



Like grunge rock, Starbucks, and anti-globalization protests, the Conversation Café is spreading out from Seattle. One group directly inspired by Vicki Robin's original has been launched in Tucson, Arizona, while conversation conveners in China, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada plan to follow suit.

If you'd like to start a conversation café in your town, contact Robin's organization, the New Road Map Foundation, which has trained dozens of "hosts" in the simple methods used in Seattle: Conversation Cafés, New Road Map Foundation, Box 15981, Seattle, WA 98115, 206/527-0437; e-mail project coordinator Claudia McNeill at claudiamcneill@mindspring.com; www.newroadmap.org. Below are some other conversation-based projects around the country.

The Public Conversations Project (PCP)

Laura Chasin, a practicing therapist, hit on the idea for PCP in 1989 while she watched an abortion debate on television devolve into a shouting match. It occurred to Chasin that she might apply the conflict resolution techniques she used with families every day in her office to public debates over abortion and other controversial subjects.

During the next several years, Chasin and her colleagues honed techniques not unlike the simple methods of the Conversation Café. Even within the dramatically polarized abortion debate, the PCP dialogues bore fruit, Chasin told newspaper columnist Ellen Goodman. "They went out thinking these people are compassionate, principled, and share concerns that I have."

Public Conversations Project
46 Kondazian Street
Watertown, MA 02472
617/923-1216
info@publicconversations.org
www.publicconversations.org

World Cafe

This project of the California-based Whole Systems Associates is basically an adaptable blueprint for fostering conversation in groups large and small. The model recreates a café setting—complete with food—and groups divide into small groups of four or five people to explore a given topic for a short time. There's a good deal of emphasis on visual means like diagramming and drawing to inspire creativity and "map" evolving ideas.

Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, principals in Whole Systems Associates, hit on the idea of the World Café by accident while they were hosting a seminar. Before the formal session began, participants gathered informally at several small tables with paper and crayons. They scribbled ideas, switched tables, and brainstormed together. By lunchtime, the paper table-cloths mapped the network of ideas that had been exchanged.

"We suddenly realized that we had tapped into something very simple, but potentially very powerful," the two explain in an online description of the process. Since then, World Café methods have been used on problems ranging from museum design to factory worker safety.

World Cafe
info@theworldcafe.com
www.theworldcafe.com

Commons Cafe

Disillusioned with the adversarial nature of the justice system, African American attorney Sharif Abdullah quit the law and eventually formed the Commonway Institute in Portland, Oregon, which sponsors the Commons Café and other projects designed to foster "inclusive social change."

The Commons Café is a discussion format that is adopted by local individuals or groups, with help from Commonway advisers. Discussion focuses on "the barriers that separate us": race, culture, and gender, to name a few. Rather than throwing the doors open—the Conversation Café, approach—Commons organizers carefully recruit a group of up to 40 participants from both sides of whatever cultural divide is at issue.

Commonway Institute
Box 12541
Portland, OR 97212
projects@commonway.org
www.commonway.org

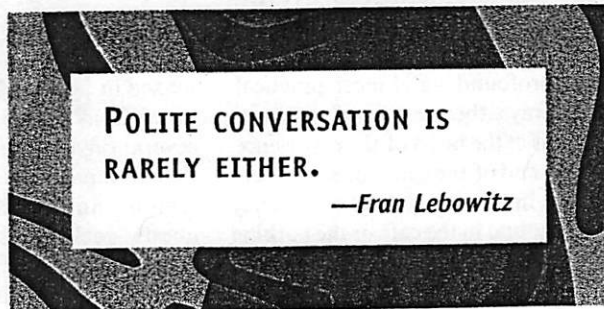
Essential Conversations

These public forums, sponsored by the Twin Cities-based Heartland Institute, are a hybrid of the talk and the salon. A speaker primes a group of about 200 with ideas and suggestions—conversation guru Margaret Wheatley (see p. 55) has played this role in the first several forums, held in Massachusetts and Minnesota. The audience divides up into small groups, then reunites for a final hour of ensemble talk.

The topics range considerably, but, according to Heartland co-founder Craig Neal, the basic theme is "the integration of personal growth with what we do in the world. The issue of meaningful work is a real fire-starter, and we return to it again and again."

Essential Conversations
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—Joseph Hart



The Greatest Conversationalists of All Time

From the salons of Paris to the villages of Hawaii, ten who can teach us a lot about talking

BY JON SPAYDE

THE TRUE SPIRIT OF CONVERSATION CONSISTS MORE IN BRINGING OUT THE CLEVERNESS OF OTHERS THAN IN SHOWING A GREAT DEAL OF IT YOURSELF.

—Jean de la Bruyere,
French aphorist

Great conversationalists are often, but not always, great talkers. The men and women honored here stand out for the way they fostered great conversation—as brilliant speakers, as powerful listeners, or as figures who masterfully facilitated the exchange of ideas. Drawing upon the wisdom, skill, and *joie de vivre* they brought to the simple act of talking, we can all learn a thing or two about the art of conversation.

SOCRATES (469–399 B.C.E.)

This Athenian gadfly transformed casual conversations into full-blown quests for philosophical truth—without leaving anyone behind. Gregarious and tactful, he urged his compatriots on to new insights about big topics—the nature of love, the meaning of courage, the perfect society. In some of Socrates' dialogues recorded by his pupil Plato, he manipulates the conversation to prove his own point of view; the famous *Republic* is a case in point. But in others, notably the *Lysis* and *Laches*, he genially helps his friends strip their own ideas of the inessential, the obvious, and the dull until only the incandescent glow of clear thought remains.

THE SEVEN SAGES OF THE BAMBOO GROVE (circa 250 C.E.)

China's Han Dynasty collapsed in 220, ushering in a period of political chaos. A number of artists and intellectuals "dropped out" to pursue Taoist philosophy, eccentric behavior, and "pure talk" (*ch'ing-t'an*)—conversation that prized wit, unconventional opinions, and skill in debate. The most famous of these gatherings took place in a bamboo grove north of the city of Loyang—a confab of seven youthful "sages" that included the brilliant musician and debater Hsi K'ang and the often-inebriated Liu Ling, who liked to invite friends to his house, remove his clothes, and declare, "I take the rooms of my house for my pants and coat! What are you gentlemen doing in my pants?"

MARTIN LUTHER (1483–1546)

The reformer was a daring theologian, a tireless pamphleteer—and a terrific talker, too, if the 6,596 entries in the posthumously compiled collection of his pronouncements, *Table Talk*, are anything to go by. At his dinner table in Wittenberg, surrounded by students and friends, Luther chatted in earthy style about everything from the human soul to the frogs in the Elbe River. He also



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showed a deep, almost therapeutic empathy with people. Introduced once to a "melancholic" (neurotic) who compulsively crowed like a cock, Luther crowed along with him, for seven days. On the eighth, he announced, "I no longer have to crow—and neither do you." The man was cured.

CATHERINE DE RAMBOUILLET
(1588–1665)

This dynamic noblewoman invented a forum for conversation that was to have worldwide influence: the salon. Tired of the banalities of court life, Rambouillet invited France's best thinkers and talkers to her home. Aided by a sly sense of humor, she created gatherings that were notable for both intellectual energy and careful decorum. When a poet named Voiture dared to bring dancing bears to the salon, Rambouillet had a selection of his verses printed under another man's name and playfully accused Voiture of plagiarism. Such high jinks notwithstanding, the alliance Rambouillet forged between good taste and good conversation has made salons a force in Europe for 400 years.



SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE
(1772–1834)

An opium addict, chronic procrastinator, and notorious sponger, the celebrated Romantic poet nevertheless mesmerized friends and enemies alike with impromptu discourses on literature, philosophy, and theology, drawing on an almost unbelievable wealth of knowledge. "Coleridge, like some great river," wrote memoirist (and fellow opium eater) Thomas De Quincey, "swept at once . . . into a continuous strain of eloquent dissertation, certainly the most novel, the most finely illustrated, and traversing the most spacious fields of thought, by transitions the most just and logical, that it was possible to conceive."



GERTRUDE STEIN (1874–1946)

Ultra-unorthodox poet and unofficial godmother of American artists and writers in Paris during the early decades of the 20th century, Stein was also an imaginative salonkeeper. She invited, as she put it, "all sizes and shapes, all degrees of wealth and poverty, some very charming, some simply rough." She reigned over these high-energy proceedings largely by keeping her considerable ego in check. On salon evenings, a friend wrote, she was "generally silent, but with a deep warmth that expressed itself in her handclasp, her look, and her rich laughter."

CARL ROGERS (1902–87)

Unlike many psychotherapists, Carl Rogers was convinced that therapy clients were not emotional cripples but resourceful, whole beings with a natural bent to make the best of their lives. He asserted that a simple procedure of empathic listening and mirroring (repeating the clients' words and showing clear comprehension of their emotional states) in an atmosphere of what Rogers called "unconditional positive regard" could markedly improve their mental and emotional health. Rogers' innovative methods gave birth to humanistic psychology and established the practice of deep listening.

LUBA PETROVA HARRINGTON

This Russian-born hostess brought the salon tradition into the swinging Sixties. As writer John Berendt noted in a memoir, Timothy Leary, Charles Mingus, *New Yorker* cartoonist Charles Addams, *Harper's* editor Willie Morris, and a host of other notables mingled with "assorted artists, writers, hippies, movie directors, blue bloods, and deadbeats" at her stylish Manhattan home. Harrington, who had led the jet-set life in Rome and taught Russian at Yale, was the equal of them all in self-

assuredness. When Leary kissed her hand and proclaimed her the "leading *saloniste* in New York," Harrington replied with a smile, "Doctor Leary, you are full of shit, as usual."

BILL MOYERS

In an age when conversation on television seems evenly divided between brain-dead chitchat and all-out combat, this consummate interviewer insists upon honoring the tradition, at least as old as Socrates, that a conversation can be a dignified, energetic search for the truth. By taking up topics that genuinely matter to him (religion, democracy, addiction, poetry) and exploring them in dialogue with the best minds in America—from mythologist Joseph Campbell to scientist Evelyn Fox Keller to playwright August Wilson—in a format that allows time for assertions, questions, reflection, and response, Moyers gives the lie to the idea that TV is a superficial medium.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

In many indigenous cultures, conversation is made sacred and dignified by rituals—including the passing of a talking stick, whose holder can't be interrupted. Benjamin Franklin compared the decorum of Iroquois councils with Parliament, "where scarcely a day passes without some Confusion, that makes the Speaker Hoarse in calling it to Order." The native Hawaiian ho'oponopono is a powerful form of conversational conflict resolution in which a leader elicits from the adversarial parties not only the facts in the case, but also their emotions. When everything has been explored, the former foes ask forgiveness of one another, and a closing ritual puts the dispute permanently in the past. The ho'oponopono is widely used by businesses and other organizations in Hawaii, and interest is spreading to the mainland and in Europe.

Jon Spayde, senior editor of Utne Reader, is co-author (with Jaida N'ha Sandra) of Salons: The Joy of Conversation (Utne Reader Books/New Society Publishers), available at your local bookstore or from 800/880-UTNE.

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