

# PATTERNS

ASCD Systems Thinking and Chaos Theory Network Newsletter

January 2002

## From the Editor:

This issue of PATTERNS is about Conversation\_\_something so common that we take it for granted; something we engage in everyday, either with others or with ourselves\_\_or with our environment.

Chilean Biologist **Humberto Maturana** has said that "*We learn, adapt, and bring forth our worlds through the networks of conversation in which we participate.*" If we reflect on our lives I think we find this very real when, for example, we notice how we converse even when we read a book and we notice the effect of a good book on our outlook. And this is only our inner conversation. (see PATTERNS September 1999, May 2000)

**Alan Stewart**, Professional Conversationist, comments (in a paper titled, *Constructivism and Collaborative Enterprises*) "... what we know as our world and what we know as ourselves are part of the same process - they're inseparable." In other words, our conversations (including with ourselves) shape what we know and this, in turn, is a function of the distinctions we as individuals 'bring forth.'

In future issues we will touch on the work of Cyberneticist **Gordon Pask** and others who, in their research on conversation have given rise to the sciences of artificial intelligence and its many off-spring. I, personally, had always thought of our "Communication Age" in terms of electronic networks\_\_the internet and the world wide web which has done so much to change our lives. I had overlooked the fact that when people spoke of the coming of this "new age" it would include the simple act of talking with my neighbor or getting together with friends at a cafe\_\_or actually changing the way I

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## The World Café Creating the Future, one Conversation at a Time

by Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, and Nancy Margulies

*Excerpts from working notes developed for the Pathfinders Scenario Project. Pathfinders was founded by Willis Harman and is sponsored by the Institute of Noetic Sciences and the Fetzer Institute. © Whole Systems Associates, 1997*

### What in the World is Going On?

*Western society's ways of attempting to satisfy fundamental human concerns is being questioned by growing numbers of thoughtful citizens.*

The challenges that face us are widespread and complex. They are being recognized by business, government, and community leaders as well as by respected scientists around the globe. These include environmental degradation; underemployment and the lack of truly meaningful work for growing numbers of people; homelessness, urban violence, and a host of other problems associated with lack of opportunity; dissolution of the social contract between society and citizen as well as between employer and employee; and the growing schism between rich and poor, both within and between nations. These and other related dilemmas are exacerbated by a host of regional military conflagrations, and by excesses on the battlefield of global economic competition.

These systemic dilemmas are compounded by a crisis of meaning that weakens the fabric of community life even further. There is a growing awareness that important spiritual, ethical, and ecological dimensions of life have been sorely neglected. All past assumptions about the future of the planet are being challenged by the present reality. No crisis in the history of civilized humanity compares with the challenge that the entire way of life of the modern world is not sustainable on a finite planet in the long term. Once we become aware of this conclusion based on the growing body of scientific evidence now available to us, the crisis is the same. All of these issues and dilemmas appear to be unsolvable with the "problem and policy focused" approaches that have been tried. Nothing short of a fundamental transformation in the way we think about our common future will alter the ultimate reckoning.

A growing number of caring and committed people throughout the world are beginning to explore what dimensions of the modern world view still hold the possibility of leading to an environmentally sustainable, political stable, and economically equitable future. They are also asking what emerging world view holds greater promise and what transformation in our collective beliefs and assumptions

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see myself.

Most educators today, following on the work of Piaget and Dewey accept, in principle, these constructivist ideas but there is a deep inertia that keeps such organizations as schools from acting on this knowledge. Our present society is demanding that our students, teachers, and schools be tested regularly to see that they comply with certain standards; standards defined by a corporate culture in a ritualized struggle for power over our minds. Although we comply with the notion that a "standard" amount of knowledge must be consumed and regurgitated in order to keep the organization, *itself*, from disintegrating, underneath this "status quo," our natural intelligence is rebelling. Statistics show that more and more of us are losing the sense of a comfortable "fit." with our institutions. Schools are becoming frayed at the edges and we, individually, feel unraveled most of the time. We KNOW something is wrong. We need to TALK to someone and we need to be LISTENED to.

In these dark times the conversation that we explore in this issue of PATTERNS has the pragmatic potential in every-day life for conversation that makes a difference. Conversation that brings us together to converse about what is troubling us as individuals. We report on the growing world-wide phenomenon of **The World Café** with **Juanita Brown, David Isaacs and Nancy Margulies**. The implication is that each of us ordinary people, together, have the power to design the future global society in which we want to live. They point out that "*We may not realize that many powerful change initiatives (some of which have won the Nobel Peace Prize) began as conversations. Founders of these change efforts often say, "Well, it all began when some friends and I started talking." Building on this history, during the month of January many conversation-based initiatives have joined together to host "Cafés for a New World."*

*All around the world, people are hosting dialogue circles and Café conversations focused on creating a positive*

may be required.

People are talking! In board rooms, living rooms, conference rooms, learning centers, cafés, salons, indigenous councils, and on the internet—the conversation is being joined. What are the questions that really matter to us here? How can we nurture the collective intelligence and wisdom to create the conditions which will give rise to the futures we want rather than being forced to live with the futures we get?

### ***Great Conversations about Things that Matter***

Conversation is the primary vehicle through which we as individuals conceive our world and embrace relationships with others. Conversation is our human way of discovering the new meanings that shape our common future. Conversation is the medium through which breakthrough thinking and collective action emerge in the service of our best hopes.

Circles of small groups in real conversation about things that matter to their collective future have always been the locus of social and institutional renewal.

- The American Revolution, which birthed our nation, was nurtured in sewing circles and "committees of correspondence."
- Key principles of American democracy were fashioned after the indigenous Iroquois approaches to small group participatory decision-making.
- The core ideas of the French Revolution were conceived and spread in conversations in cafes and salons.
- The Scandinavian "study circles" created learning societies and an economic and social renaissance in Northern Europe in the earlier part of the century.
- The Farmworkers movement and the civil rights movements in the U.S. were born and sustained through house meetings at the local level.

Reaching out in ever widening circles, members of these small groups pollinate larger constituencies, carrying the seed ideas for new conversations, creative possibilities and collective action. As Margaret Mead said, "*Never doubt that small groups of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*"

### ***Large Scale System Change: Is there a Simpler Way?***

*NOTE: while ideas that follow are framed as "The World Café" the core concepts regarding the deeper process principles involved in building collective intelligence and co-evolving common futures are relevant, as a fractal image, (the principles of the whole exist in any part) to any level of system in any organization. The World Café framework is also relevant to those working in the areas of intellectual capital, strategic futuring, scenario development and other areas relevant to organizational learning.*

Peter Russell, scientist and author, has spoken of the rise of global information technology and the possibility that, for the first time in history, we may be experiencing the evolution of a "global brain." The explosive growth of the Internet and global communications technology makes this a plausible hypothesis. For the first time in history we are, in fact, able to imagine a global conversation focused around questions at the heart of our common future. The speed with which financial transactions move around the globe is but a forerunner of the speed with which organizational and societal learning also have the opportunity to spread.

Danah Zohar, in her landmark work, *The Quantum Society*, has argued cogently that if there were only one "covenant" we shared across cultures and across the great divide of our apparent differences it would be a commitment to the conversation itself arising from the quantum vacuum, the Source, from which the new possibilities that we cannot now imagine will emerge. She adds that "keeping that conversation going, creating the multi-layered and multi-centered structure that make it possible, should perhaps be our highest priority. our willingness to engage in dialogue, the emerging pattern of the dialogue itself, is our common ground." (p. 293 and 330)

Meg Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers who have pioneered new thinking in management circles about the implications of self-organizing systems and the new sciences for the life of organizations suggest that identity, relationships, and information

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are the fundamental requirements for self-organization to occur. If their hypothesis is correct, then great conversations about questions that matter seem to be a core process by which we in human systems:

- a) create a common sense of identity/purpose;
- b) build relationships and connections both among people and among ideas; and
- c) create a richer web of information than existed previously  
(or at least make it visible).

Perhaps there is a simpler way. Perhaps the simple metaphor of The World Café provides one path forward for our mutual exploration.

### The World Café: Organizational and Societal Learning in Action

What is embodied in the core image of the Café that draws us and may be relevant to our thinking about process principles for organizational learning and large scale change?

(Excerpts from conversations regarding the World Café with Finn Voldtofte (Denmark) and David Isaacs.

- A Café is a space/place \_\_a safe place\_\_ where we meet with friends to talk, to visit, and to share our latest news and/or thinking or just to make connections and build relationships.
- A Café is a neutral space \_\_“a third space”\_\_ where anything can be said or explored \_\_where there are often paper tablecloths and/or paper napkins for sketching out new ideas that emerge from the conversation.
- Cafés are associated with creativity, community, and great conversation. You go to a Café specifically to have conversations \_\_to talk together and to share food and/or drink together. this has been the tradition for many hundreds of years across many different cultures.
- You travel to a Café. Even though it's not too far away, it does involve a commitment on your part to be a part of the conversation that will be happening there. The metaphor here is that you leave home (comfortable habits of thought, your ego, etc.) to travel to the Café \_\_that's just far enough from home to give the space for a new conversation to happen and new insights to emerge.
- In addition to the conversations, a café may have multiple evocative ways of engaging your interest \_\_art on the walls, poetry readings, music, storytelling. But rarely, if ever, are there lectures, overheads, teaching or speeches in a Café.
- A Café is people-centered and human scale. People participate in a café. Even if you are a people watcher and are alone you are participating in the life of the Café experience as a whole.
- The institution of the Café implies a level of social complexity that indicates the presence (or the possibility) of community. It implies a certain level of connection and relatedness among people that is beyond that of family. It's a product of a societal development process that is complex enough and connected enough to foster things like Cafés.
- The idea of discussing philosophy/deep subjects is not foreign to the idea of what happens in a Café. The literary set and political types and all types of people meet in a Café. The image implies diversity \_\_the diverse clientele in many Cafés is seen as an attraction.
- A Café is a more natural image than dialogue with a big D. The Café contains the potential for dialogue in a more natural and self-organizing way than the typical “Dialogue” settings that are currently being used. The few initiating conditions described in the section that follows move the Café image from being a place of small talk to a place of dialogue and breakthrough thinking on a large scale.

future.”

Recently, I attended a half-day World Café conversation where 120 of us from all walks of life shared our hopes and fears with each other. Meg Wheatley was there suggesting that we take the courage to shape the world as we talk together. Pointing out that the root for the word “courage” is “heart” she spoke of how language evolved simply because we were curious about each other...and learned to care about each other. This is the key. Her latest book is titled, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*. (Reviewed on P. 8)

“Listening is the simplest thing we can do to heal each other.” she writes.

But it is an act of courage. People have proved that in South Africa with the Truth and Reconciliation Courts. In the United States we have the shining example of those who lost family members in the attack on the Twin Towers journeying to Afghanistan to listen to those “others” who have been victimized seeking their healing in being listened to also.

There is *meaning* in this kind of networking. Meg comments that the *only* thing that moves through a network is meaning. We support each other in having the courage to “follow your bliss” \_\_to “step out” and do something about what grabs us individually. As we support each other, *not enroll each other in “our thing,”* a variety of responses coupling with the variety of concerns, emerge.

I am reminded of Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety. (see PATTERNS November 1998) “*Only variety can destroy variety....Variety of responses must be bigger if variety of perturbations is big and the one of acceptable states small.*” (International Encyclopedia of Systems and Cybernetics, Charles Francois, Editor. p. 386) This is an interesting way of seeing the systemic wisdom in such a simple act as supporting each other in conversation. As Lily Tomlin says;

*We're all in this together, by ourselves.*

Lucas Pawlik in Vienna, author of the three part article in PATTERNS title,;

*Forget the Observer*, writes us;  
"I do believe that there is a lot of self-organization going on at the moment triggered by the 9/11 attack. For me it is important to see that neither the events on 9.September nor the American Government came upon us by unforeseeable accidents, but that both are an output from our general behaviors."

He continues, "As a consequence I am pondering about how our perception/experience of the world must change to produce different outputs. This must happen in a profound and continuing manner."

We invite him to look into The World Café process, Vienna, being famous for its café's. Check the website at;

< [www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com).>

"*Forget The Observer*" stimulated a lot of feedback from our readers. **Helen Miller** reminded us of Humpty Dumpty's famous declaration to Alice in "*Through the Looking Glass*": "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."

"The question is," Alice replies, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," Humpty Dumpty says, "which is to be master — that's all."

In response to the report of the **International Society for System Sciences'** internet dialogue, (PATTERNS, November 2001) **Ayten Ayden** writes us from Rome;

"I was also pleasantly surprised to see a part of my article together with the views of my support system. I hope such a fine support system fast multiplies itself to spread the word, world-wide. Who knows, it may be picked up by people still operating the world who may be convinced to replace their war-like activities with peaceful and reconciliatory ones. Only then, we may feel somewhat hopeful for a better world for coming generations.

Now, may I ask you: what could be the percentage of all Americans, who

## World Café Process Principles

What are the process principles that would transform an ordinary Café experience into one that was "The World Café" (as a process scenario)?

Some of the key initiating conditions that encourage the possibility for organizational and societal learning might include:

- Questions worth asking AND that travel well serve as the red thread in any local conversation and are the link to other conversations happening in the system (or at other "tables" of the Café). This assumes creating a sense of context (the big WHY and the big HOW) within which the question worth asking (the big WHAT) rests and finds a home.

The question(s) have to be open and broad enough for people to tap into "the source" within a focused enough context to be meaningful to their real life situation. It's this combination that carries the possibility that any individual conversation will be a fractal of the larger whole. The questions that travel well and the context that holds them move the Café from being a place of small talk to a place of dialogue.

*This raises the whole issue of the art and architecture of powerful questions — questions worth asking as "attractors" that combine and recombine in new patterns of meaning and value for the future.*

- Engaging the spirit of collective discovery/adventure/inquiry/curiosity/learning.

The World Café scenario embodies the idea that I/we are part of something important that's bigger than just me/us. It should encourage the idea that we are explorers in new territory and new ways of thinking and that we're not the only ones. Our group is part of the larger conversation and our members will be going out and carrying what they learn to other conversations they are a part of\_\_ in our own organization, community, policy discussion, etc.

- Encouraging shared listening. This is the encouragement to really listen and be listened to. It happens in a spirit of learning and discovery that what is emerging none of us can know by ourselves but that each of us has an important contribution to make. None of us is smarter than all of us.

- Framing the larger context is key. The Café embodies the image of the fundamental organizing principle of great conversations as a core process for learning, knowledge creation, and large scale change as well as the self-organizing seeding process that is at the heart of it. Setting the context by one person (who might or might not be the convenor) but who understands the organizing principle and image of the World Café in a way that people feel that their conversation is both local and more than local at the same time\_\_that they are part of something important that is larger than just their individual conversation. (It's a both/and!)

Other process principles include:

- Knowing the conversation may have a beginning but it has no end. The conversation starts as the questions begin to get framed. The thread is not lost even though some people are always coming and going.

- The intention held while entering the conversation is, in large measure, responsible for whatever comes out. The Café is a kind of doorway created by deep intention. Conversation is nurtured by cross pollination. People seed other conversations with what they are taking from conversations they had. With this seeding, the dialogue continues to mutate and transform and change its shape. As long as the deeper intention is held steady, it can take different shapes in a self-organizing way.

From small conversations, one person from one conversation goes to the next one and they are a fractal of the conversation they've just been in, sharing their learnings and what they have a passion for. When they recombine, they become a fractal of that larger whole and when they recombine each learning conversation becomes a fractal of the larger and larger whole, leading to organizational/societal learning and large-scale change.

*Process principles (continued)*

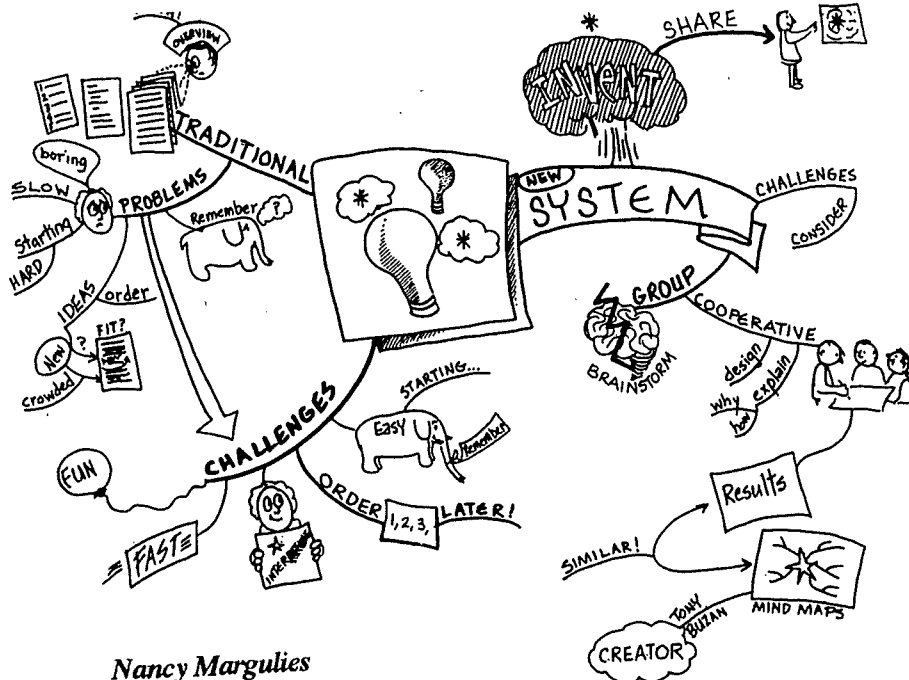
• By noticing the learning, the next emergence in terms of order, coherence or possibility is made manifest and more actionable. It changes the energetic of the whole and raises the collective intelligence in the “field” as a whole\_\_ which is why new members then find it easier to pick up wherever the group happens to be in the conversation when they enter.

• Discovering and spreading natural groupings of kindreds\_\_letting kindreds find each other\_\_cultivating the grapevine. This is already happening on the Internet in a massive and interesting way. so let’s imagine that we allowed each person in a conversation to pick several friends. They extend the conversation to several friends and so on. If you had questions that traveled well, with a common deeper intention of “remembering the connections” and the “deeper wisdom” that’s already there, you would, over time, get a reinforcing feedback loop. The conversations might be very different in form but they would carry a common essence, a common field for the emerging collective intelligence about a more vital and nourishing future in any system within which they were occurring.

• Using symbols, visual imagery and metaphors give access to deeper knowledge.. When you transport only the words, the deeper meaning is obscured by the construction of our object-oriented languages (especially in the West). We need symbols to express the process principles embodied by the World Café and to embody the key learnings as they travel well and broadly.

The core image of the World Café (or its fractal equivalent at the organizational or community level of system), could, if refined, become a process scenario and a systemic infrastructure for organizational and societal learning toward positive and nourishing futures. Café learning approaches are one way of putting the principles of self-organization explored in Meg Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers’ book, *A Simpler Way*, into practice in organizational and community life.

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Nancy Margulies

**Announcements**

***Seeds of Wholeness:***

**Science, Systems, Spirit**

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**An International  
Inter-active  
Conference.**

**The Netherlands  
June 6 - 9 2002,  
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- A space for questioning, learning and co-creation.

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*For information or registration:*

*Boekesteyn Manor, Noordereinde 56, NL  
1243 JJ 's-Graveland, The Netherlands  
Tel +31 (0)35 655 9359,  
Fax + 31 (0) 35 655 9360*

*Email: [info@milieubewustzijn.nl](mailto:info@milieubewustzijn.nl)  
Website: [www.milieubewustzijn.nl](http://www.milieubewustzijn.nl)*

## *The Music of Conversation*

with Michael Jones and John Shibley

*from A Primer on Systems Thinking & Organizational Learning*

*John J. Shibley / The Portland Learning Organization Group*

As organizations face increasing uncertainty and complexity they will need to invent solutions to problems which cannot be anticipated - or even imagined - in advance.

In this climate, new knowledge and insight will be created and shared through new types of conversations. These new conversations will need to be deeply creative - they will need to resemble nothing as much as the kind of collaborative conversations artists have as they work together. And the most accessible kinds of artistic conversations are musical conversations; the spontaneous improvisations between musicians

This conversation of musicians playing together is a living reminder of a time when communication was priceless, true to its linguistic roots as a "common-union" of minds and hearts.

Michael Jones and John Shibley evoke this communication in a powerful and unique way. Each is an accomplished musician, a successful business consultant and a natural teacher. Their music and teachings create a learning space where people can experience and practice a way of speaking and listening together that is vitally new, and as old as music itself.

Michael and John's teaching weaves music, reflection and activities into a day of deepening conversation and learning. Michael plays piano and John plays classical guitar. They begin playing together with no plan about the music to come - they just start and see what emerges. These spontaneous musical creations illustrate deep, collaborative conversations, and invite participants to witness ideas like "dialogue" and "generous listening" practiced in real time by two experienced and sympathetic musicians.

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## Cybernetics And Conversation

by Paul Pangaro

*This piece was written at the request of Frank Galuszka, President, American Society for Cybernetics, in May 1996, and published in monograph format as Communication and Anti-communication. It attempts to capture, in every-day language, the breadth of Conversation Theory as purveyed by Gordon Pask. Although it was not explicit in the publication, a sub-title could be, "Conversation Theory in Two Pages."*

A: 'Without conversation, there is nothing (no thing).'

B: 'Doesn't that imply, "In the beginning, was the conversation" ?'

As observing beings, we learn what we learn by interacting with our environment: the spaces, objects, processes and others-who-are-also-observing all around us. Construing these interactions as "conversations", whether with our friends or our pet fish, is highly useful in both metaphorical and formal ways.

Metaphorically speaking, we "converse" with everything in our environment. We "offer our views" as we act, re-act and think. The environment "speaks to us" in the sense that we interpret it. We respond to what we hear and see and feel, in an exchange that has the structure of a dialogue in language.

More formally, the term "conversation" was used by Gordon Pask and others in the body of work called Conversation Theory, which formalizes concepts such as agreement, understanding, and consciousness. Each of these concepts (as well as the concept "concept") exists in relation to conversation.

For us to understand each other, there are minimum requirements. We may both utter the word "cup" or "happiness" or "cybernetics", but, what is required for each of us to know we agree on the meaning? A conversation, surely. You explicate how a cup is used, and what it is for. I hear your views, re-compute your perspectives, and come as close as I can get to your meaning of "cup." But is your meaning (or, to say it more carefully, my view of your meaning) consistent with my own, pre-existing view? Are there conflicts? And that is only the half of it. After I exteriorize my view of why a cup is what it is and how it is used, does your view of my view of a cup resonate (and not conflict) with your original view? In summary, if we resonate together in our views of "cup", then (as named by Conversation Theory) we have "agreement over an understanding" - in both metaphorical and formal terms.

### *We "converse" with everything in our environment.*

This perspective is consonant with Maturana's concept of language as "consensual coordination of consensual coordination of actions." It is in language, and via conversation, that we live together. In that living, and through agreement, we share perspectives and merge into fractal communities of relations, friends, clubs, schools of thought and entire cultures. Insofar as we share our similarities and (for a moment) ignore our differences, we merge with other participants in conversation and lose our individuality in exchange for "becoming one with others", at least in the cognitive domain.

This shared awareness, or consciousness, is an outcome of conversation. It is a state that persists beyond the individual. According to Pask, consciousness is conserved in the same strict scientific sense that matter and energy are conserved in the transformations of physics. And, much as Heisenberg uncertainty informs us about the physical

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realm, Conversation Theory speaks of how certain we can be of what we know about each other.

And what of the taciturn world of trees and sky, stones and water (particles and electrons)? How do we know anything about these things? How are they distinguished and their properties observed? Though "on our own" we evoke a conversation between these elements, just to be able to see them: figure and ground, boundary and body, identity and exchange. Perhaps the elements of our perceptual field do not, by one meaning of the term, converse; but as observers we trace a dialogue from one side to the other, looping around and across the boundaries we create. Carrying utterances about "harder on this side, softer on that side" in an interaction that we give breath to, we compare and contrast the two (or more) sides. We invoke a point-of-view for each side, inventing participants in conversation. By this process we construct our understanding of all the elements, based in their relationship to each other.

By this explanation it appears that we learn what we learn through the interactions we construct. Conversation is the basis of all that we know. Hence cybernetics, which is itself a formal inquiry into what we can know and how we know it, is always concerned with conversations.

***We learn what we learn  
through the interactions we construct.***

One further thought about what arises through conversation, in this looping-around across perspectives that constructs what we know. If instead of observing a relationship of objects in our environment, we take a position of observing ourselves in conversation with others, a similar phenomenon occurs: the participants in the conversation are defined by the looping-around. Our features, feelings, opinions, boundaries, differences are computed by the interaction. Thus we find ourselves being constructed (defined, identified, distinguished) by that conversation. From this point-of-view, our selves emerge as a consequence of conversation. Expressed more fully, conversation and identity arise together.

A: 'So without conversation, there is no self-and-other.'

B: 'But can you also say that the conversation creates the observer and the observer creates the conversation?'

These sentences are, themselves, observer statements. Cybernetics, the science of describing, offers to place such circular and self-reflexive utterances in their scientific context: the inevitable consequence of the actions of observing systems.

Paul Pangaro <pan@pangaro.com> Feedback welcome.

*Paul Pangaro is the Founder & President of PANGARO Incorporated (PI) applied cybernetics and advanced prototyping to real-world problems. He is currently lecturing at Stanford University.*

***The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you. Don't go back to sleep.  
You must ask for what you really want. Don't go back to sleep.  
People are going back and forth across the doorsill  
Where the two worlds touch.  
The door is round and open.  
Don't go back to sleep.***

— Rumi

Drawing on over 50 years of combined experience as facilitators and teachers, Michael and John invite participants to experiment with different ways of talking and listening together. Participants are left with an indelible metaphor of what can occur when generous listening is infused into conversation."

For more information...Contact John by phone (207.761.0322) or see [www.systemsprimer.com](http://www.systemsprimer.com)

In January we are reminded of Martin Luther King, Jr's's legacy. People throughout the world remember his dream and his words of courage and commitment.

***"When evil men plot, good men must plan. When evil men burn and bomb, good men must build and bind. When evil men shout ugly words of hatred, good men must commit themselves to the glories of love. Where evil men would seek to perpetuate an unjust status quo, good men must seek to bring into being a real order of justice."***

**Martin Luther King**

**Network News**

The new Systems Thinking/Chaos Theory Network Facilitator, **Terry Burik** <tburik@aol.com> has had extensive experience in the systems field and education. She will be conducting our annual meeting at the ASCD annual conference in San Antonio, March 11, 2002. She is on the New Jersey ASCD Board and was selected for the ASCD Issues Committee. She is an energetic and exciting thinker who I know will do much to increase the membership of our STCT Network. We'll see you in Texas March 9th through 11th.

Barbara

## Book Reviews

### Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future.

By Margaret J. Wheatley  
Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.  
San Francisco 2002

In her most recent book Margaret Wheatley, author of *Leadership and the New Science*, writes with urgency and sincerity about important questions. *How do we live and work in a world that is increasingly chaotic? How do we live and work as an interdependent community and planet? How do we evoke people's innate creativity and caring? What are the values we must preserve as everything changes around us? How can we be together in ways that affirm rather than destroy life?*

She cites her close friendship with Juanita Brown (see the World Café) and the realization that "simple conversations held at kitchen tables, or seated on the ground, or leaning against doorways are powerful means to start influencing and changing our world." She also credits Christina Baldwin with teaching her the power of circles and councils. "Whether I'm with a group of friends or strangers, seated in a windowless corporate room or on logs in the African bush, I have learned that the very simple process of council takes us to a place of deep connection with each other. And, as we slow down the conversation to a pace that encourages thinking, we become wise and courageous actors in our world."

Wheatley (it's impossible not to think of her as Meg) draws on her extensive leadership work in the world "with tribal peoples and corporate peoples, with religious ministers and with government ministers" and yes, with eleven-year-old Girl Scouts.

She describes her distress and that of others who are being asked to work faster, more competitively, more selfishly—and to focus only on the short-term, values that are alarmingly destructive. She believes "we must

## Is There a New Wind Blowing??

*Editor's Note: In these dark times it is good to stand back to see if there are fresh winds on the horizon.....winds carrying the longed for rain to revive our spirit of wholeness and health for all living systems. We offer these examples of trends in thinking in Science and History in the hope that our readers will find further evidence that we are weaving our world together in the midst of destruction.*

*Reporting on the American Historical Association's annual convention, Emily Eakin writes in the New York Times, January 12, 2002*

Female tavern owners in early 20th-century Bolivia. A Polish periodical for Jewish children. A medieval Catalan women's monastery. These were the typical fare at the American Historical Association's annual convention Jan. 4 to 6. That's no surprise. *Over the last few decades, historical research has become more and more specialized. As Gale Stokes, a Rice University historian who was at the convention, put it, "There's a sense of grinding the nuts into an ever finer powder."*

Also in attendance, however, was David Christian, a 55-year-old history professor at San Diego State University, who has been bucking the trend and urging his colleagues to do the same by thinking big—very big.

Mr. Christian announced his campaign 10 years ago with an essay called "*The Case for Big History*" in *The Journal of World History*. "Unfortunately," he wrote, "historians have become so absorbed in detailed research that they have tended to neglect the job of building larger-scale maps of the past." To understand the last few thousand years of human history, he insisted, scholars need to understand the rest of the past as well—data up to and including the Big Bang—in short, the whole 14-billion-year span of time itself. Over the last decade, as science has made inroads in the humanities, Mr. Christian's big history approach has gained a handful of adherents. Half a dozen college courses on big history have cropped up around the world. But most historians had not paid much attention until he pitched the idea at the convention on a panel that also featured Carlo Ginzburg and Jacques Revel, two leading scholars of what is big history's methodological antithesis: microhistory.

"What we normally define as history doesn't interest me," Mr. Christian told an audience of a couple hundred scholars. "It's a constraint."

### *Big history involves the play of scales.*

As Mr. Christian described it, big history differs from more conventional approaches in several crucial respects. One is that its practitioners draw on a variety of fields; cosmology, geology, archaeology and evolutionary biology as well as history. More important, big history involves what Mr. Christian, referring to the title of a recent book by Mr. Revel, called "the play of scales." Like a photographer armed with a galaxy-size zoom lens, a big historian moves back and forth across several large time scales; the human, the geological and the cosmological. Through these radical shifts in perspective, Mr. Christian predicted, big history will yield "new insights into familiar historical problems, from the nature/nurture debate to environmental history to the fundamental nature of change itself."

Although most historians haven't reached back to the Big Bang, others have certainly tried elements of Mr. Christian's approach. The French historian Fernand Braudel, for example, combined detailed analyses of life with sweeping investigations of large-scale historical forces like geology and climate. More recently, world historians and other scholars have tackled large puzzles; like why world power came to be centered in the West by examining evidence from several fields, including biology, genetics and the environment. The physiologist Jared Diamond's Pulitzer Prize-winning "Guns, Germs



and Steel” is one example. Few scholars, however, have ventured into the murky terrain of the prehuman past.

One of the best illustrations of big history, Mr. Christian said, is *“Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900”* (Cambridge University Press, 1986) by Alfred W. Crosby, an emeritus professor of American studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

Why, Mr. Crosby wondered, have people of European descent been so successful at scattering themselves around the world? Unsatisfied with traditional explanations crediting the military superiority of European conquerors, he turned to geological history instead.

Working back 180 million years to the time when the supercontinent Pangea was beginning to break into smaller land masses, Mr. Crosby concluded that the conditions for European victory were being established even then: the plants, animals and microbes that evolved in Europe gave its human inhabitants a decisive advantage when they spread to the New World, South America, Australia and New Zealand.

“Europeans came from the biggest chunk of Pangea,” Mr. Crosby said in a telephone interview. “And it was the development of life forms there that enabled them to develop a civilization there with many more big domesticated animals and prominent diseases. The peoples they conquered just didn’t have the biological means to cope.”

### *Students never get a sense of reality as a coherent whole*

Then there is Mr. Christian’s own work, which contains tantalizing hints of what big history might eventually look like. In *“The Case for ‘Big History,’”* for example, he looks at estimated rates of population increase to challenge the notion that growth is a characteristic feature of human societies. For 250,000 years, he argues, the growth rate was virtually negligible. Only during the last 10,000 years did the human population really take off, exploding from 10 million then to nearly 5 billion today. His conclusion? “Growth, far from being the normal condition of humanity, is an aberration.”

This, Mr. Christian argues, raises important new questions like: is a capacity for spectacular growth something that distinguishes humans from other species?

But many historians remain skeptical. “I strongly doubt that plate tectonics and the Big Bang might contribute to our understanding of history,” Mr. Revel said after listening to Mr. Christian’s talk at the convention.

One reason microhistory became popular in the first place, said Michael Steinberg, a professor of history at Cornell University who was in the audience, was skepticism about older forms of big history, what he called “large national narratives about civilization becoming modern and leaving barbarism behind.”

A cheerful, self-deprecating proselytizer, Mr. Christian is unfazed by such objections. Big history fulfills an important social need, he says. Just as creation myths provided ancient cultures with an account of the origins of life and their place in a larger story, big history can provide the same service, although more scientifically. “Today nothing like a modern creation myth is taught,” he said. “I think this is dangerous. It means that students never get a sense of reality as a coherent whole.”

*If historians don’t tell stories at the scales of creation myths, someone else will.*

Mr. Christian, who said he turned to big history not long after completing “an incredibly obscure and in retrospect pointless” Ph.D. in Russian history, hopes that a book he is writing on big history, to be published next year by the University of California Press — “a nightmare project, as you can imagine” — will convince some of the skeptics. “There is an allergy to the general,” he said. “But if historians don’t tell stories at the scales of creation myths, someone else will.”

learn quickly now how to work and live together in ways that bring us back to life.”

She writes:

*“I first fell in love with the practice of conversation when I experienced for myself the sense of unity, of communion, that is available in this process. Most of what we do in communities and organizations focuses us on our individual needs. We attend a conference or meeting for our own purposes, for “what I can get out of this.” Conversation is different.... Good conversation connects us at a deeper level. As we share our different human experiences, we rediscover a sense of unity. We remember we are part of a greater whole. And as an added joy, we also discover our collective wisdom. We suddenly see how wise we can be together.”*

The book is useful in providing encouragement, support and suggested ways to begin. But it is more than that. It is an invitation to join the on-going conversation. Meg shares her poetry and that of others who have given us light in the darkness.

I found the format itself conversational, designed to promote reflection and delight in such images as this from the Sufi poet, Rumi.

*Sit down and be quiet.*

*You are drunk, and this is the edge of the roof.*

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Contact : [www.margaretwheatley.com](http://www.margaretwheatley.com)  
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*Since 2000, Berkana’s initiative, “From the Four Directions: People Everywhere Leading the Way,” has been organizing conversations among people in their local communities in over thirty countries. These conversation circles have inspired many local leaders to take action in their communities. Berkana supports their activities with many different types of resources. These local leaders also are linked together as a worldwide web of life-affirming leaders. For more information, see*

[www.berkana.org](http://www.berkana.org)

From the Editor ( continued from p. 4)

*understand, and share the sour/sweet content of "PATTERNS" and similar initiatives and be ready to digest and spread such a new belief system, even if they cannot adopt a corresponding behaviour in their daily life, usually defined and ordered by others? It is still, perhaps for sometime to come....*

*Besides, I sincerely believe that there is a fertile ground for such views to develop in the USA. If an outline of new world paradigm can be imprinted into the minds of 3% + of Americans, who count in such matters, a new world can be triggered to come to the surface and from there, it may safely grow on its own. I know that it is a long order to expect to be realized. On the other hand why not, with deliberate and concentrated efforts?"*

**We agree! Why Not?  
What do we have to lose?**

*The human heart can go to  
the lengths of God.  
Dark and cold we may be,  
but this  
Is no winter now. The frozen  
misery  
Of centuries breaks, cracks,  
begins to move,  
The thunder is the thunder  
of the floes,  
The thaw, the flood, the  
upstart Spring.  
Thank God our time is now  
when wrong  
Comes up to face us every-  
where,  
Never to leave us till we take  
The longest stride of soul  
men ever took.  
Affairs are now soul size  
The enterprise  
Is exploration into God.*

by Christopher Fry  
*A Sleep of Prisoners.*

## Bertalanffy's Conference in 2002 !!!

From: elohimjl <elohimjl@mail.zserv.tuwien.ac.at>

We are glad to announce that the International Conference on Systems Thinking Globally Concerned, "UNITY through DIVERSITY" (November 1-4, 2001 in Technische UniversitSt Wien, Vienna, Austria) organized in order to celebrate the 100th Anniversary of Karl Ludwig von Bertalanffy's Birthday has taken place not only through the traditional presentation of papers prepared by the participants but also through the debate of controversial issues related to some of the main concerns of Ludwig von Bertalanffy.

These issues are basically derived from statements such as:  
"...this is a question not just of abstract theory and specialties in the Ivory Tower of academic science. Rather, it is part of a far wider question: that science, and a science of and for man in particular, has become deeply problematic in our days" [Bertalanffy, L. von: "Robots, Men and Minds. Part One: Toward a New Image of Man" (p. 4) 1967]  
"...I decided to make the commitment (the challenge of assembling the Bertalanffy's insights in a conceptual biography) when I discovered that Bertalanffy had espoused a single standard of morality, which is a viewpoint I find irresistibly appealing because it is extremely rare and (to my mind) absolutely necessary if humanity is to survive." [Davidson M. "Uncommon Sense. The Life and Thought of Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Father of General Systems Theory" (p. 10), 1983]

It has been a relatively successful confrontation between contradictory interpretations of what the Bertalanffy's heritage is. The Conference 2001 only managed to start exchanging views about the possible impact that the Bertalanffian Systems Thinking may have - at the dawn of the 21st century - in the seriously troubled evolvement of the human society which Bertalanffy forecasted more than 30 years ago. But his warnings have been in practice disregarded and even ignored.

### *Science is more than the accumulation of facts and technological exploitation of knowledge*

"The trend we have spoken of appears to be toward science, that is, appropriate conceptual models of reality, without neglecting or denying human concerns. If this is so, science is more than the accumulation of facts and technological exploitation of knowledge in the service of the Establishment: it may still be able to present a grand view and to become deeply humanistic in its endeavour: If we achieve as much as a bit toward humanization of science, we have done our share in the service of society and civilization" [Bertalanffy, L. von: "Robots, Men and Minds. Part One: Toward a New Image of Man" (pag 114) 1967]"

Therefore we must at least welcome the initiative of Prof. Alfred Locker who has tentatively announced that he is "glad to accept the invitation extended by (our) friend and colleague Richard Jung, viz. to commonly organize and participate (in) a meeting - commemoration of Ludwig von Bertalanffy's achievements - to take place in big house in Kutna-Hora (the pretty and formerly famous Medieval silver-mining town Kuttenberg near Prague)."

There, the participants may "in a very intimate and personal atmosphere - devoid of any stress and hurry - report on their results and discuss in the friendly intent to really contribute to that break-through which the public nowadays rightly expects from systems-theory (and cybernetics)."

We congratulate Prof. Locker and Prof Jung who are planning to "carefully prepare this meeting through intensive correspondence between..." some of our colleagues who are also interested in recognizing the validity of some other aspect of the work carried out by Bertalanffy more than three decades ago. [Bertalanffy died on June 12, 1972.]

elohimjl

It is interesting to note two more viewpoints emerging on the popular front. One from the modern corporate world and one from the ancient indigenous world.

**Tachi Kiuchi**, Chairman and CEO Emeritus, Mitsubishi Electric America

**Bill Shireman**, President and CEO, Future 500 and Global Futures announce their book, "*What We Learned in the Rainforest: Business Lessons from Nature*," is available in bookstores. You can get a discount at <http://www.barnesandnoble.com>

They write; "*What did we learn? If you want to make your business more innovative, profitable, and sustainable -- the secret lies in the rainforest: We can use less and have more.*"

The book shows how nature creates value not by consumption, but by design -- and presents practical, real-world case studies on how business can, too. The Future 500 is a global network of companies that apply the principles of nature to improve the performance and sustainability of business.

Learn more at:

<http://www.globalfutures.org>.

Continuing the conversation on the ISSS issues list, Thomas Mandel refers us to [http://www.newciv.org/ISSS\\_Primer/4winds.html](http://www.newciv.org/ISSS_Primer/4winds.html) where we can learn from nature in a different way.

*The medicine wheel is a map, and it is also sacred space. It is all the symbology of the circle, the equilateral cross, and the square. It is the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water. It is the four cardinal directions, it is above (sky) and below (earth), and the seventh direction of within. It is a psychospiritual process of growth, and it is the vessel of the alchemical process of transmutation.*

*There is no "one" medicine wheel and one way to use it. In ceremony, we call in the directions, sometimes with words, sometimes with rattles and whistles, or it could be done by dance, art, or anything else, as it is intent and feeling that matters, not the form. This is creating sacred space and inviting in spiritual support. At the end of the ceremony, spirit is thanked and the sacred space is returned to ordinary space. My favorite way to do that is with a sacred song.*

Thus we find hope in the breeze at dawn bringing us secrets of a more humane, ecological and sustainable way of being in the world.

## *You are invited to join us as a member of the ASCD sponsored Systems Thinking and Chaos Theory Network*

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