



Margaret J. Wheatley

We Can Be Wise Only Together **Preface for the World Café: Shaping Our Futures** **Through Conversations That Matter**

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In this troubling time when people are so disconnected from one another, I keep searching to find those ideas, processes, and behaviors that can restore hope to the future. The World Café does just that. The stories told in these pages by its practitioners from all over the world demonstrate that it is possible for people to find meaning, even joy in working together. And that as we work together, we discover a greater wisdom that can resolve our most irresolvable problems.

The World Café *reintroduces* us to a world we have forgotten. This is a world where people naturally congregate because we want to be together. A world where we enjoy the ages-old process of good conversation, where we're not afraid to talk about things that matter most to us. A world where we're not separated, classified, or stereotyped. A world of simple greeting, free from techniques, technology, or artificiality. A world which constantly surprises us with the wisdom that exists not in any one of us, but in all of us. And a world where we learn that the wisdom we need to solve our problems is available when we talk together.

This world has been forgotten by us, but it has never abandoned us. For several years, David Isaacs, co-founder of the Café process, has said that our work is to remember this world, that we don't need to create it. From what I observe in many places however, it appears that our memory of healthy, productive human interactions has been nearly extinguished by the creeping complexity of group work, facilitation techniques, obscure analytic processes, and our own exhaustion. People are more polarized, more overwhelmed, more impatient, more easily disappointed in others, and more withdrawn than ever. We're frustrated by the increasing number of problems that confront us and our impotence to resolve even the most simple ones. And no sane person wants to participate in yet another meeting or get involved with yet another problem-solving process because these things only increase our frustration and impotence.

Perhaps the most pernicious consequence of this memory loss is our growing belief that humans are a difficult, self-serving species, and that we cannot trust each other. As this negative belief grows stronger, we remove ourselves and focus only on work that we can do on our own. We pay attention only to the work in front of us, and thus lose any appreciation of the whole system. Isolated and alone, we lose courage and capacity; our work loses meaning and we end up with unending fatigue and loneliness.

The World Café process reawakens our deep species' memory of two fundamental beliefs about human life. First, we humans want to work together on things that matter to us. In fact, this is what gives satisfaction and meaning to life. Second, as we work together, we are able to access a greater wisdom that is found only in the collective.

As you read the stories and counsel in this wonderful book, *The World Cafe*, you will see these two beliefs brought to life in the café process. In order to provoke your exploration of them, I'd like to underline some of the dimensions of the Café process that bring these beliefs into vibrant, healthy reality.

Believe in everybody. The World Café is a good, simple process for bringing people together around questions that matter. It is founded on the assumption that people want to work together, *no matter who they are*. For me, this is a very important assumption. It frees us from our current focus on personality types, learning styles, meme colors, emotional IQ—all the popular ways we currently use to pre-identify and pre-judge people. Each of these typologies ends up separating and stereotyping people. This is not what was intended by their creators, but it is what has happened.

The Café process has been used in many different cultures, amongst many different age groups, for many different purposes, and within many different types of communities and organizations. *It doesn't matter who the people are—the process always works*. It works because *all people* can work well together, can be creative and caring and insightful when they're engaged in meaningful work. I hope that these stories inspire us to move away from all the preconditions we currently use about who should be involved, who should attend a meeting, all the careful but ill-founded analysis we put into constructing the "right" group.

Diversity. It's important to notice the diversity of the places and purposes for which the World Café has been used. These pages contain a rich illustration of a value I live by—we need to "depend on diversity." Diversity is a survival skill these days, because there's no other way to get an accurate picture of any complex problem or system. We need many eyes and ears and hearts engaged in sharing perspectives. How else can we create an accurate picture of the whole if we don't honor the fact that we each see something different because of who we are and where we sit in the system? Only when we have many different perspectives do we have enough information to make good decisions.

And exploring our differing perspectives always brings us closer together. One café person said it well: "You're moving among strangers, but it feels as if you've known these people for a long time."

Invitation. In every World Café, there's a wonderful feeling of invitation. Attention is paid to creating "hospitable space". But the hospitality runs much deeper. It is rooted in the host's awareness that everyone is needed, that anyone might contribute something that suddenly sparks a collective insight. Café facilitators act like true hosts—creating a spirit of welcome that is missing from most of our processes. It's important to notice this in the stories here, and to contrast it with your own experience of setting up meetings and processes. What does it feel like to be truly wanted at an event, to be greeted by facilitators who delight in your presence, to be welcomed in as a full contributor?

Listening. When people are engaged in meaningful conversation, the whole room reflects our curiosity and delight. People move closer physically, their faces exhibit intense listening and the air becomes charged with their attention to each other. A loud, resonant quiet develops, broken by occasional laughter. It becomes a challenge to call people back from these conversations, (which I always take as a good sign.)

Movement. In the café process, people move from table to table. But it's much more than physical movement. As we move, we leave behind our roles, our preconceptions, our certainty. Each time we move to a new table, we lose more of ourselves and become bigger—we now represent a conversation that happened among several people. We move away from a confining sense of self and our small certainties into a spaciousness where new ideas can reveal themselves. As one participant describes it: "It's almost as if you don't know where the thought came from because it's merged so many times that it's been molded and shaped and shifted with new dimensions. People are speaking for each other and using words that started somewhere else that they hadn't thought of before."

We also move into a greater awareness as we look for connections amongst the conversations, as we listen to voices other than our own. Patterns become apparent. Things we couldn't see from our own narrow perspective suddenly become obvious to the entire group.

Questions. Cafes, like all good conversations, succeed or fail based on what we're talking about. Good questions—ones that we care about and that we want to answer—call us outward and to each other. They are an invitation to explore, to venture out, to risk, to listen, to abandon our positions. Good questions help us become both curious and uncertain, which is always the road that opens us to the surprise of new insight.

Energy. I've never been in a World Café that was dull or boring. People become energized, inspired, excited, creative. Laughter is common, playfulness abounds even with the most serious of issues. For me this is proof positive of how much we relish being together, of how wonderful it is to rediscover the fact of human community. As one host from a very formal culture says: "My faith in people has been confirmed. Underneath all the formal ways of the past, people really want to have significant conversations. People everywhere truly love to talk with each other, learn together, and make a contribution to things they care about."

Discovering Collective Wisdom

These are some of the Café design dimensions that bring out the best in us. But this is only half the story. Café conversations take us into a new realm, one that has been forgotten in modern, individualistic cultures. This is the realm of collective intelligence, of the wisdom we possess as a group that is unavailable to us as individuals. This wisdom emerges as we get more and more connected with each other, as we move from conversation to conversation, carrying the ideas from one conversation to another, looking for patterns, suddenly surprised by an insight we all share. There's a good scientific explanation for this because this is how all life works. As separate ideas or entities become connected to each other, life surprises us with emergence, the sudden appearance of new capacity and intelligence.

To those of us raised in a linear world with our minds shrunken by detailed analyses, the sudden appearance of collective wisdom always feels magical. I am fascinated by the descriptions given by Café participants of this emergence. Here are a few quotes from them:

- the magic in the middle
- the voice in the center of the room
- the magic in experiencing our own and other people's humanity around whatever the content is.
- something coming to life in the middle of the table
- what joins us together—a larger whole that we always knew was there, but never really appreciated.
- a spinning sphere or ball suspended above all the tables, which is the spirit of the whole community or the spirit of whatever the project is. It gets more colorful and brighter as more people touch it.

For me, the moments when collective wisdom appears are always breathtaking. Even though I know such wisdom is bound to appear, I'm always stunned with delight when it enters the room. And the appearance of such wisdom is a huge relief. We actually do know how to solve our problems! We can discover solutions that work! We've just been looking in the wrong places—we've been looking to experts, or external solutions, or to detailed, empty analyses. And all this time, the wisdom has been waiting for us, waiting for us to enter into meaningful conversations and deeper connections, waiting for us to realize that we can be wise only together.

One last comment. One of the wonderful things about this book is that it is designed to give us an enticing taste of a Café experience; as much as is possible, it embodies what it describes. In these pages, we are introduced to many strangers, diverse people we don't know who may be doing work very different from our own. They relay stories of their many experiences in using the World Café. Their stories are compelling and it's possible to feel as if we're sitting with them at an intimate café table, exchanging tales, learning from each other, moving closer. Then our gifted host, Juanita, enters and warmly invites us to another level of learning. She speaks in the Café voice, inviting, curious, inquiring. With her guidance, we can see things that weren't clear, or learn principles that we can use in our own work. And as stories and learnings weave together, we can begin to notice patterns and insights that weren't available to us before we opened the book. In the end, we too may experience a collective insight, a wider wisdom, the magic of thinking together.

I hope you will enjoy this book for all that it offers. I hope you will read it, savor it, use it, do it. If enough of us do so, we can reintroduce many people to a world where people enjoy working together, where collective activity yields true insight and solutions, where work and life are revived with meaning and possibility. In this way, we truly can restore hope to the future.



ABOUT MARGARET (MEG) WHEATLEY, Ed.D.

Margaret Wheatley writes, speaks, and teaches how we can accomplish our work, sustain our relationships, and willingly step forward to serve in this troubled time. She is co-founder and President emerita of The Berkana Institute, an organizational consultant since 1973, a global citizen since her youth, and a prolific writer. She has authored eight books. Her numerous articles may be downloaded free at her web site: margaretwheatley.com. For more biographical information, see margaretwheatley.com/bio