

the **POWER** of
COLLECTIVE
WISDOM and the
trap of
collective
folly



Alan Briskin • Sheryl Erickson • John Ott • Tom Callanan

Foreword by Peter Senge

Praise for *The Power of Collective Wisdom*

Leadership and Organizational Development

“An extraordinary book filled with powerful insights, evocative stories, and yes, collective wisdom! Beyond the Knowledge Revolution lies the Wisdom Revolution—and this book points the way.”

—William Ury, coauthor of *Getting to Yes*; author of *The Third Side: Why We Fight and How We Can Stop*; and cofounder, Harvard Law School’s Program on Negotiation

“This is an exceptional work challenging leaders to question their assumptions about how to achieve organizational excellence and providing a new narrative for leading with an eye toward collective wisdom. I love this book’s message that we are all needed and that each of us has a reason to invest in one another.”

—Carol Pearson, PhD, Executive Vice President and Provost, Pacifica Graduate Institute, and author of *The Hero Within*

“What I find especially useful about this book is that along with its creativity in search of wisdom is its inclusion of humanities’ destructive inclinations, what the authors call *collective folly*. Decision makers and leaders will find this book a necessary stop in any search for wisdom.”

—Arthur D. Colman, MD, author of *Up from Scapegoating*; Senior Fellow, James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership; and Clinical Professor, UC San Francisco Medical Center, San Francisco

“*The Power of Collective Wisdom* is down to earth, extremely practical, and rich with wisdom—a rare combination. It shows how collaboration is possible and necessary for those who care deeply about the outcome of their collective efforts. The book is remarkably easy to read but also reaches a depth of thought that is engaging and profound.”

—Jan Boller, PhD, RN, Associate Professor and Director of Nursing Leadership Programs, College of Graduate Nursing, Western University of Health Sciences, and coauthor of *Daily Miracles*

“The most significant challenges of our time—social, economic, and environmental—are calling for leaders to understand, trust, and draw upon relational and cocreative capacities. This inspiring and practical book points the way. Not only have authors Briskin, Erikson, Ott, and Callanan written about collective wisdom, they have created it.”

—Diana Whitney, PhD, author of *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*

“In a time when expressions like ‘wisdom of the crowd’ can be shorthand for quick, uninformed group decision making, *The Power of Collective Wisdom* gives the world a new vocabulary to distinguish the various states and stages of wisdom. Finally, a book that explains what collective wisdom is and how to harness this wisdom if we hope to survive as a species!”

—Peter Coughlan, Partner and Coleader of Transformation Practice, IDEO

Community and Institutional Renewal

“This book takes knowledge about groups and elevates it to a field and a movement. The authors are original thinkers and good writers and have the ability to integrate a breadth of thinking into a new whole.”

—Peter Block, author of *Community and Stewardship*

“In this time of challenge and change, we need to have hope. People everywhere, from the lowest caste in India to the highest penthouse in New York’s Upper East Side, are seeking wisdom. This book maps the territory and points toward a new field of knowing, where together we can effectively explore possible solutions. Indeed, *The Power of Collective Wisdom* may be the most important book of our times.”

—Michael Toms, CEO, New Dimensions Media, and author of *A Time for Choices: Deep Dialogues for Deep Democracy* and *An Open Life: Joseph Campbell in Conversation with Michael Toms*

“I think we are all seeing the growing need and yearning for approaches that enable people to think wisely together about critical issues and concerns. This pioneering book helps illuminate the lived experience of collective wisdom and invites us to create the conditions that make its appearance more likely. It is a great contribution to both theory and practice in this rapidly growing field.”

—Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, cofounders,
The World Café, and coauthors of *The World Café*

“This book is a timely reminder that whenever two or more are gathered, there is *always* the potential for wisdom as well as folly. We owe the authors a debt of gratitude for providing signposts to recognize when we are slipping into folly and practices to help us create conditions that support collective creativity, inspiration, and wise choices.”

—Glenna Gerard, coauthor of *Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation*, and creator of The Presence Walkabout

“These days more and more of us need to act together decisively and still avoid folly. *The Power of Collective Wisdom* provides anyone who is part of a group confronting a crisis with practical approaches for finding the ‘sweet spot’ where the group’s best potential can be realized.”

—Marvin Southard, DSW, Director, Los Angeles County
Department of Mental Health

Social Justice and Environmental Activism

“This book confirmed what I have learned from my peace-building work in Kenya. The conceptual framework provided helps to free us from thinking that narrows our scope to one that broadens our understanding. It asks us to seek individual and collective empowerment of people and institutions—recognizing that the answer does not lie within an individual or an organization but through linking periphery and center, top to bottom, and sectors of society together.”

—Dekha Ibrahim Abdi, peace activist and recipient
of the 2007 Right Livelihood Award

“We at PeaceJam have been bringing Nobel Peace Laureates together for a series of dialogues. The collective moral and spiritual voice that has emerged from our dialogues was made possible by the base of knowledge provided by the Collective Wisdom Initiative and now this book. *The Power of Collective Wisdom* is valuable for anyone working to find common ground in groups, whether that be at the highest levels of peace negotiations or at the grassroots level of community organizing and youth education.”

—Dawn Engle, cofounder and Director, PeaceJam

“In an era that desperately needs more comprehensive solutions, this book challenges traditional views of where wisdom resides, shifting us from the individual to the whole. This transformative process both embraces many voices and embodies deep insight for outcomes that are more connective, more intelligent, and more complete.”

—Rev. angel Kyodo williams, author of *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace*, and founder, Center for Transformative Change

“The complexity and urgency of today’s environmental challenges will not be solved by experts, politicians, activists, and others working in isolation. Real breakthroughs arise only when stakeholders agree to have conversations about controversial issues with new, open attitudes. This book is a must-read for anyone looking to get beyond the either/or mind-set and help divergent groups of people to collaborate and innovate together.”

—Diane Demee-Benoit, Director of Programs,
Institute at the Golden Gate

“I wish I had this book five or ten years ago; I’m thrilled to have it now. Many of us in social justice work wonder why we can’t always maximize our common strength, passion, and potential. *The Power of Collective Wisdom* powerfully and carefully explores what we need to crack the code. It paints a compelling picture—compassionately but without sentimentality—of the traps we fall into and the alternative possibilities that are within our grasp. If we can absorb the lessons

of this timely resource and begin to integrate them with more courage, wondrous things will likely be the result.”

—Claudia Horwitz, Executive Director, stone circles and The Stone House, and author of *The Spiritual Activist*

Spiritual and Religious Traditions

“A fascinating account of a meeting between ancient wisdom traditions and contemporary challenges. It shows how dialogue, reflection, and higher purpose can help us reimagine groups and larger collectives so that they can be a force for healing and repair—*together we can get it together*. The book is a call for all who wish to contribute to the health of their communities, organizations, and planet through a deeper connection to their own talents, vision, and spirit.”

—Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Professor Emeritus, Temple University; World Wisdom Chair, Naropa University; founder, Alliance for Jewish Renewal; and author of *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*

“*The Power of Collective Wisdom* accelerates a movement that is quietly on the rise during this time of vast cultural change. This book names it, outlines the thinkers and leaders, and distinguishes—through real-life stories and fables—collective wisdom from groupthink gone awry. It will expand your grasp of the role of groups to re-envision the inclusive, peaceful, creative world we all long for.”

—Lauren Artress, Episcopal priest; author of *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool*; and founder and Creative Director, Veriditas

“While many romanticize either the lone individual or the community, *The Power of Collective Wisdom* understands the essential complexity of a freely formed association of individuals who listen deeply, speak truly, and act ethically. If we are to attain the essential insights required for our future, we will need each other. Where old forms of community fail us, we need new spiritually sound forms suited to our collective future.”

—Arthur Zajonc, Professor of Physics, Amherst College, and Scientific Coordinator, Mind and Life Dialogues with His Holiness the Dalai Lama

“This sourcebook teaches us to recognize the ingredients and skills that can bring collective wisdom to the forefront of human endeavor. The authors reveal that just as intentional and disciplined use of these ingredients and skills gives rise to creative actions, ignoring them reinforces the folly of separation and sectarianism. This unique work shows that we ourselves are responsible for committing to collective wisdom and caring in order to harness our human potential to heal the earth and benefit all of humanity.”

—Roshi Wendy Egyoku Nakao, Zen Center of Los Angeles

“*The Power of Collective Wisdom* is a meditation, a journey, and a pragmatic investigation of a worldview that challenges all individuals and organizations to open to their potential for collective wisdom. The authors reveal the power of the emergence of group wisdom through a variety of stories and illustrations, offering a workable solution to many of today’s conflicts. It is an ideal read for managers, politicians, health and human service workers, teachers, coaches, parents, and those who wish to remember how good it is to be a human being, connected to other human beings, the Creator, and the earth.”

—Francesca Mason Boring, Shoshone, author of *Feather Medicine: Walking in Shoshone Dreamtime*, and facilitator/teacher of Family, Human, and Natural Systems Constellation



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WISDOM**

*And the Trap of
Collective Folly*

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Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
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The Power of Collective Wisdom

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Foreword

by Peter Senge

Few words have a longer historical association with leadership than wisdom, and few have less credibility in that association today.

What has happened?

First, it seems that we have lost our consensual definition of what wisdom actually is. In earlier eras, when elders had revered places in community, we had a way of understanding wisdom through example. The elders grounded us in appreciating the importance of perspective, in seeing things from multiple points of view, in considering what the past could teach us about the future, and in reminding us that many things we might think were our own unique problems had in fact been faced by others before and we should meditate on what we could learn from that.

Second, in an era that has little deep concern about the future, wisdom has little functional value. For wisdom has always been concerned with balancing the short term and the long term—of seeing possible longer-term consequences of our actions in and for the future.

But for most of us most of the time, the future does not really exist. Indeed, an important feature of the modern era has been the marginalization of the future. The future has become an abstraction rather than a reality with which we are emotionally connected. An economist's prediction. A futurist's fantasy images. A few more technological gadgets.

Something that will come someday but is of little importance in shaping the decisions we make today. Spend now, pay later. Get the stock price as high as possible so that your public stock offering brings in as much money as possible. Live for the moment. The future will take care of itself. The end of history (and, by implication, the end of the future).

All of this seemed to work so long as people could basically assume that the future was more or less an extrapolation of the past, just with another 3 percent of GDP growth and more technology.

But then that complacency started to wear thin. Gradually, a deep and pervasive anxiety about the future began to set in. Climate change. Food safety. Pollution. Toxicity in everyday products (and more and more people getting cancers at younger and younger ages). The gap between rich and poor. Social and political instability. Terrorism.

Today, according to a Gallup Poll, two-thirds of sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds in America believe the world was a better place when their parents were their age—and over half are convinced it will be worse for their own children. With this pessimism has come historically low confidence ratings for virtually all the primary institutions that shape modern society: business, investors, public education, health care, Congress.

So now, wisdom may be making a comeback—if it weren't for the fact that most people seem to regard it as a thing of bygone eras, a sort of historical footnote, or maybe myth, that is so antithetical to how we think and act today that the phrase *wise leadership* seems almost an oxymoron.

That is why this book is so important.

First, it corrects a basic misconception, that wisdom is not developable. Coming from diverse contemplative traditions, the authors bridge modern challenges with ancient understandings of how wisdom can be cultivated: through continual reflection, through silence, and through connecting with the highest in yourself and others.

Second is that wisdom is not about just a few wise people but about the capacity of human communities to make wise choices and to orient themselves around a living sense of the future that truly matters to them. Wisdom is about connection, connection to one another and to a larger whole. It is an inherently relational concept and founders when we overidentify it with particular people.

While the world's cultures offer a rich storehouse of stories of extraordinary individuals who exercised wisdom, upon closer inspection what makes the stories compelling is what emerged collectively. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. were not wise leaders just because of what they said but also because of the coordinated and consequential actions they helped inspire among millions. But even these examples are misleading, insofar as they start with the central leadership figure. For it is the everyday emergence of collective intelligence in teams, communities, and networks that is most relevant for today.

Marianne Knuth, cofounder of Kufunda Village, a network of sustainable agriculture villages in Zimbabwe, and of Pioneers of Change, one of many extraordinary global youth leadership networks tackling the most pressing issues of our time, expresses this sensibility of action for the whole in criticizing why most direct aid efforts to address poverty fail:

The development sector is still engaged in a large-scale mechanistic and hierarchical approach to addressing the challenges of poverty and so-called under-development. In the name of material development, villages and communities have to adopt less communal ways of relating to each other. In the name of development, problems are fixed for a community without recognizing the need for ownership in the development initiative by the community itself.

The consequence is that “larger scale development initiatives fix a problem for a short term, only to have the problem return years later (abandoned boreholes, broken down toilets, or community pumps for which no one has taken ownership after the intervener has left).”¹

Third, the authors show that rather than being a “feel good” concept with little tangible impact, wisdom is all about results, and especially what is achieved over the longer term. Groups dedicated to developing collective wisdom can have dramatically greater effectiveness in what they achieve. Throughout this book are examples of how collective wisdom arises and is shaped precisely through people’s engagement with real problems, and through learning how to achieve lasting outcomes that matter.

In this process of engaging real problems, a subtlety also emerges that distinguishes collective wisdom from other, more common forms of intelligence. The world is full of smart people. Every failed third world developmental program, every failed corporate strategy, every disastrous national policy was designed by smart people. The real dis-

inction between wisdom and the types of intelligence that abound in modern society comes from not knowing the answers. Wisdom manifests in humility rather than arrogance. It is known by its quiet presence rather than by noisy advocacy for one way. In this sense, collective wisdom is much more about the capacity for learning than about a single brilliant decision.

All learning arises through doing, but the most frequent problem is the “learning,” not the “doing.” Our organizations and societies are full of doing but deficient in learning. I believe there is no more telling indicator of the absence of collective wisdom than the inability to learn as we go. It is characterized by rigidity and dogma. It is characterized by low trust and the inability to talk about difficult subjects where people must recognize their shortfalls. It is characterized by maintaining a façade of confidence and competence that masks insecurity and fear of failure. Conversely, collective wisdom is most evident in quiet confidence that our “not knowing” is our strength, that the ability to ask deep questions is more important than offering superficial answers—and that imagination, commitment, patience and openness, and trust in one another will consistently trump IQ over the long haul.

Why does all this matter, especially today? Because the problems we face today do not have “right answers.” Our most pressing problems are characterized by unprecedented levels of complexity and interdependence, and the consequent breakdown of the conventional problem-solving paradigm. The well-known conflict resolution facilitator Mark Gerzon says in this book, “Humanity is hungering for

wisdom. That is the word I hear most: not *compassion*; not *love*; not *peace*; not *kindness*—but *wisdom*.” This is precisely because we sense that the major challenges we face will not be solved by a few more smart people or technological magic bullets.

Lastly, because of this urgency, what matters most today is not only to clarify what wisdom is and why it matters, but to understand how to go about developing collective wisdom. That is why the most important contribution of this book is not just pointing out that wisdom is developable, but offering stories and practices that can help each of us in our own wisdom journey.

In our work, we have come to see this journey revolving around three intertwined openings, what Otto Scharmer terms opening the mind, opening the heart, and opening the will.² These three openings are each evident in the stories and practices presented in the pages that follow: learning how to listen more deeply and suspend our taken-for-granted mental models, how to connect with one another in that listening, and, perhaps quietly and barely noticed, how to pay attention to why we are here.

Reflecting on her journey, Knuth says simply, “In the beginning was the meeting. . . . How we meet people determines all else. Do we meet people assuming the best we can about them? Do we meet each person curious about the miracle of a human being that we are about to connect with? Or do we meet a *poor* person that we are about to help?”

She tells a story of Anna, a widow of forty-six who lives on a \$2 per month pension from her late husband but must pay \$20 every three months in children’s school fees. Despite

these hardships, Anna set up a women's crochet cooperative, started teaching knitting to women in her area, built her own compost toilet and taught others how to do the same, and now runs an AIDS dialogue group and provides home care for AIDS patients. Asked how all this was possible, Anna says, "I have learnt that I have been an example in my community for being a widowed woman who overcame severe hardship. I have learnt that I am a strong woman. I have learnt that I can find peace of mind within myself. I have learnt that I am a good listener, and I am trustworthy." Knuth adds, "I do not understand how all of these things are happening. But I do know that we met Anna *in her wisdom*. Not in her poverty."³

For me, the promise of this work is that we all learn more and more how to meet one another in our wisdom. Then our challenges will appear not as threats to our way of life but as opportunities to grow into life itself.

—Peter M. Senge

Founding chair, Society for Organizational Learning
Senior Lecturer, MIT Sloan School of Management
Author of *The Fifth Discipline* and coauthor of *Presence*
and *The Necessary Revolution*.

Welcome

This book is intended for people who seek more effective and satisfying ways of working with others. It is for people who are working to make their communities, neighborhoods, and organizations more inclusive, effective, and wise. Everyone who participates in groups has something important to contribute and something further to learn. As authors, we bring to bear our learning from decades of convening groups and participating in large-scale change efforts in business, health care, education, mental health, criminal justice, conflict resolution, and global initiatives. Ten years ago, we founded and have since shepherded the Collective Wisdom Initiative, an informal network of practitioners and scholars from around the world who are bringing together a body of research, theory, and practice into a field of study that we have come to call *collective wisdom*.

Collective wisdom refers to knowledge and insight gained through group and community interaction. At a deeper level, however, it is about our living connection to each other and the interdependence we share in our neighborhoods, organizations, and world community. Supported by the Fetzer Institute, a private operating foundation in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the Collective Wisdom Initiative shares with Fetzer a common conviction: that efforts to address the world's critical issues must go beyond political, social, and economic strategies to their psychological, spiritual, and cultural roots. Behind our shared conviction lies a belief that human

survival depends upon our recognizing that we have a stake in each other's well-being, and that groups have potential for being sources of extraordinary creative power, incubators of innovative ideas, and vehicles for social healing.

The Power of Collective Wisdom is the result of a collaboration involving dozens of contributors and hundreds of people from our network and beyond. Stories fill the book, telling of collective wisdom's emergence in diverse settings, across different cultures, and in earlier times. Our book outlines the commitments and convictions that aid collective wisdom's emergence in groups. It also sketches a larger worldview, one encompassing the reverence for life associated with wisdom and the importance of a collective perspective. Throughout these pages, readers will be guided toward a deeper understanding of the conditions that make wisdom possible in groups and the characteristics that underlie many successful group methodologies.

We also offer a caution. We need to be alert to wisdom's opposing potential. One of the main messages of the book is just how easy it is to fall into the trap of *collective folly* instead of collective wisdom. This happens when groups, organizations, or communities become so polarized that they can't see the consequences of their collective actions. Similarly, false or forced agreement in groups can lead to tragic consequences. The power of collective wisdom is furthered when we learn how to navigate skillfully between the shores of polarization and false agreement.

We see our efforts as part of a larger social movement. Everywhere we look, we see groups, networks, and communities rising up to address common challenges. What all of us

share is a collective outlook and a desire for wise action. We seek what human beings have always sought: to find what is best in ourselves and what is best in and for the group. Our intent in the following pages is to articulate some of the key ideas of this search and to provide a foundation for the field of collective wisdom's further development.

Use of Terms

COLLECTIVE — A number of persons or things considered as one group or whole; marked by connection among or with the members of a group.

FOLLY — Lacking good sense or normal prudence and foresight, a continuum of behaviors ranging from personally foolish behavior to criminality, evil, and depravity.

POWER — The ability, strength, and capacity to do something, including the capacity to bring about change.

TRAP — Something by which one is caught or stopped unawares; a position or situation from which it is difficult or impossible to escape.

WISDOM — Exercising sound judgment; reflects great understanding of people and of situations. Considerate of multiple perspectives and forms of intelligence. Wisdom in groups is demonstrated by insight, good sense, clarity, objectivity, and discernment rooted in deep caring and compassion.



Collective and Wisdom Makes the Difference

It started with a bolt of lightning in an area of wilderness known as Mann Gulch in Montana. In a telling case study of collective failure, twelve young smokejumpers and a forest ranger lost their lives battling the flames that erupted. Everything that could have gone wrong that tragic day seemed to, including the final moments when an action was taken that might have saved them. Wagner Dodge, who headed the crew, came up with a brilliant tactic. As the flames from the fire whipped their way toward the men, he bent down and lit a fire to the grass in front of him. As the fire spread, it burned in a widening circle. Standing in front of this wall of flame, he stepped through onto a small charred patch of ground that

allowed him to “hide” within the larger body of the blaze. This was not a *backfire*, in which an area of ground is burned in front of an oncoming blaze to create a firebreak. There was no time. This was simply a case of an in-the-moment reaction.

From within the burned-out patch of ground, Dodge beckoned the two men closest to him to follow him in. They could not hear him amid the sounds of exploding trees and screaming winds, but they could see him frantically waving, motioning them to follow him inside the circle. Instead, they glanced his way and kept going. And then the rest of the men passed by, not one of them following their crew chief into the safety of the circle. With the exception of Dodge and two men who miraculously stumbled into an area barren of vegetation, everyone perished. It was the worst disaster in Forest Service history.

There were certainly lessons here about leadership, especially in this particular circumstance, which later documented failed relationships among the crew and a command-and-control style of leadership. There were also lessons about the need for cooperation, trust, teamwork, and coordination, lessons the Forest Service took seriously and which transformed their ways of preparing teams rather than just individuals.¹ Yet, at a deeper level, there is a more fundamental question. What allows us, in groups and larger collectives, to find solutions amid complexity and daunting circumstances, to make wise choices and work together, as opposed to splintering apart and failing to see what opportunities arise? How can we *together* find solutions to pressing and bewildering problems that face us every day? How

can we know when and how to join with others, stepping through fire if necessary?

The failure at Mann Gulch was not due to any one element alone; the science of firefighting was at an early stage, wind direction is always unpredictable, and bad luck played its part. We all understand how external conditions can dictate the outcome of a situation. What stood out, however, from the studies that followed was something internal to the group. There had been an assumption, which proved tragic, that men individually trained, put on a plane without even knowing each other, and given orders to obey their crew chief without question would know what to do when their circumstances changed dramatically. There had been precious little understanding about how to prepare groups to improvise when necessary and trust in each other.

The lessons learned from Mann Gulch were not a call for just any change, but for a change in thinking about how to save lives. The tragedy moved the Forest Service in the direction of thinking collectively: how to train men together and create greater collaboration among the various disciplines involved with fire safety. They dedicated themselves to the question of how best to make sound judgments as teams and to cultivate the intelligence that existed from the bottom up, from the smokejumpers and firefighters who fought the fires. It is a lesson we must now learn on a much larger scale.

The Power of Collective Wisdom is a call for people to come together to think collectively about the circumstances they face. It is a guide to reclaiming our participation in groups as positive, necessary, and hopeful without sugarcoating the external challenges we face or the internal obstacles that prevent

us from seeing new possibilities. Wisdom reflects a capacity for sound judgment, discernment, and the objectivity to see what is needed in the moment. Collective wisdom reflects a similar capacity to learn together and evolve toward something greater and wiser than what we can do as individuals alone. This book emerges from a deep conviction that we have a stake in each other and that what binds us together is greater than what drives us apart.

THE NEED FOR THIS BOOK

We must find insight and ways to cooperate with each other at a depth and scale that is unprecedented. We see this need appearing everywhere—on the front pages of our newspapers, in our organizations, and even within our network of family and friends. If we cannot find legitimate ways to join together, to cooperate and to understand each other, we will not find solutions to the dysfunctionality and messes that seem to be growing all around us, let alone to the largest problems that beset us as nations and as a world community, such as global warming, poverty, and war.

We cannot any longer

- kill our way out of it,
- deny that it is happening, or
- rationalize that this is just the way it is.

If we do not turn the temperature down, literally and figuratively, on the global challenges we face and the polarization and fragmentation we live with on a daily basis, we will

be staring down a path of untenable choices. Are we willing to gamble our future and our children's future on more of the same?

Change happens on a macro systems level but also on a micro level—one conversation at a time, one group at a time, one new idea spawned among a group of committed people, setting off a chain reaction of new possibilities. We believe this kind of transformation not only is possible but has always been the way change happens. Transformation, even on a large scale, has a personal dimension, and each individual matters. We believe such transformation involves a fundamental shift in our thinking, and an understanding and embodiment of collective wisdom.

We believe our capacity for collective wisdom is innate and its emergence in groups catalyzed by awareness of a compelling need and a higher purpose. The global crises we face, ranging from economic instability to resource sustainability, are each day encroaching more on our personal lives. There is a clear rationale for collective action. We see the beginnings of a social movement, grounded in wisdom, percolating up through social networks in the business world, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and cross-cultural affiliations. In every community and organization are those whose uncommon behaviors are empathic, collective in their orientation, and far-reaching in their vision. We already have the human resources necessary to make a difference. Amid the crises we face is also an opportunity for seeking fresh perspectives on a grand scale. This book provides a framework for that search and a name for that movement.

Mark Gerzon, a leading conflict resolution facilitator and leadership trainer, and the author of *Leading Through Conflict*, wrote to us, “Humanity is hungering for wisdom. That is the word I hear most: not *compassion*; not *love*; not *peace*; not *kindness*—but *wisdom*. The other words all have deep meaning and their own unique power. But wisdom is the one that seems to magnetize people across the broadest spectrum around the world. I found myself drawn to this word because it is a cross-cutting theme in so many of the very diverse settings in which I am traveling.”²

DEFINING OUR TERMS: COLLECTIVE, WISDOM, AND THE TRAP OF FOLLY

The dictionary defines *collective* as denoting a number of persons or things considered as one group or whole, marked by connection or similarity among or with the members of a group. In general, we use the term to designate a larger wholeness that may not be visible to the individual. For example, in groups we may be hardly conscious of being part of a collective because we see the world through an individualistic orientation. It is sometimes only in extreme circumstances or crisis that we recognize just how critical it is for groups to form a joint identity or combine and coordinate their diverse elements, or to become united behind a common purpose.

More often than not, we have a tendency to treat everything as separate and divisible. We analyze organizational structure and break it down into departments and functions. We diagram workflow and break it down into processes. We

evaluate people and break them down into skills or job classifications. In a hospital setting, people can become diagnostic categories or simply dysfunctioning organs, such as “the bad kidney in room 6.” We are so used to breaking things down into parts and pieces that we forget to look for what binds us together.

We must learn to shift our perspective back to what makes people and groups whole, to find what connects us together as a family, an organization, a nation, a world. Yet to do so requires a special kind of awareness. Collectivity without vigilance can come at a great cost. The collective can rob us of our distinctiveness, force upon us conformity, and rally us to war against an “other” who is not seen as part of our designated group. The collective can easily become synonymous with mobs, groupthink, and the lowest common denominator of group consensus, sacrificing anything original or even relevant to the circumstances that need to be addressed. Our book recognizes this in the form of collective behavior that leads to folly.

We define *folly* as lacking good sense, prudence, and foresight, a continuum of behaviors ranging from personally foolish behavior to criminality, evil, and depravity on a mass scale. Folly lacks discernment of fundamental human values and is a refusal to accept existing reality or to foresee the inevitable consequences of its actions. The result of folly can be mildly disconcerting or reach a scale of utter destruction and tragedy. It is a trap that all groups may find themselves in at some time and, once they’re caught, difficult to extricate themselves from. Our book presents folly as a potentiality of every group and often the consequence of two related yet

opposing dynamics: One is the movement in groups toward polarization, and the other is the movement toward false or forced agreement among the members.

We offer an alternative that is both hopeful and grounded in our research of groups. We believe the alternative is the human potential for finding ways to constructively work together and pursue wise action. By wise action, we mean the ability to exercise sound judgment, demonstrate good sense, and reflect a depth of understanding about people and situations. Wisdom in groups is demonstrated by insight, clarity, objectivity, and discernment rooted in deep caring and compassion.

By definition, wisdom is associated with accumulated philosophic or scientific learning but is distinguished by qualities of reverence and respect for life. *Wisdom*, as we use the term in this book, reminds us that we are part of something greater than ourselves alone. At a personal and group level, we link wisdom with thoughtfulness, an ability to reflect deeply on personal experience, and a capacity for applying discretion and intuitive understanding. Wisdom is a form of knowledge marked by our ability to discern the inner qualities and relationships of a situation. Considerate of multiple perspectives and forms of intelligence, wisdom often shows up in flashes of insight and new ways of understanding a situation. In groups, this can come in the form of *emergence*, something original or unexpected that moves the whole group forward or ties together disparate aspects of a situation.

When we join together the terms *collective* and *wisdom*, we reach a whole new synthesis of insight and revelation. Like binocular vision, in which both eyes are used at once, joining

collective with wisdom is a way of seeing with added dimension and depth. The collective eye can pick up patterns of order, variation, and connections; wisdom can detect meaning and human values that arise spontaneously from a particular situation. We achieve, to paraphrase the words of the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, an ability to weave together the slender threads of a fractured whole into a firmer pattern of meaning. To share collective wisdom with others is to make meaning from disparate threads and weave together a fresh understanding.

THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE WISDOM

So why should collective wisdom matter to us personally? Real change comes from an awareness of our deep connectedness. For some, this may mean a spiritual awakening, a transformation that begins with the human heart. For others, it may be a more intellectual process, coming to see anew the need for addressing an emerging environmental ethic and related social issues involving business, health, education, and the disparity of wealth within and between nations. However we come to this new awareness, the promise of wisdom offers something unique that is often absent from more traditional approaches to innovation, change, and progressive ideas. Wisdom offers greater meaning regarding the value of life for oneself and others. Wisdom teachings invariably draw our attention back to the indivisibility of the whole and the immediacy of the moment.

At the collective level, wisdom holds the key to redefining communities in the service of alternative futures that are

life giving and sustainable. Collective wisdom invites us to think about the necessity of networks of people operating at the grassroots level to improve, invent, and discover new ways of enacting positive results. The outcome of a collective process that is wise is more likely a sound decision that goes beyond partisan concerns, and speaks instead to the aspirations of what is best in us and best for the circumstances at hand.

Collective wisdom helps us transcend the duality of self and others because it is a reminder that we are part of a larger framework from which we act out our role. As Shakespeare recognized, alone we are merely players, each with our exits and entrances, but as members of something larger, we become something extraordinary. “Consider,” another wise poet said, “how the stars that shine more brightly manage to combine in constellations, get a name.”³ So too with collective wisdom: When we are in service to that which is life affirming and needed, we become something greater in combination with others.

The power of collective wisdom is to elicit new perspectives that reflect our common humanity and heal the divisions that keep us separated. Our ability to contribute to a better world, locally and globally, is magnified when we do it effectively with others. Similarly, dysfunction and divisions limit our contribution and lead us collectively into paralysis and negativity. Groups can be avenues for wisdom or unwittingly fall into traps of collective folly that foster false agreement and destructive polarities. The contribution of this book is to help readers navigate change that is alert to the potential of both wisdom and folly.

THIS BOOK AT A GLANCE

When human beings gather in groups or in communities, a depth of awareness and insight, a type of transcendent knowing, becomes available to us that can inform wise action and extraordinary results. We call this type of knowing *collective wisdom* and believe it to be a potential of *all* groups as an innate human capacity.

In chapter 1, we discuss what collective wisdom is and the qualities associated with the experience. Collective wisdom, as the phrase suggests, is not of the individual alone or purely an insight of the intellect or mind. Sometimes spontaneous in groups, sometimes the outcome of an extended period of time and attention, collective wisdom is a potential of all groups and is marked by an experience of deepening connections: within ourselves, with each other, and to larger natural forces involving nature, spirit, and our place in the cosmos.

While collective wisdom can have positive, even dramatic effects on our efforts in groups, we cannot will it to arise. The appearance of collective wisdom is unpredictable and often difficult to put into words, which reflects both its quality of immediacy and its deeper underlying purpose. The power of collective wisdom lies in its ability to be an emergent phenomenon—from uncertainty, inquiry, and dialogue come new meaning, learning, and unanticipated ways to move forward. Although we cannot will collective wisdom to arise in groups, we can make preparations that encourage it to emerge.

In chapter 2, we discuss six stances that can deepen our capacity for wise action and prepare us for collective

wisdom to arise—illustrated with stories from diverse settings and times in history. We learn that we can increase the likelihood that collective wisdom will arise through the quality of how we listen and the conscious effort we make to suspend our personal certainty and seek diverse perspectives. We have the ability, personally and in groups, to read between the lines and listen with the wisdom of our heart.

In chapter 3, we explore these stances more fully by seeing how our internal perspective and external actions constitute a worldview. Through reflection on how our reality is shaped, we become better able to see the contours of a new consciousness, one that is more likely to create a positive future with others. The root meaning of the word *wisdom* involves seeing truths hidden from the casual observer. We bring attention to alternative worldviews that suggest we may be part of a larger collective consciousness, and why.

Being alert to wisdom, however, includes a necessary vigilance. In chapters 4–6, we discuss the pitfalls of an opposing potential—*collective folly*. Collective folly is a trap that all groups find themselves in at times, existing on a continuum from misguided or foolish behaviors to large-scale acts of depravity. As with collective wisdom, we believe that collective folly is a potential of *all* groups and is amplified by group dynamics involving polarization and false agreement. Every day, human beings commit small acts of foolishness and injustice, as well as unspeakable acts of violence and cruelty, within our families, among our friends, and against groups of strangers small and large that we deem as “other.” By being alert

to the potential presence of collective folly, we become more adept at cultivating a group wisdom that is realistic and tangible—unleashing extraordinary potential for innovation and change.

In chapter 7, we tell stories of groups and their capacity for innovation and change that reveal the power of collective wisdom for healing, creativity, and conflict resolution. Collective wisdom occurs most reliably when group members feel both safe and challenged to find what is best in themselves and what is best in and for the group. From such a vantage point, it becomes possible to heal old and current divisions, to experience true belonging to a vital community, to act creatively, and to feel hope about the larger world. When groups come together like this, a new threshold of co-creative power is reached.

In chapter 8, we learn how to embody the power of collective wisdom in acts of mindfulness. We learn how to continually return to the immediacy of our circumstances, create safe spaces for inquiry, and cultivate our transformative powers in the context of groups. Mindfulness keeps our attention on the present moment even as we must learn to act strategically and from a long-term perspective. Sometimes mistaken simply for a way to solve problems, the power of collective wisdom is in its ability to alter the way we pay attention to what will help us solve problems together. It is an affirmation of the common humanity we share with others.



What Is Collective Wisdom and How Does It Show Up?

Central Washington University and Western Oregon University were playing each other for a spot in the NCAA Division playoffs in women's softball. Up to the plate stepped Western Oregon's Sara Tucholsky, their five-foot-two right fielder, with two runners on base in the second inning. On the second pitch, the light-hitting outfielder blasted the ball over the center field fence for an apparent home run. Looking up to see the ball clear the fence, she missed first base as she rounded toward second and had to stop abruptly to return and touch it. But something in her right knee gave way and she collapsed on the base path. "I was in a lot of pain," she reported later. "Our first-base

coach was telling me I had to crawl back to first base. 'I can't touch you,' she said, 'or you'll be out. I can't help you.'" Sara crawled through the dirt in obvious agony as her teammates and spectators watched her.¹

The Western Oregon coach rushed onto the field and conferred with the umpires. They were clear that a player could not be assisted by her own teammates and that she would be credited with a single but not a home run. The Western Oregon coach did not know what to do; this was a crucial game, and it was Sara's first home run in four years.

Then Mallory Holtman stepped in. She was Central Washington's star first baseman and the player that other teams feared most. She offered a simple solution. If Sara's own teammates could not help her round the bases, what if Central Washington players did? The umpires concluded that there were no rules against an opposing team assisting. Mallory and her shortstop picked up Sara and resumed the home run walk, pausing at each base to let her touch her uninjured foot to the bag. Mallory recalled that they were laughing when they reached second base and wondered how this would look to others. When they reached home, they found out. The entire Western Oregon team was in tears. "My whole team was crying," Sara recalled. "Everybody in the stands was crying. My coach was crying. It touched a lot of people."

Western Oregon won the game 4-2, but that is not what Mallory Holtman took away as her lesson. "In the end, it is not about winning and losing so much," she reflected. "It

was about this girl. She hit it over the fence and was in pain and she deserved a home run. . . . This is a huge experience I will take away. We are not going to remember if we won or lost, we are going to remember this kind of stuff that shows the character of our team. It is the best group of girls I've played with. I came up with the idea, but any girl on the team would have done it."

Mallory Holtman is a fine human being. When the moment came for her to act, she did not hesitate. Nor did she wonder whether her teammates would hesitate. *It is the best group of girls I've played with.* Indeed, her impulse to help was not seen as separate from her teammates: *I came up with the idea, but any girl on the team would have done it.*

The story of Sara and the aid she received from Mallory and her teammates flew over the Internet. It was as if in a sea of distress, evidence of human kindness was news. Yet it was news not because it was beyond our imagination, though the details were unusual, but because it was a reminder of what is common and decent in all of us. Yes, many would have left Sara to fend for herself, rationalized that the rules dictated the outcome, and felt justified, even fortunate, in her turn of bad luck. But Mallory Holtman did not hesitate to help, and her team backed her up.

How can we awaken to a world more like that? We see the results of a world in which the urge to dominate is everywhere, and even conversations can be competitive battlegrounds for winning and losing. How can we be part of settings, and help create settings, where the company we keep is more in step with human kindness, more likely to give others consideration and a helping hand?

FOUNDATIONAL QUALITIES AND
CHARACTERISTICS OF COLLECTIVE WISDOM

Collective wisdom is about how we come to make sound judgments with others, touched by what is common and decent in all of us. It is an insight or action recognizing that what happens to one happens to all. As such, it is not solely an analytic decision, a compromise, a vote, or even a win-win situation. Mallory knew enough about herself and enough about her teammates to act with a high degree of empathy that extended beyond her own group. This was no small feat regardless of its simplicity or the seemingly minor consequences at stake. *She hit it over the fence and was in pain and she deserved a home run* is a statement that has metaphoric power. We are capable of treating others, even those outside our own group, as we would want to be treated. We are capable of recognizing pain in others and responding to them. More often than we realize, we are adept at acting in the immediacy of the moment when something of real importance and value is at stake. These are characteristics that extend beyond the individual to groups, and they have real significance.

“I’ve been collecting stories about collective wisdom,” cross-cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrien told us. “One was in Montana, where a Jewish family had a menorah in the window, and their home got completely trashed. The next morning, word got out, and by that evening, all the people in that community put a menorah in their window. That’s an example of stopping violence in a collective, a unification that stopped violence.”² It’s the same message that Mallory Holtman conveyed in her actions with her team, but now

set up in reverse: If it's done to one, it'll have to be done to all. Mallory Holtman saw beyond two separate teams, and the townspeople in Montana saw beyond two separate religions, both recognizing the larger humanity in which we are joined.

Reduced to its essence, collective wisdom evokes experiences of connection—an understanding that arises with others of right action and on behalf of a larger purpose. It is a form of knowledge that is not solely intellectual or based entirely on the knowledge of one person. This is what makes wisdom collective, though individuals often play a major part in collective wisdom's occurrence.

Collective wisdom is reflected in group behaviors that show human decency, social justice, and spiritual awareness. The effects of such behaviors result in surprising and positive outcomes that often cannot be ascribed to a simple or singular cause. Sometimes quite ordinary, other times quite profound, collective wisdom is what can happen when people find themselves in situations that invite new perspectives and evoke higher aspirations. Often, its emergence is grounded in a different way of listening and bringing attention to the immediacy of the moment.

A Silence on the River

I WAS IN A GROUP of about fifty people preparing to take our rafts into the water. There was a guide, a park ranger, who was Native American. His name was Vincent. We mostly didn't know each other. There was a lot of nervous energy in

the group. People were chatting, checking their gear, eating. Some were expecting Vincent to speak and get the trip going. He didn't seem to be in a hurry. He sat quietly as the group bustled about. Finally, as the group energy settled, he began to talk. I don't remember him going through a long list of dos and don'ts about rafting, though I'm sure he shared with us the essentials of what we needed to know. What I remember instead was that he shared a bit about himself and why he worked as a ranger. He talked about the land we were on, and how his ancestors once lived here. He mentioned that there were times when he sat by himself that he could feel the presence of his ancestors still, and hear their voices in the wind and on the river.

When he finished, there was a noticeable calm that came over the group, and we began moving into the water, almost silently. It was really quite beautiful, as if we too might hear something in the sounds of the water and the wind.³



One of the essential qualities of collective wisdom is a palpable sense of connection with each other and to larger forces that is found, for example, in nature, in relationship to our ancestors, and even in relation to a physical place. Often these experiences are grounded in group members' understanding of the sacred, however defined by the individuals and the group. Carol Frenier, an author and an active participant in the Collective Wisdom Initiative, was interviewed

by Craig Hamilton several years ago for an article about the growing interest in this phenomenon. During her interview, Frenier observed: “In these group experiences, people have access to a kind of knowing that’s bigger than what we normally experience with each other. . . . You feel the presence of the sacred, and you sense that everybody else in the group is also feeling that.”⁴

People who talk about their experiences of collective wisdom often report a sense of openness and awareness of something larger than themselves. The ability to communicate seems broader, and people are often astounded by the creativity that comes forward. “You have a sense,” Frenier observed, “that the whole group is creating together, and you don’t quite exactly know how.”

This experience of connection, when it arises, often expands or dissipates our experience of boundaries—boundaries between different parts of ourselves, between ourselves and other members of the group, between our group and others outside of the group, between what is personal and what is universal. In a second interview conducted by Hamilton, a woman observed: “In the group, I experienced a kind of consciousness that was almost a singularity, like a dropping of personalities and a joining together where there was no sense of conflict. Nobody was in opposition and everybody was just helping each other. It became obvious that we weren’t responding to individual personalities but were responding to something much deeper, much more real in each other that was collective, something that we shared—a commonality, really.”⁵

Such experiences of connection, when they arise, can feel mystical, almost magical. But they are also quite *natural*. Certain kinds of conversations and collective endeavors, our colleague Meg Wheatley has written, take us to

the wisdom we possess [in groups] that is unavailable to us as individuals. The wisdom emerges as we get more and more connected with each other, as we move from conversation to conversation, carrying the ideas from one conversation to another, looking for patterns, suddenly surprised by an insight we all share.

There's a good scientific explanation for this, because this is how all life works. As separate ideas or entities become connected to each other, life surprises us with emergence—the sudden appearance of new capacity and intelligence. All living systems work in this way. We humans got confused and lost sight of this remarkable process by which individual actions, when connected, lead to much greater capacity.

To those of us raised in a linear world with our minds shrunken by detailed analysis, the sudden appearance of collective wisdom always feels magical.⁶

Wheatley's last point may seem surprising: The emergence of collective wisdom can feel magical—somehow extraordinary or even unreal—because we have become so focused on the rational (“our minds shrunken by detailed analysis”) that we have lost touch with other ways in which new capacity and intelligence come into being. Sometimes conversations and writings about collective wisdom can, perhaps unintentionally, reinforce this perception of the extraor-

dinary nature of the phenomenon, intimating that collective wisdom is available only to the initiated.

This is not our view. We maintain that collective wisdom is a potentiality of *all* groups, not just of so-called healthy or enlightened ones. This premise is not some declaration of naïve faith or a wistful prayer; we believe that collective wisdom is a potentiality of all groups because, as Wheatley writes, this is how *all* life works. New capacity and intelligence emerges through connections: from cell to cell, dendrite to dendrite, human to human, group to group. As extraordinary and mysterious as the experience of profound connection—and of collective wisdom emerging—may feel in the moment, collective wisdom as a phenomenon is natural, even potentially ordinary.

This does not mean that collective wisdom will emerge in every group, only that it can, whether the group is a women's softball team, a rural town, a one-time rafting expedition, a shared moment of profound awareness—or a team of hard-edged engineers and consultants confronting concrete challenges of sustainability. Peter Senge, who is often identified with the lessons that living systems have for organizational life, offered a story to us about this last kind of group as an example of boundaries expanding and dissipating, of deeper connections emerging.

For the Sake of Our Children

THE SOCIETY FOR ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING has organized a Sustainability Consortium, a group of diverse people, including researchers, consultants, and executives from companies, who

are embracing environmental and social sustainability as a cornerstone of their business strategy. This consortium works together through diverse action projects; its members meet together about twice a year.

One of the theories the consortium has explored was developed by John Ehrenfeld, director of the MIT Program on Technology, Business, and Environment. Ehrenfeld posits that building sustainable enterprises will require embracing three often-competing perspectives: the rationalistic, the naturalistic, and the humanistic. Some years ago, consortium members had a firsthand experience of the convergence of these three perspectives.

Xerox was hosting the meeting, and throughout the first day, members learned about Xerox's corporate philosophy of design for remanufacture. The company accounts for at least \$250 million in cost savings due to remanufacture and waste reduction, a compelling illustration of the rationalistic perspective.

The group also toured the Document System 265 assembly area and saw firsthand what a "Zero to Landfill" work environment looks like. The production facility mimics nature by creating no waste—a powerful realization of the naturalistic perspective.

But at the end of the first day of meetings, the role of the humanistic perspective in Xerox's change effort was still only implicit. It was late in the afternoon, and consortium members were packed into a noisy, stuffy meeting room adjacent to the Document System 265 assembly area.

A young woman, one of the lead designers on the Xerox team, was talking about how meaningful it had been for her

to be part of such an innovative effort when she was interrupted with an unusual question. A Consortium member from Ford, a veteran of many organizational learning projects, asked, "Helen, I understand what a great opportunity this was, and how exciting it was for you. I work with engineers and I know the intellectual excitement of pushing the technological envelope. But what I really want to know is: *Why* did you do this? What I mean is, what was the stand you took and *who were you* taking that stand?"

Helen looked at him for a long time in silence, and then, in front of many peers and a few superiors, she began to cry. "I am a mom," she said.

We all knew the team's motto, "Zero to landfill . . . for the sake of our children." But now we were in its presence. I suspect many of us will never forget the deep silence that filled the room. Another consortium member, a vice president from Ford/Visteon, turned to me and whispered, "seamlessness."⁷



In the story that Senge tells, a unifying element pulled together the different strands of the rational, naturalistic, and humanistic domains. There was a rational utilitarian benefit from remanufacture and waste reduction. There was the marvel of engineering skills that can mimic nature by creating no waste. There was a designer who was personally fulfilled by the challenge and possibilities of this effort. Yet, beyond these elements, there was something additional, something

unexpected: a question that lifted the group to another level. It was a very personal question that elicited a very personal answer. “I am a mom,” she answered, and her eyes welled up with tears. She did this in front of her peers and supervisors. There was risk involved. She was at once exquisitely vulnerable and quietly beautiful in her honesty. It had the effect of deepening the silence that began when she listened to the question and took it seriously, pausing to find within herself the most direct answer.

With Helen’s answer, there was a convergence of varied perspectives. The company’s motto—*Zero to landfill . . . for the sake of our children*—stopped for a moment being just a motto and became something real and alive. It was a memorable moment, one that Senge felt was unlikely to be forgotten. This is common in our conversations with people about such moments—there is something vital, something that just feels so alive that it wants to burst out on its own. Seamlessness. An experience of a larger whole emerging as boundaries expand and connections grow stronger: within an individual group member, within a project team, within a business model, within an industry, within a world.

Collective wisdom is often revealed as people and world-views mix and collide, sometimes beautifully as in Senge’s tale, and sometimes with turbulence. Often, a catalytic moment—in this case, the question and response that expressed authenticity and vulnerability—moves the group into a new space or territory of understanding. In spiritual traditions, such as Zen Buddhism, this might be understood as a shift away from duality, erasing the concreteness of something having to be true or not true and moving instead toward a larger truth inclusive

of multiple perspectives. However we might want to understand it, the higher aspiration that was indicated by the simple statement “I am a mom” drew into focus the richness of the group’s collective efforts and the meaning for a better life that the higher aspiration held for them and others.

BEYOND THE INTELLECT, BEYOND THE INDIVIDUAL

While some writers speak of collective intelligence, we use the term collective wisdom to reflect a quality of group understanding that is neither of the intellect alone nor of any individual alone. When this knowing and sense of right action emerges, it does so from deep within the individual participants, from within the collective awareness of the group, and from within the larger field of spiritual, cultural, and institutional forces that surround any group activity.

Many people who describe experiences of collective wisdom describe a physicality to the experience, a feeling of discernment in their personal body and an awareness of permeability with others. In another interview by Craig Hamilton, a woman said this of her group experience: “When someone else spoke, it felt as if I was speaking. And when I did speak, it was almost egoless, like it wasn’t really me. It was as if something larger than me was speaking through me. The atmosphere in the room felt like we were in a river. . . . We started to say things that we had never thought before . . . something would be revealed, and that would open up something else to be revealed.”⁸

Sometimes this quality of understanding can manifest in a sudden and shared sense of what to do next, a know-

ing that extends beyond words and amplifies a shared sense of connection and purpose with others. Often, this knowing can emerge from uncertainty, a “not knowing” that requires added personal reflection and listening to divergent perspectives. We become less “expert” but more open. The cognitive scientist Francisco Varela explains how this can be true because at the “moments of breakdown, that is, when we are *not* experts . . . we become like beginners seeking to feel at ease with the task at hand.”⁹ In other words, it is at just those moments when our world is less familiar to us that we have the chance to see in new ways and embody new actions.

One of the paradoxes of collective wisdom is that such insights are far more likely to arise when the group is willing to risk, or admit, not knowing. Juanita Brown recalls this moment experienced by a group that reached a point of surrender to not knowing.

I Don't Know, but Maybe We Do

THE YEAR IS 1966. THE grape fields of California are ablaze with conflict and tension. Cesar Chavez and his fledgling United Farm Workers are seeking negotiations through collective bargaining elections with the DiGiorgio Corporation—the largest grower of table grapes in the nation. Many new workers are frightened, already indentured by the company who paid their way from Mexico and now living in DiGiorgio's labor camps. They support their brothers and sisters in the United Farm Workers who are seeking a better life, but they have children to feed and no passage home.

The farm labor camps, row on row of cinder block housing, are located on company property. There are watchtowers overlooking the camps, silent reminders of earlier days when the Japanese were interned in these same buildings during World War II. There are no longer guards in the towers but there are guards at the gates. Because the camps are on private property, United Farm Worker organizers have been barred from entry—barred from engaging in conversations with the workers inside—barred from discussing the workers' democratic rights under the law to vote for the United Farm Workers to represent them in conversations with the growers. A paradox—workers have the right to vote in the first election in agricultural history but not the means to share in the conversation needed to make an informed choice on behalf of a better life for themselves and their families.

What to do? Cesar Chavez and farm worker organizers are on the roadside at 5 AM as the trucks leave for the fields, passing small informational leaflets through the slats of the trucks. The growers have permitted informational leafleting.

Even Cesar is beginning to lose hope. He calls a meeting of the whole community. Men, women, children: the farm worker meeting hall is full. The mood is somber. Cesar explains the situation to those gathered, realistically, honestly, without artifice.

Cesar says he has no answer to the dilemma. If there is no way to engage in conversation with the workers in the camps, it will be hard to change our future, he says. He asks for their honest assessment, for ideas, for help. All bearing witness know that some unforeseen breakthrough is the only way through.

People share ideas, many ideas. None are rejected. Everyone is asked not to debate because no decision is going to be made tonight. We are trying to listen, he says, listen to every voice that wants to be heard.

Many voices enter the conversation. The meeting is nearly done. Way in the back of the hall sits an old woman wrapped in a rebozo, a Mexican shawl. She stands and speaks quietly in Spanish.

“Well, I know I am not qualified, but there was something . . . I had an idea, maybe just a small idea, but maybe it can help. If we can’t go in to visit the workers, maybe there is a way they could come to us. I believe only God can help us now. Why don’t we build an altar, a small church on the public roadway across the street from the camps? We can hold Mass and a prayer vigil every night. I know there are priests who will help us. The workers can come across the street to the Mass and the prayer vigil. The growers can’t stop them from coming to a prayer vigil, can they? And they can’t stop us from holding one, can they? And as we pray together with the workers from the camps, they will come to know who we are and what we stand for and then they can vote in a better way for their future. . . .”

As the person who translated the old woman’s words from Spanish, I think somehow the energy of her presence, the power of her simplicity, and the sigh of *Yes* that emerged from the collective in the room will remain forever etched in my own being.¹⁰



What is this community struggling for? For the right to have conversations, for the right to gather with farm workers and engage them in dialogue about how the United Farm Workers might help them. The mood is somber; everyone knows what's at stake. The UFW is a fledgling organization in 1966. It has just recently launched the grape boycott. A setback in these fields would be devastating not only for the workers here but for the larger movement as well.

Cesar Chavez calls the group together, not to ratify a plan he has already developed, but to confess that he does not know what to do. No one else does, either. So they gather: not to debate, not even to decide, but to listen to "every voice that wants to be heard." Everyone is needed because no one individual, not even the leader, has the answer. Many people speak; none are rejected. And then, from the back of the room, an old woman who wonders if she is even qualified risks sharing an idea. She changes the very nature of the question: If we can't go to them, can we invite them to us? In a place of past and present imprisonment, can we extend an invitation that allows them freedom to choose? For Juanita Brown, the energy of this woman's presence and the simplicity of her profound questions shifted the trajectory in the room. Suddenly, there was a way forward. Yes. *The sigh of Yes that emerged . . . will remain forever etched in my own being.*

How is this possible? How does it happen that from a place of not knowing, of even hopelessness, a way forward emerges? A first response might be to appreciate the mystery of collective wisdom's emergence. An additional response, however, might point to what becomes possible when we

authentically confess to not knowing. In such moments of surrender, we may open to a knowing that transcends the intellect alone, a knowing that is beyond any one of us, a knowing that may not have been possible when the certainty of the mind crowded all else out. The “small idea” put forward by the old woman seeded new possibilities; she is the set breaker, in systems language. As with Mallory Holtman’s role in the opening story, a certain logic that shackled the group was released. If we cannot gain access by pushing our way in, would it be possible to draw people out? The group is “lifted up” by the possibilities of a new approach.

PERCEPTIBLE, POSITIVE, OFTEN SURPRISING EFFECTS

So what happened after the community meeting? A day or so later, the group parked Chavez’s old station wagon across the road from the camp gates and erected a small altar in the back. At first, only a few workers came, then many, and then many more. When the election was held, the workers voted to have the UFW represent them.

Collective wisdom is a transformative shift that affects both inner awareness and outer behavior. These effects can benefit individuals within the group; the whole group; and individuals, groups, and larger collectives impacted by the group’s work. They are also positive to the extent that they serve the larger social impulses for wholeness, fairness, compassion, and justice.

Sometimes the shifts are dramatic, as in the election that certified the UFW to represent the DiGiorgio workers. Sometimes they are subtle, as in the designer’s ability to

embody a collective vision of “Zero to landfill—for the sake of our children.” Sometimes they are subtler still, as members began to move in concert and support each other as they embarked on a rafting trip.

Collective wisdom emerges when people open to it and don’t try to control and will it into being, so its effects are frequently surprising and in some cases unimaginable before they unfold. We doubt that anyone went into the UFW community meeting thinking, “I know: an altar on the back of a Chevy!” The effects are surprising because they are not predetermined; they arise through the connections and conversations that unfold within the group. Wisdom arises in the gaps between what is known and unknown, in the small openings that allow new meanings and perspectives to take hold.

SUMMARY: SOUND JUDGMENT AND REVELATION

Collective wisdom is about the nature of sound judgments made with others, reflecting a deep understanding of people and situations. It often involves an insight or revelation that what happens to one happens to all. Accordingly, we feel an instinct for ethical and constructive action in the moment. Collective wisdom shows up in our ways of being together—sometimes experienced as sacredness; or being part of a flow state; or feeling an expansion and dissipation of boundaries with others, nature, and spirit.

Throughout this chapter, we have also pointed to some of the paradoxes of collective wisdom. It is a mystery that has

predictable patterns. It is an understanding beyond the intellect; it is a knowing that emerges from not knowing. The experience of collective wisdom can be extraordinary, and it is natural, even common, in groups. Collective wisdom depends on conversation and is most powerfully felt in the silences that arise within those conversations. Collective wisdom is experienced in groups, yet it is often catalyzed by or reflected in the behavior of an individual. Finally, collective wisdom has positive, even dramatic effects on group cohesion and action, yet it cannot be willed into existence, controlled, or even planned for. What can we do to bring it forth?

We believe we can prepare for it and increase the likelihood that it will emerge. The commitments and convictions instrumental for preparation are the focus of our next chapter.

Preparing for Collective Wisdom to Arise

Our colleague Kate Regan uses a simple exercise to prepare individuals in groups to notice their internal thoughts and calibrate their group behaviors. In this exercise, typically done in workshops of approximately twenty people who are seated in a circle, she asks the participants to look down at the floor and close their eyes. She tells them that without opening their eyes, they must count to thirty in sequence without two people speaking at the same time. If two people do speak simultaneously, they must begin again. As you might expect, rarely do groups accomplish this the first time. As they report later, many individuals develop strategies to get the task done quickly without

any sense of knowing what others are doing. For example, one person may decide to call out a number immediately once the exercise begins, or another may decide to call out his number at the split second after another person finishes. They learn that these individual strategies collide with each other, and two or three people inevitably call out at the same time.

Remarkably, most groups end up succeeding at the task, but only after there is a shift in their attitude and behavior. What happens is that participants suspend their individual strategies and begin to sense into the rhythm of the group. This requires a different set of skills and competence than an approach that is solely individual or analytic. It is more like a jazz musician sensing the openings and transitions in the flow of the music. Rather than the punctuated sounds of individuals' punching out their numbers, a noticeable quiet settles over the group. Individuals begin to sense a different energy in the room and pay attention to a different part of themselves. In the language of collective wisdom, they sense what is arising among them in the immediacy of the moment. How can we do more of this? How can we increase this kind of competence and attentiveness in ourselves as well as groups?

So far we have described what collective wisdom is and some of the key qualities associated with the experience. Now we will look at stances, found through our research and experience, that can increase the likelihood of collective wisdom emerging. A *stance* is an attitude and bearing involving commitment and conviction. These are choices of internal perspective and external action that we make in the day-to-day and moment-by-moment interactions we have with others. Such a

stance can be learned and practiced, becoming a new way of being in relationship with others, a new type of human association leading to unleashing the spirit of cooperation and unlimited cocreation in groups. The stances are as follows:

DEEP LISTENING

Collective wisdom begins with a commitment to recognize that we are more than just the sum of our external parts. There is an interior realm within individuals, groups, and larger collectives. Deep listening invites us to be curious about what is *really* going on inside the person, the group, or the larger collective. It is an act of being fully present with others, not simply an act of hearing or memory. What do people really feel, dream, and fear? Deep listening is a way to pay attention to both interior and exterior worlds in order for groups to make sounder judgments and act in accordance with deeper values.

SUSPENSION OF CERTAINTY

A transcendent discovery is far more possible for individuals and groups when there is a willingness to risk, or admit, not knowing—when we confront directly the full weight of our confusion or the dilemma we are facing. The human capacity to make meaning together depends on a suspension of any one individual or subgroup's having always to be in the right. This commitment to suspend certainty is what makes our *knowing together* collective, because something new and often unexpected emerges in and through the group. A greater collective wisdom becomes possible because ideas are no

longer the possession of one person or subgroup, but are shared by those who helped shape it together. A suspension of certainty is akin to beginner's mind, a commitment to *not know* in order for new knowledge to arise.

SEEING WHOLE SYSTEMS/SEEKING DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

This stance shifts our attention from the individual to the group. Each group member sees the world in a unique way, but all the information is valuable and part of the whole. Our diverse perspectives, therefore, matter because they reveal more of the whole system. This is why groups need to gather information from many perspectives: to increase their understanding of the whole. Committing to this stance requires us to find ways to synthesize diverse information, whether through multiple personal conversations, through data collection, or through group methodologies that emphasize listening and discovery.

RESPECT FOR OTHERS/GROUP DISCERNMENT

Respect is a commitment to esteem others, even when disagreements arise. It is a willingness to recognize dissent as an avenue for new learning. Discernment is a capacity in groups for differentiation, permitting the emergence of new thinking and new images of what is possible. When respect and discernment are brought together, groups have a renewed ability to find common ground—even when such a direction seems difficult or obstructed. This commitment creates the conditions for alignment of personal, group, and higher-order

values such as justice, compassion, and freedom. Although never perfect, this stance allows for the development of productive relationships and directed action in accord with a common purpose.

WELCOMING ALL THAT IS ARISING

How we invite others into relationship matters. The stance of welcoming brings conscious attention to how gracefully we treat each other—recognizing different needs, respecting differences, and celebrating our common humanity. It brings attention to sharing power with others and treating others as equals. This commitment also encourages us to welcome the pleasant and unpleasant aspects of group life, recognizing that even disruptive obstacles or difficult circumstances can be critical aspects of our passage to wholeness.

TRUST IN THE TRANSCENDENT

Underlying and critical to all the stances that aid collective wisdom's emergence is a respect for human agency, the powers of nature, and the significance of a spiritual dimension to the activities we undertake. When we look out upon the world with awe and wonder, we are better able to see constructive possibilities rather than simply constricting limits. There is a Chinese expression that says when we step back, we can see more of the ocean and sky. Trust in the transcendent is the invitation to see a larger natural world on which the human journey is written. We become capable of remaining secure even in our uncertainty and better able to ask others for assistance, cocreating a world that works for all.



To illustrate how a stance for collective wisdom can be embodied and lived, we offer four stories from four key thought leaders and practitioners in the field of collective wisdom: Paula Underwood, Jacob Needleman, Lauren Artress, and Jerry Sternin. We have chosen these stories for their diversity and their ability to reveal examples of actions and beliefs that aid collective wisdom's emergence.

*DEEP LISTENING, RESPECT FOR OTHERS/
GROUP DISCERNMENT*

How does one cultivate an orientation of *deep listening*? How can we listen to what is said “between the words” as much as to the content of the words themselves? What is a way to respect “all the voices in the room” when it is not always possible to be physically present together in the same room?

We had a chance to talk with Paula Underwood, a member of the Turtle clan of the first five nations of the Iroquois. Author of *The Walking People: A Native American Oral History*, she was a Keeper of the ancient traditions handed down to her from an agreement made by her great-great-grandmother two hundred years ago to keep alive the wisdom of her people. Her teaching and consulting work in systems and cross-cultural understanding has touched the lives of elementary-school children, graduate students, and corporate executives.

Underwood addressed with us an approach to consensus that is often confused with getting “agreement” simply for the sake of pacifying certain members or to avoid conflict.

Her description of *one mind* amplifies those qualities of collective wisdom that point to a knowing that emerges through our internal senses and empathic connection with others. She speaks of allowing answers to emerge from a relational field grounded in respect and compassion. Deep listening, as she describes it, prepares the ground for collective wisdom to emerge, and she offers a very personal story of how she learned this for herself. Her words open for us a window on the inner workings of an indigenous community where roles and relationships are integrated to further the spirit of group cohesion.



May We Be of One Mind

*From an interview with Paula Underwood,
clan mother of the Turtle clan, Iroquois nation¹*

Paula Underwood:

AS FAR AS I KNOW, almost all the people, on the northern part of Turtle Island at least, made their decisions on the basis of group consensus. And that doesn't mean that everybody gets in a circle and all nine thousand people speak up. It does mean that you begin a process of learning to understand the members of your group in such a way that you can project reasonably well what their views will be on a given issue. So the general understanding always rises from the people.

The specific application then can safely be made by counselors based on that general understanding. In Iroquois terms, you'd say, "May we be of one mind." You don't have agreement until you are of one mind.

You've probably heard that every decision must be made on the basis of what the impact will be in the seventh generation ahead.

Leaders are responsible to feed the mind and the spirit of the people, and you feed the mind with good information.

Well, just as the clan mothers are responsible to count the ears of corn and to make sure there is enough to see us through the winter and indeed through the next three winters in case the crop is bad next year, so the clan mothers are responsible to feed the mind and spirit.

You are chosen as a clan mother for your ability to know the people's heart. So a clan mother is somebody who knows how to listen. And she knows how to listen whether anyone's saying something or not, if you see what I mean.

How does one learn that?

When I was a little bitty kiddy, about five, my dad began a process . . . anytime somebody came and said something to us, my dad would say, "You remember what he said, honey girl?"

And I would tell my father what the person said until I got so good at it that I could repeat verbatim even long presentations of what the person had said. And he did this all the time.

And finally one day there was this old gentleman, Richard Thompson. I still remember his name; he lived across the street. And every time my dad started to mow the lawn, here comes Mr. Thompson. And so I would stand out there.

Dad says, "You might come and listen to this man, honey girl. He's pretty interesting." And so I listened to him, and then my dad would say, "What did you hear him say?" And I would tell him.

Well, eventually I was repeating all the stories he liked to share with my dad verbatim. I knew them all by heart.

And my dad says, “You’re getting pretty good at that. *Did you hear his heart?*” And I thought, what?

So I went around for days with my ear to people’s chests trying *to hear their hearts*.

Finally my dad created another learning situation for me by asking my mother to read an article from the newspaper.

He says, “Well, I guess if you want to understand that article, you have to read between the lines.”

I thought, oh, read between the lines. Hear between the words. And the next time I listened to Mr. Thompson’s stories, I tried to listen between the words.

And my dad said, “I know you know his story. Did you hear his heart?” And I said, yes. He is very lonely and comes and shares his memories with you again and again because he’s asking you to keep him company in his memories. And it just came out of me. In other words, my heart echoed his heart. And when you can listen at that level, then you can hear not only the people. If you really pay attention, you can hear what the Universe is saying.



COMMENTARY

Paula Underwood’s words highlight three kinds of preparation that create the conditions for collective wisdom’s emergence. First is looking forward in time. Making decisions on the basis of their impact seven generations forward

obligates us to value the future in the present moment and consider the consequences of our actions over time. In a practical sense, it means that group members can anticipate the future together before it happens, even considering unintended consequences that might result from specific decisions. It also means simultaneously having shorter time frames (such as three winters) to prepare contingencies in case of difficult times. Underwood herself was a product of this commitment to look forward in time and to value what would be needed for future generations. She was the fifth generation of her family to be the Keeper of Iroquois traditions and to tell their story of ten thousand years, an account that in her words was not a “catalog of kings. It is instead a history of a people learning together.”

The second form of preparation is a demonstration of how empathy and compassion support the unity of the group as a whole. Empathy asks that we see, at least for a moment, through someone else’s eyes. Compassion asks that we recognize human frailty and suffering, and share with others our loving attention. These are capacities we develop within ourselves through a gradual process of learning and maturation. They are also capacities that develop a group’s readiness for deepening insight and directed action. In Underwood’s interview, she communicated to us the responsibility of people in leadership roles to provide good information, but also of everyone to become more skillfully attentive to “reading between the lines” and listening to each other’s hearts.

The third form of preparation is implied by the way she talked with us—her use of story, symbol, metaphor, and repetition to emphasize her points and evoke an understanding

of her true intent. At one point in the interview, she described this as a way of communicating that is “using your sense of wholeness, as well as your sequential logic. You’re combining the two, which is something my tradition always tries to do, and these days we say you’re using both left and right brain. And that’s really critical. You have to get both functioning.” Preparing for collective wisdom’s emergence requires us as individuals and in groups to use both our logical and symbol-making minds. “Symbols,” Underwood told us, “are in effect a door through which you can walk to the greater understanding.” We need to make room in groups for this kind of more sophisticated understanding, incorporating sequential logic and spontaneous insights, linear progressions and intuitive leaps, bullet points and poetry. Collective wisdom is more likely to arise when sound judgment is based on the entirety of our multiple intelligences.



*TRUST IN THE TRANSCENDENT AND THE
SUSPENSION OF CERTAINTY*

Jacob Needleman is one of our great modern philosophers and also one of the originating inspirations for the Collective Wisdom Initiative. Some ten years ago, in a letter to the president of the Fetzer Institute, the foundation that sponsored our research, he wrote of the pressing need for new social forms that would address the growing fragmentation and balkanization of our communities: “We obviously cannot confront this tangled world alone. . . . It takes no great insight to realize that we have no choice but to think together, ponder

together, in groups and communities. The question is how to do this. How to come together and think and hear each other in order to touch, or be touched by, the intelligence we need.” His answer suggested a depth of insight arising in groups from a confluence of forces, joining the inner spiritual life of the individual with the outer circumstances and conflicts that confront groups all the time. He wrote: “I [believe] that the group is the art form of the future. . . . In our present culture the main need is for a form that can enable human beings to share their perceptions and attention and, through that sharing, to become a conduit for the appearance of spiritual intelligence.”²

Needleman was pointing to a form of intelligence we have heard described in our research on collective wisdom and that has been our own experience. He was suggesting that we can suspend our desire for individual certainty on behalf of a larger, more compelling and ultimately more inclusive vision. The group is the art form of this kind of human association.

At the time, he was working on his book *The American Soul: Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founders*. In it, he articulated the historical antecedents of this group vision by studying the American founders’ formulation of government and specifically democracy’s transformative document—the Constitution of the United States of America. Drawing from his book and our conversations with him, here is our account of Jacob Needleman’s retelling of the story of the Constitutional Convention, the role Benjamin Franklin played, and the larger implications for collective wisdom emerging.



The Creation of the U.S. Constitution

*Based on conversations with Jacob Needleman
and on his book The American Soul*³

IN MOSTLY SWELTERING SUMMER HEAT, the Constitutional Convention took place in Philadelphia over almost four months in 1787. The windows were shuttered closed, and an agreement to maintain secrecy was kept throughout the proceedings. After a month of quarreling, bitterness, and contentious debate, there were ample reasons to believe that failure was a real possibility.

At the age of eighty-one and suffering from gout, Benjamin Franklin, a delegate to the convention, rose to speak to the group:

The small progress we have made after four or five weeks' close attendance and continual reasonings with each other, our different sentiments on almost every question . . . is, methinks, a melancholy proof of the imperfection of human understanding.⁴

Franklin suggested to the group members that they were seeking wisdom in the wrong places—from the past or from political models in Europe. He called instead for them to become a conduit for spirit:

In this situation of this assembly, groping, as it were, in the dark to find political truth, and scarce able to distinguish it when presented to us, how has it happened, Sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of Lights to illuminate our understanding? . . . And have we now forgotten that powerful Friend? Or do we imagine we no longer need its assistance?⁵

“I picture Franklin reminding them,” wrote Needleman, reflecting on whether Franklin’s words had any impact on the delegates, “of what a man is willing to let go of when the need for a greater force in oneself is felt and understood. But I do not picture Franklin believing that his words are actually going to turn the tide and bring harmony to the delegation. He is too worldly wise to expect that.” Needleman wonders if Franklin may indeed be holding up to the group a mirror of his own exhaustion, “that he is too ready to give up listening, too ready to let things go by power plays and egoism, the all too familiar forces of wishful thinking and paranoia.”⁶

Needleman continues with his story:

The days, weeks and months passed by. The heat increased, the wrangling and quarreling went on, the danger of dissolution increased. How often it must have seemed that the colonies would break apart—that fear and mistrust and individual opinion would prevail, or that the final resolution would be a weak and ineffectual document that, in the absence of obvious external danger, would only hold the colonies together until the next crisis or the one after that blew them apart. How clear it probably would have seemed to an outside observer that no real depth of

unity would ever be achieved by these men who in general sought not a deep and greater good for the whole, but only a greater good for their own interests. . . .

And yet, a union was formed, a union beyond economic, military, legal, religious or political bonds, a union that has lasted amid forces that in the past two centuries have broken down every other government in the world. The Constitution of the United States has allowed the coherence of a people and a nation within whose geographical and psychological borders all the immense forces of human life on earth have played and clashed with intensity beyond any imagining.

What force lies at the origin of the Constitution of the United States, beyond what may be labeled economic, political, legal, military or religious influences in any of their obvious meanings? What enabled the Constitution as we know it to come into existence?

Is not the answer to this question to be found in the nearly superhuman struggle of individuals to listen to each other? If we are to discern a spiritual resonance in the founding of America, will it not be seen mainly in the effort of individuals to open their minds to each other when almost everything in them is pulling them into isolation? I do not say that all or even many of the delegates of the Constitutional Convention undertook soul-searching efforts, or that they listened to each other for the purpose of spiritual freedom. This group was not a collection of spiritual aspirants. Nevertheless, we can take the "miracle" of the formation of the Constitution as a great external sign of a process that can take place when individuals come together

to seek understanding and right action. If government is the art form of America, if the Constitution is the masterpiece of this art, then there must lie within the process of its formation lessons that we shall need to learn. . . . *The art of the future is the group.* The intelligence and benevolence we need can only come from the group, from associations of men and women seeking to struggle against the impulses of illusion, egoism, and fear.⁷

Let us skip to the end of the convention. Needleman recounts the final movement in the symphony of actions, reactions, secret meetings, compromises, agreements, lapses of judgment, and self-interest that shaped the final document. Franklin himself, old and wise and respected by his colleagues, had been rebuffed in many of his key positions. He argued for and lost in his advocacy for proportional representation based on state population. Fearing corruption, he lost in his argument against salaries for the president and members of Congress. An abolitionist, he accepted that the issue of slavery would not be confronted, leaving a wounding that future generations would have to solve. How then to balance the distaste of parts while believing in the necessity of the whole?

On September 17, 1787, the last day of the Constitutional Convention, Franklin composed a speech that sought to rally those still on the fence regarding its signing. Franklin, whose formal education never went beyond penmanship, had taught himself to pay attention to style, organization, and insightfulness. Now, he was putting his lifetime learning together in a final argument for democracy. Franklin was too weak to give the speech himself, so it was read by James Wilson, a fellow Pennsylvanian.

Mr. President,

I confess that I do not entirely approve of this Constitution at present; but, Sir, I am not sure I shall never approve it; for having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged, by better information or fuller considerations, to change my opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore that, the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment of others.⁸

In his final words to the convention, Franklin chose to articulate the one quality that distinguished democracy from past forms of government. This quality was citizens' ability to reach beyond human fallibility and collective foolishness to find wisdom together. To do this, however, required from each of them a certain humility and suspension of certainty. Franklin continued:

Most men, indeed, as well as most sects in religion, think themselves in possession of all truth, and that wherever others differ from them, it is so far error. Steele, a Protestant, in a dedication, tells the Pope, that the only difference between our two churches in their opinions of the certainty of their doctrine, is the Romish Church is *infallible*, and the Church of England is *never in the wrong*. But although many private persons think almost as highly of their own infallibility as that of their sect, few express it so naturally as a certain French Lady, who, in a little dispute with her sister, said, "But I meet with nobody but myself that is always in the right." *"Je ne trouve que moi qui aie toujours raison."*

In these sentiments, Sir, I agree to this Constitution, with all its faults—if they are such; because I think a general government necessary for us, and there is no form of government but what may be a blessing to the people, if well administered; and I believe, farther, that this is likely to be well administered for a course of years, and can only end in despotism, as other forms have done before it, when the people shall become so corrupted as to need despotic government, being incapable of any other.⁹



COMMENTARY

Franklin articulates with wit and alacrity of association the reason why suspension of certainty is needed—taking on the church in Rome and the Church of England with a twist of French arrogance thrown in. In just a few words, he is able to equate divine infallibility with the very human inclination to feel “always in the right.” He asserts that infallibility is the mark of the past and the antithesis of what democracy requires. The group, he warns, is in jeopardy whenever one individual or one subgroup believes it must always have the right idea or single solution. His words function as a bridge taking us from past reliance on certainty to the threshold of a new kind of human association based on listening and cooperation—even under the most difficult challenges. This is the legacy we still celebrate to this day.

Through Needleman's eyes we see some of Franklin's ability to provoke new understanding and feel in Franklin's words his power to understand people and situations. He understands that government is a necessary but external structure that will thrive when well administered and wither when the collective is no longer capable of maintaining it. He sees how it is possible, through seeking to serve a greater aim, to consciously struggle with attachment to one's opinions—a quality Needleman calls the “metaphysics of democracy.” He is able to elevate and reframe even the most petty of disagreements to its place in a larger conversation about the future of our collective efforts.

Democracy is a fragile agreement that depends on the art and power of the group and on our capacity to allow reason to enter us communally. Genuine democracy is the power that comes from listening each other into a new being, a collective being that is as conscious of its wholeness as of its differences. Franklin's words foreshadow the dialogic writings of the philosopher Martin Buber and the physicist David Bohm, who asserted, “Real dialogue is where two or more people become willing to suspend their certainty in each other's presence.”

The power of collective wisdom issues forth from listening, beyond surface concerns, to the deeper well of wisdom that lies in each of us and among us. From this struggle to hear each other is the preparation for a transcendent understanding. It is a cultivation of what has genuine significance for each other and the group as a collective entity. It is a knowledge that joins the search for greater purpose with a spiritual intelligence that derives from humility. *And have*

we now forgotten that powerful Friend? Franklin asked. *Or do we imagine we no longer need its assistance?* And it can grow from the most precarious and rocky of circumstances.

The story of the Constitutional Convention holds lessons for what is necessary to prepare for collective wisdom's emergence: an ability to listen beyond the partisan position or particular loyalties of the moment. Wisdom's emergence in groups depends on a delicate weaving back and forth between our ability to suspend personal certainty and our competence to hear a quiet voice from a source deep within us. Needleman's account reminds us of an actual event that holds symbolic significance:

Between, or rather above, these two opposite poles—the sentimental and the cynical views of our history—there hovers the element of symbolic reality, of an actual process that took place in actual history which yet at the same time has about it the fragrance of a process that could lead all men and women toward the moral power and intelligence we are searching for. This kind of process took place during the blistering Philadelphia summer—the process of a group of ordinary human beings *listening* to each other, not as people usually listen, but as people *can* listen: from a source deeper in themselves which opens them not only to the thoughts and views of their neighbor, but to something wiser and finer in themselves and, perhaps, in the universe itself.¹⁰

“Never forget that the true character of our nation is revealed not during times of comfort and ease, but by the right we do when the moment is hard. I ask you to help me reveal that character once more, and together, we can carry forward as one nation, and one people, the legacy of our forefathers that we celebrate today.”

—Barack Obama, forty-fourth President of the United States,
in a pre-inaugural address.¹¹

WELCOMING ALL THAT IS ARISING

The willingness to suspend personal certainty on behalf of a greater collective benefit is something we can all learn to practice and embody. So too is the stance of *welcoming all that is arising*. The need to open to guidance from the unexpected and sometimes disturbing elements of group life distinguishes collective wisdom from many group processes. Intentionally or not, leaders often attempt to control or contain the unexpected elements of group life. Welcoming all that is arising suggests a capacity to accept, and even welcome, the sudden obstacle or seeming distraction. As with the stance of trusting in the transcendent, we are reminded to be open to the larger meaning that is possible for us when we step back from the discomfort of the moment. How we accomplish this depends on a certain level of inner preparation and conscious awareness that events are unfolding around us, whether we like it or not.

We had the opportunity to talk with Lauren Artress, Episcopal priest and founder and creative director of Veriditas, a nonprofit organization dedicated to introducing people to the healing, meditative powers of the labyrinth. The labyrinth is an ancient pattern found in many cultures around the world. Inscribed on pottery, tablets, and tiles that date as far back as five thousand years, the labyrinth design is based on spirals and circles mirrored in nature. In Native American tradition, the labyrinth has similarities to the Medicine Wheel; in mystical Judaism, the Kabala; in Celtic traditions, the never-ending circle. A feature common to labyrinths is that they have one path that winds circuitously to

the center. The labyrinth represents a different way of seeing, a different kind of perception altogether—one that values and makes good use of symbolic meaning and metaphor.

Artress, who is the author of three books on the labyrinth and is identified with launching what is now known as the Labyrinth Movement, recounted to us the story of a quite unexpected and potentially disruptive experience. Her story sheds light on how the unplanned moment becomes preparation for deepening insight and collective awareness.



Encountering the Stranger

*From an interview with Lauren Artress, founder
and creative director of Veriditas¹²*

Lauren Artress:

THIS IS A STORY ABOUT a time we were doing labyrinth work at a monastery in Pecos, New Mexico. The program we do is called the Theater of Enlightenment. As part of the program, we traditionally invite the larger community, beyond the group we are working with, to join us. We offer a lecture about the labyrinth on Friday afternoon and then everyone is invited, in the evening, to join us for a labyrinth walk. In this case, we were in a relatively small room with a labyrinth design pattern on the floor and many people. And because of the participation of the monastery, many of the people were dressed in their white robes—creating a charismatic, fascinating quality.

Well, into this evening's walk comes a big, tall, rather good-looking man in his early forties—and I thought, "Hmm, he

hasn't had instruction with the labyrinth." So I gave him my short thirty-second talk about the labyrinth and how the ritual entails walking along the path of the labyrinth from the entrance to its center—and then sitting or standing in the center for as long as you want, and then following the same path out.

And he seemed to me sort of surly, with a kind of "What the hell is this thing?" attitude. He walked into the labyrinth without following the path and I thought to myself, "Well, that's fine, he didn't follow the path." And then all of a sudden, I start hearing sobs. I look around to see what is happening—it's the man who came in, and he's racked with sobs, he's fallen to his knees, lying down on the labyrinth, sobbing and sobbing and sobbing.

This is not what's expected, or so it might seem. But you're holding a space for the consciousness of the group, and you're making sure that people are dealing with it. I'm not going to say, "Excuse me—you're interrupting the labyrinth walk." Instead, you go with whatever is, trusting whatever is arising. And whatever mystery is going to live itself out.

I think that's part of the issue about the magic and the mystery of the group—it is that you have to be really secure in yourself, to let whatever's going to live out, live out. And I call it holding the space, but you're holding your inner space too.

The man remains lying on the labyrinth for some twenty minutes and finally gets up. There is a sense of relief. He starts walking toward the exit and then suddenly turns around and goes right smack dab into the center of the labyrinth, crumples to the floor, and starts sobbing again, louder than before.

And then a group of people near him made a judgment, and it's a judgment that came from the group and from within

the container of the labyrinth. It was a decision to begin a ritual for healing called “laying of hands.” And they worked with him physically and energetically as he cried for another forty-five minutes or so until he reached the end of his pain for that time.

During that time, no one else in the community could go into the center. They may have reached the center, but it was jammed with people and this man sobbing. During this process, I didn’t do anything to stop what was happening. I just let it be, let the community handle it, which is part of holding the whole space. I learned later that he came because of a dream, was given guidance in his dream to come to this monastery.

And so what does this have to do with the community, with our group in the room? Here we are, with this man definitely in a crisis. And then it began to reveal itself, its meaning for the monastery, for the larger community, and the larger healing that is needed. Its significance is for everybody—what part of ourselves is racked in pain? What part of ourselves needs to come apart? Or when in our life have we been in that place? See, everything can be used.

One way I understood it was through Scripture—the “welcoming of the stranger.” Now, we could have said, “Excuse me, you’re not part of this program.” Or, “Excuse me, you’re being too emotional.” All of the silly things that could have happened if you don’t understand that there’s mystery being lived out here.

Everyone was able to get something from this experience. To do this, however, you need to keep the energy unblocked, to clear the path for people to be able to understand its meaning in their own lives.

The stranger could be archetypal. There’s a making room, even when you have the view, “Hey, this was my labyrinth walk;

excuse me, what are you doing here?” But metaphorically, I think it’s about allowing, making room, receiving. Dropping your own agenda and seeing that there’s a bigger agenda being lived out.



COMMENTARY

At one key moment of the story, Artress pointed to the wisdom that emerged in the group during the labyrinth ritual experience—the decision to turn toward healing the man in the center of the circle. As she says, this is not something that can be directed from outside. Her role was to support what was unfolding and to trust that the labyrinth functioned as a container on behalf of wholeness and healing.

The stranger, or outsider, was the metaphoric lens through which she understood the unexpected entering the group. The disturbance created by the man who crumpled to the floor became a symbolic flash point allowing the members of the monastery to see their own mission to serve the larger community, including possibly their own internal needs for healing.

Artress is very clear about the nature of *welcoming all that is arising*. The emergence of collective wisdom is associated with respect for an underlying connectedness that reveals itself over time. You cannot intervene by simply saying this should not be happening. She demonstrated a willingness to

be in the presence of the unknown and to trust that positive growth could be an outcome. In doing so, she furthered the group's capacity for resilience, for overcoming obstacles and improvising what was needed. No one and no group can be immune to unforeseen events, but we can learn to embrace the unexpected as opportunities for deepening our sense of larger purpose and enhancing our clarity.

Two complementary elements of Artress's story are particularly instructive in preparing for collective wisdom's emergence. First is the element of design. Design is an essential component for allowing groups to interact in ways that support meaning and purpose. Although some might think of design as how something looks, it is more often about how something works. The labyrinth is a design for healing and meditation, and is particularly a good tool for groups because of the symbolic nature of walking a path together. How you hurry forward or slow down as you individually walk the labyrinth affects everyone else. In an analogous way, the design of social processes and organizational structures also carries meaning regarding how people will interact with each other. Design helps determine how well we will recognize our interconnectedness, and it is an essential component of preparing groups for wisdom's emergence.

People need to participate in designs that are thoughtful and structures that support the task of the group, but they need something else as well. The stance of welcoming all that arises is a commitment to the spontaneity of group experience. This is the complementary element that must be present for groups to create a greater likelihood of collective wisdom emerging.

Although it may seem paradoxical, we can prepare for spontaneity. We do this simply by not imposing on the group our outlook about how something should happen or how something could have been done better. As Artress described it, saying to the person sobbing that he is being too emotional is not helping the group to discover what is possible. Instead, she asks how this spontaneous occurrence might contribute to a better understanding of the group's situation. We are in the realm of group improvisation, which is exactly how Artress understood her own role to serve what was spontaneously unfolding. It was only by reminding herself that she was guardian of the collective experience that she had the restraint to not intervene.

The stance of welcoming all that arises is an attitude and bearing that demonstrates positive regard for the unknown and unexpected. It is fundamental skill in any collective process because predictably the unexpected happens. Collective wisdom is far more likely to arise when individuals and groups can embrace events rather than recoil in fear or anger. This does not imply a posture of forced delight but a thoughtfulness and understanding that every outer event has an inner meaning and orientation. This is what Lauren Artress modeled so well through her inner preparation and understanding of symbol and metaphor. When we prepare ourselves to follow where the unexpected leads, we are better able to develop the resourcefulness necessary for life's challenges.

SEEING WHOLE SYSTEMS/SEEKING
DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

The stance of *seeing whole systems/seeking diverse perspectives* shifts our attention from the individual to the group. In the earlier stories by Paula Underwood, Jacob Needleman, and Lauren Artress, we saw elements of this stance throughout their descriptions. Underwood demonstrated how to create empathic connections through deep listening. Needleman's portrait of the creation of the U.S. Constitution revealed how Franklin could see bickering factions but also a group birthing a historic design for democracy. Artress recognized how a leader can design an event and still embrace the unplanned element, seeing diversity in the form of a stranger who is still understood as part of the larger system.

Each group member sees the world in a unique way, but all the information is valuable and part of the whole. Sometimes this is uncomfortable because diverse views and fundamentally different approaches conflict and constrain a group's ability to adapt and change. Nonetheless, these diverse perspectives matter because they reveal more of the whole system. Committing to this stance requires patience and persistence. It also requires us to pay attention to how we pay attention. In other words, if we look for what separates us from each other and what problems groups have, we will certainly find it. If we look for what unites us and what is already working in a group, we can find that too. Learning to notice how and what we pay attention to matters. It is one of the keys for increasing the likelihood that collective wisdom will emerge.

A number of years ago, business author David Dorsey interviewed Jerry Sternin about his time in Vietnam, where he had done remarkable work involving childhood malnutrition in rural Vietnamese villages. The article that came from their collaboration, published in *Fast Company*, further defined Sternin's ideas about a systemic intervention called *positive deviance*. It is an illustration of how paying attention to a whole system and seeking out what is working can make a huge difference.



Positive Deviance

*Based on a story of Jerry Sternin's work with
childhood malnutrition in Vietnam*¹³

AT THE INVITATION OF THE Vietnamese government, Jerry Sternin went to Vietnam in the 1990s to work on eradicating malnutrition in the country's villages as a staff member of Save the Children. Building on research by Marian Zeitlin of Tufts University, he held the kernel of an idea and a question: Is it possible to find out why some children might be healthy? This was a very odd question when everyone knew their mission was to fight the problem of malnutrition against near-hopeless odds, with its attendant and well-documented poverty, poor sanitation, limited food distribution systems, lack of access to fresh water, and political bureaucracy. Who in their right mind would ask if anyone was well nourished?

Well, that is exactly what Sternin did. He stood in front of a group of women from a local village who had been trained to chart the growth of the children by age and weight. He asked them if there were any children under three who were from poor families but well nourished. He did not know what would happen next. The answer was like the call and response of birds singing to each other. “*Co* [pronounced “Gah,” meaning “Yes”], *co, co.*”

“You mean it’s possible today in this village for a very poor family to have a well-nourished child?” Sternin asked them.

“*Co, co, co*” was the answer. And then all of them went off to see for themselves. “That’s how it starts,” said Sternin: The change began with the impulse to see what was happening before anything changed.

What they found was that the families that maintained healthy children adopted, in slight but meaningful ways, habits that were modifications of the norm. The norm in most villages was that families, when faced with limited food, would reduce their number of meals in direct proportion to the amount of available food. If there was plenty of food, they’d eat three or four times a day. When there was less food, twice a day; and with very limited food, just once a day. Under these circumstances, families were almost always malnourished.

Contrasting with this pattern, the healthy families ensured that children ate small portions many times a day. They went into the rice paddies to collect tiny shrimp that could be mixed in with the rice, and into the fields to collect sweet potato greens, a food that many looked down upon. They displayed directive and nurturing behaviors, such as making sure

the children actually ate the food. And they went against the conventional wisdom by feeding even the children with diarrhea, small portions but consistently. Sternin began to grasp the importance of being specific, understanding exactly what made the outcome work. He was learning from the part of the system that was adapting and becoming successful.

“In every community, organization, or social group,” wrote David Dorsey about the meaning of Sternin’s findings, “there are individuals whose exceptional behaviors or practices enable them to get better results. . . . Without realizing it, these ‘positive deviants’ have discovered the path to success for the entire group—that is, if their secrets can be analyzed, isolated, and then shared with the rest of the group.” For example, the conventional wisdom was to limit feedings, avoid certain foods for reasons of status, and eliminate feedings during bouts of diarrhea. Yet an alternative behavior, found within the group itself, held the possibility of survival.

Sternin wisely chose not to overemphasize the success of the few but rather to treat them as scouts of the collective. The solutions that were necessary could not be reduced to a formula and taught to others by experts. Instead, those who practiced successfully had to be the ones to teach the new behaviors. The guiding question for the methodology was how to enlarge the network. How do you amplify successful behaviors by making the group the “guru” of change?

The emphasis was on productive relationships and encouraging new behavior. As an illustration of this approach, a health volunteer would invite eight to ten mothers into her home to participate in and learn about medicinal food preparation. In order to come, the mothers would have to collect tiny

shrimp and crab and the sweet potato greens. For two weeks they prepared food together and then continued the practices within their own homes. In cases where families did not have success, they were welcomed back for another two-week period. The bias was always toward action, calibration, and remaining true to the actual circumstances of the situation.

“We call conventional wisdom about malnutrition,” Sternin reflected about his learning, “true but useless.” He feels the same way about most organizational change strategies that rely on outside expertise alone. “The traditional model for social and organizational change doesn’t work. It never has. You can’t bring permanent solutions in from outside.” Instead, Sternin works from inside the system, learning what are considered the acceptable behaviors of the majority while continually seeking the “positive deviants” who represent an alternative solution.

When Sternin and his wife went to Vietnam, they were novices, “like orphans at the airport when we arrived. . . . We had no idea what we were going to do.” Without presumption of an answer, they were open to seeking new perspectives and disciplined about paying attention to what was already working. They knew they had to depend on the people closest to the situation and to respect that an appropriate response to malnutrition was already present in the village. From this orientation, they could listen with a kind of beginner’s mind, curious and willing to ask lots of questions. “Our attitude was, Oh my God, what’s going to happen?”



COMMENTARY

What happened was remarkable. There was a continual willingness to experiment, adjust, track results, and celebrate successes. The charting of children's growth by age and weight became common practice. The expectation that malnourishment could not be impacted was confronted, challenged, and altered by demonstrating success with quantitative studies. The work that began with 4 villages extended to 14 and ultimately to 265. In all, the work begun in Vietnam has touched over 2.2 million people and has been extended to over twenty countries.

Sternin's ideas demonstrate the value of directing attention to what is already working in groups, revealing a wisdom found through collective discovery and cooperative learning. The sound judgment cultivated in one part of the system can then be amplified through a larger network of individuals, through teams, and across communities of shared interest. Sternin discovered the immense power of the collective by inviting people to discover replicable aspects of solutions that mattered to them, rather than codifying protocols, enforcing norms from above, or trying to duplicate best practices from other villages.

The stance of seeing whole systems and seeking diverse perspectives is a commitment of inquiry and a willingness to suspend the conventional wisdom for new possibilities. The answers are available to us if we know how to turn our attention to those who already embody some part of the solution. Committing to this stance requires us to practice what the business writer Dorsey called Sternin's "beginner's mind."

At its most basic, it is the readiness to listen and ask lots of questions.

Collective wisdom is more likely to arise when we do not see ourselves as experts separated from others. We may bring expertise to a group, but groups develop the know-how they need when they make discoveries for themselves. The Vietnamese women, for example, whose growth and weight charts pointed to families with healthy children could not be held back from learning more. The information they discovered was then amplified by more experiments, more data collection, and recruiting of new followers. The role of individuals is to further the efforts of the group by constantly seeking to encourage new behavior—tapping into the extraordinary power for innovation and adaptation already present in groups and communities.

TAKING A STANCE ON BEHALF OF COLLECTIVE WISDOM

*The meaning of life is not a fact to be discovered,
but a choice that you make about the way you live.*

—Hilda Bernstein, South African activist

The power of collective wisdom is evidenced by what is accomplished. Are the decisions we make in accordance with deeper values? Have we made room for the opinions of others in order to find shared understanding? Do we inquire about the larger system by seeking diverse perspectives? How well do we welcome outsiders into our group? When dissent

arises, can we listen well and seek common ground? What is done to find constructive possibilities when the conventional wisdom tells us not to bother? The short answer for how best to prepare for collective wisdom is to take a stance. Our choices, commitments, and convictions define the meaning of our lives and prepare us to be with others in ways that deny or amplify wisdom.

What aids collective wisdom's emergence is an awareness and respect for our underlying connectedness—to each other, nature, and spirit. As revealed through these stories from an Iroquois clan mother, a Western philosopher, a spiritual teacher, and a social activist, collective wisdom is a culmination of group behaviors. We prepare for collective wisdom by the quality of how we listen, by using our logical mind and our symbol-making intelligence, by valuing the future in the choices we make in the moment. We prepare for collective wisdom when we refrain from hardening our opposition to others and reframe our circumstances. The choices we make are embodied in the stances we take. It matters that we think deeply about the design of how people interact with each other: the physical structure, norms, and aspirations we create and hold together. It matters that there is space for spontaneity, caring behaviors, and ways to esteem others.

We are conduits for collective wisdom to arise when as individuals and groups we learn to pay attention to how we pay attention. What parts of a larger system do we see and not see? How skilled are we in methods of inquiry? Do we notice what is working? We have the ability to question and reflect on our own as well as collective behavior, and this has proved to be an extraordinary advantage.

A theme weaves through these stories of an indigenous people learning together over ten thousand years, a document for democracy that has lasted over two centuries, a design that remains vital after five thousand years. The theme is that human beings have knowledge of themselves as individuals and as members of a collective. We have the ability to reflect personally, to bend back the gaze of our own mind and observe our own thoughts, just as we can observe collectively the behavior of a group while still a member of it. We can, though never without struggle, transcend our habitual behaviors. We can innovate when necessary and alter our collective direction as a group, a nation, a human species. The stances we take define us and provide us with meaning.

If we step back from any one particular stance, we can also glimpse a larger pattern. The stances we create for ourselves—the internal perspectives we choose and the external actions we take—arise from our way of looking at the world. How we look at the world matters. How we observe and understand our own worldview matters.

If we see a world of pure chance and limited resources, of hostile enemies and heartless human actions, then the stances we discuss in this chapter, such as deep listening, seeking diverse perspectives, welcoming all that is arising, and trusting in the transcendent, become mottos without meaning. We are left to fend for ourselves. Our thoughts are directed from the outside by immediate threats and from the inside by fear, anger, and the desire to protect ourselves or to dominate others. It is a worldview unfortunately all too familiar.

The stances that support the emergence of collective wisdom arise from a far different framework of beliefs. It is a

worldview of intimate connectivity, of shared power as our greatest adaptive advantage, and of a regard for individual genius not separate from collective accomplishment. It is this subject of worldview, with its relationship to collective wisdom, that we look at next.

An Invitation

If you enjoyed *The Power of Collective Wisdom* and are interested in the ideas of this book and/or meeting others who share this interest, visit our Web site at

www.thepowerofcollectivewisdom.com

Colleagues

Colleagues with Interviews, Correspondence,
and Published Excerpts in this Book
(Listed in Order of Appearance)

1. Mark Gerzon
2. Angeles Arrien
3. Linda Monte
4. Carol Frenier
5. Craig Hamilton
6. Meg Wheatley
7. Peter Senge
8. Beth Jandernoa
9. Juanita Brown
10. Kate Regan
11. Paula Underwood
12. Jacob Needleman
13. Lauren Artress
14. Robert Kenny
15. Parker Palmer
16. David Potter
17. John Paul Lederach
18. David Whyte
19. Renee Levi
20. Tom Hurley
21. Barbara Nussbaum
22. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi
23. Mona Afary
24. Daniel Goleman

Notes

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About the Collective Wisdom Initiative

People are deeply nourished by the process of creating wholeness.

—Christopher Alexander, *The Luminous Ground: The Nature of Order*

The Collective Wisdom Initiative is an informal network of practitioners and scholars exploring an emerging field of study and practice called by its founding stewards *collective wisdom*. Initially funded through support from the Fetzer Institute in 2000, the CWI is based on the conviction that groups have the potential to be sources of extraordinary creative power, incubators of innovative ideas, and vehicles for social healing. During its initial years, the CWI was a leader in cultivating relationships across diverse disciplines, commissioning a series of groundbreaking writings, and interviewing thought leaders. The emphasis from the beginning was on the active, dynamic nature of *initiative*. There was evidence of a compelling force that was motivating people to come together in meaningful and collective ways to address social needs and concerns. In 2002, a Web site was created to make visible this emerging field.

The Web site has evolved with contributions of hundreds of people and organizations. Containing the equivalent of over two thousand pages of content, audio and video clips, and hundreds of links, the CWI is consistently number

one on Google's list of over nine hundred thousand related sites. Ten "doorways" lead the visitor through the field of collective wisdom, including multimedia presentations; research from our network; maps of people, places, and events taking place around the world; and a variety of methodologies and applications.

Many of our visitors have created self-portraits of their interest and involvement in the field of collective wisdom.

We invite you to become a part of this growing social movement by visiting our site and profiling your interest in collective wisdom. Visit www.collectivewisdominitiative.org.

About the Fetzer Institute

A private foundation located in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the Fetzer Institute has given significant support to the Collective Wisdom Initiative and much of the research underlying this book. The institute's mission, to foster awareness of the power of love and forgiveness, rests on its conviction that efforts to address the critical issues facing the world must go beyond political, social, and economic strategies to their psychological and spiritual roots. The institute applies both science and spirituality to better understand the foundations of love and forgiveness, creates opportunities to bring love and forgiveness into the heart of individual and community life, and shares compelling stories that inspire others to embrace these practices. For more information, visit www.fetzer.org.



Fetzer Institute

About the Cover Image

The cover image of the spiral shell, a simple sea snail, was chosen because it speaks in three metaphorical ways to this book's themes. First, the spiral is a dynamic pattern occurring at multiple levels in nature—from the smallest chromosomes to the largest galaxies. Within many cultures, as well as within the realm of science, the spiral has come to represent growth and evolution. Similarly, collective wisdom is a naturally occurring phenomenon, revealing itself within multiple levels of society (from families to nation states), that is critical to our social growth and evolution.

Second, if we imagine navigating the spiral cavity of a shell, the path would likely be long, dark, and circuitous, with few navigational markers. Our paths forward as families, organizations, and nations can often feel similar, leading us to wonder whether we're spiraling in one direction toward wisdom or in the opposite direction toward folly. The best groups, as described in this book, develop techniques and structures for navigating away from folly and toward wisdom.

Finally, a key indicator that groups are headed in the direction of wisdom is a feeling of aliveness, coherence, simplicity, beauty—even luminousness. Our cover image embodies and radiates these same qualities that are present with collective wisdom.

In these volatile and challenging times, may the image of the humble but elegant sea snail serve as a symbol for how we might best tap our natural collective capacity and navigate our way toward greater coherence, growth, and wisdom.

About the Authors



Alan Briskin is author of the award-winning book *The Stirring of Soul in the Workplace* and coauthor of *Daily Miracles*, which earned the *American Journal of Nursing's* Book of the Year award in the category of Public Interest and Creative Works. He is coauthor of *Bringing Your Soul to Work: An Everyday Practice*. Alan is a pioneer in the field of organizational learning and co-founder of the Collective Wisdom Initiative.

His work with groups and collectives extends back to the early 1970s, when he was part of an international community in Israel founded on the principles of the communal

kibbutz. As an educator, he contributed to the design of schools based on experiential learning and was the director of education for the Vermont group home that became the model for deinstitutionalization of confined youth. His interest in alternative educational settings continued for over ten years when he was the principal consultant to the George Lucas Educational Foundation.

As a health care consultant, he was a founding member of the Relationship Centered Care Network and developed programs at Kaiser Permanente for practicing physicians to deepen their communication skills with patients. He has continued for the past twenty years as a coach and mentor for physician and nurse leaders as well as an organizational consultant to executive teams, businesses, and nonprofit organizations. He serves as an adjunct faculty member at Saybrook Graduate School, where he helped design its doctoral program in organizational systems.

In corporate and conference settings, Alan has given keynotes and conducted workshops on collective wisdom throughout the United States, as well as in Canada, England, and South Africa. He has a doctorate in organizational behavior from the Wright Institute in Berkeley, California, and is a professional associate of the Grubb Institute in London. Alan lives with his wife, Jane, in Oakland, California. They have a son in college.

Visit his Web site at www.alanbriskin.com.

Sheryl Erickson has been principal investigator for the Collective Wisdom Initiative since 2000, seeking to articulate a field of study and practice now identified as that of collective wisdom.

In the late 1970s, her work was committed to creating community-based programs for low-income children and families, Head Start preschool education, and Follow Through innovative elementary education. For more than a decade, she served as a child development consultant, program evaluator, curriculum designer, and regional director of field evaluation teams.

In the mid-1980s, Sheryl transitioned from the public sector to working primarily in business with a focus on leadership development and organizational change. She was liaison for executive leadership development with Procter & Gamble (through Innovation Associates' Leadership and Mastery program), then convener and advocate for what would become a field of practice identified as organizational learning. She was instrumental in the marketing and visibility of Peter Senge's seminal management book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*.

With Peter Senge and an international group of practitioners, Sheryl convened the historic Bretton Woods Gathering of 1994, an innovative conference that was instrumental in catalyzing the organizational learning field. This led her to an extended period of inquiry into individual learning modalities and how groups learn and cocreate, during which she offered small group weekend explorations, online conversations, virtual cocreation projects, and large innovative

gatherings. She has recently undertaken a research initiative, the Powers of Place Collaborative, looking at the relationship of place and environment to collective transformative experience.

Sheryl has an MS in human development (University of Maryland), an MA in urban elementary education (Simmons College), and an ABD in curriculum instruction and design (Boston University). She lives with her husband, Martin Fuchs, and two daughters in Massachusetts.

John Ott has designed and led successful collective change efforts for almost thirty years. He has worked with cities, counties, and large human services systems, designing and leading participatory budget processes to resolve gaping deficits. He designed and led the initial community change processes at the heart of Smart Start, a statewide initiative in North Carolina designed to ensure that every child begins kindergarten healthy and ready to succeed.

At the core of his work is a commitment to help diverse groups of people, often who have profound and contentious disagreements, learn how to create spaces of collective discernment and right action.

More recently, he has worked with mental health systems across California, bringing policy makers and service providers together with people who receive services, their families, and local community leaders to transform how mental health departments help communities promote the well-being of their members.

With his wife and partner, Rose Pinard, John led an organizational spirituality initiative funded by the Angell

Foundation. Partnering with a wide array of nonprofits, Rose and John worked to translate spiritual concepts and practices into frameworks that could help the organizations creatively address some of their most pressing challenges.

John began his work with groups as a community organizer, helping residents of communities with few economic resources to build relationships of trust and common values, discern their collective voice, and claim their power to effect change.

John holds a JD from Stanford University. He has been a lecturer of public policy studies at Duke University, helping launch the Hart Leadership Program there and serving as associate director from 1985 to 1989.

He was part of the Collective Wisdom Initiative from its earliest days and is one of the authors of *Centered on the Edge*, an early book about collective wisdom that was funded by the Fetzer Institute.

Tom Callanan is a senior advisor and former program officer at the Fetzer Institute, where he helped to cofound the Collective Wisdom Initiative (CWI) in 2000. During his time as program officer, CWI informed the projects in his portfolio with the notion that it's possible to convene groups to create greater impact than could be accomplished by anyone alone. Through his work with the institute, Tom has helped to establish a number of internationally recognized initiatives, including the following:

We Speak as One: Twelve Nobel Laureates Share Their Vision for Peace: The result of a three-year project that engaged

peacemakers in developing a unified moral and spiritual voice. The laureates have since issued a global call to action based on this project. See the book and visit www.peacejam.org.

The Seasons Fund for Social Transformation: A dozen U.S. foundations are combining resources and developing shared strategies for supporting the use of personal awareness and leadership practices by those working with grassroots community change. Visit www.seasonsfund.org.

The Conflict Transformation Collaborative: Peace-building practitioners on the front lines of global conflict situations have created a global action/learning community aimed at bringing greater cooperation, visibility, and resources to the conflict transformation field. Visit www.mediatorsfoundation.org.

The Global Youth Leadership Collaborative: Young nonprofit leaders from a dozen countries are working together to build relationships and establish collaborative efforts across divides of race, class, culture, geography, religion, and nationality. Visit www.yesworld.org.

Tom is also a writer, group process facilitator, and consultant to other foundations and organizations involved in social change work. He is a former journalist, Outward Bound instructor, and mountaineer. He has three children (Bapu, Kaitlin, and Tucker) and lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

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We believe that to truly create a better world, action is needed at all levels—individual, organizational, and societal. At the individual level, our publications help people align their lives with their values and with their aspirations for a better world. At the organizational level, our publications promote progressive leadership and management practices, socially responsible approaches to business, and humane and effective organizations. At the societal level, our publications advance social and economic justice, shared prosperity, sustainability, and new solutions to national and global issues.

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