

Conversation Cafés On The Verge

2002-2003 Annual Report



Creating a positive future begins in human conversation. The simplest and most powerful investment any member of a community or an organization may make in renewal is to begin talking with other people as though the answers mattered. *William Greider*

Executive summary

In excited conversation we have glimpses of the universe, hints of power native to the soul, far-darting lights and shadows of an Andes landscape, such as we can hardly attain in lone meditation. Here are oracles sometimes profusely given, to which the memory goes back in barren hours.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

The Conversation Café Initiative began just 2 years ago, sponsored by the New Road Map Foundation. From a humble beginnings in few neighborhood Seattle cafes, the power of Conversation Cafes continues to take us by surprise. For example, what organization do you know that:

- Has been featured in Reader's Digest and the Utne Reader and the New York Times?
- Works with an annual budget of \$30,000 and has spread to 5 countries and 25 cities in just two years?
- Attracts devoted participants in large corporations as well as community-based grassroots groups?

Started in Seattle with 3 experimental locations in the Summer of 2001, there are now 70 Conversation Cafés internationally. At least 400 hosts have been trained, and teams of hosts have held conversations at major events like The San Francisco and Austin Green Festivals, The Institute of Noetic Sciences 2003 conference, the Bioneers and at large-scale community meetings on current events attracting hundreds of participants. The Readers' Digest, The Seattle Times, The New York Times and Utne Reader have featured articles on the Conversation Cafés as well as a radio interview on Talk of the Nation and a television story on the local NBC affiliate.

A 10-person volunteer Advisory Council has stewarded the growth of the Conversation Café Initiative. With an eye toward maximum empowerment of local hosts, the board has developed a lofty purpose, guiding principles and practical strategies embodied in a Charter (see page 5).

An open invitation to bring BIG conversations back to life

The board and founders of the CC Initiatives now invite you to share in their story, and to consider becoming a part of this very worthy challenge – bringing BIG conversation back to life. The CC Initiative is on the verge of dramatic growth and development. We know the Conversation Cafes are powerful, positive force for change... ready to take BIG steps forward. See our proposal for the Election 2004 Café Initiative on page 7.

Introduction: The Conversation Cafe story

There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening. *Marshall McLuhan*

ORIGINS

The Cafés arose from the questions, “How can we create a culture of conversation? What is the minimum set of conditions that will allow strangers in public places shift from ‘small talk to BIG TALK?’” We believed that conversation is an antidote to loneliness and social isolation, that it’s democracy in action and that it could counteract the dumbing down of America.

In July 2001, Susan Partnow, Habib Rose and Vicki Robin each began hosting weekly conversations in Cafés to experiment with variations of this theme. Over the summer they developed the basic process and agreements and some of the outreach strategies that form the backbone of the Conversation Cafés. On September 10 they convened a small group to ask, “How could we take this bigger? How can we create a “culture of conversation?” Within a day it was clear that a “culture of conversation” was needed to help American grieve, understand and choose wisely in this frightening new world.

By January 2002, this small team grew to 65 trained hosts, a part-time, temporary coordinator, an exciting website, 24 locations in Seattle for weekly conversations and community launch event that attracted over 200 people and many local celebrities.

EARLY MOMENTUM AND 9/11

From the beginning, we designed the process and materials to spread like a meme, i.e. a friendly virus. We posted all materials on the web for people to download — from the training manual, posters and seed questions for conversations to business cards and calendars. We distilled the riches of dialogue process to barebones to enable anyone to follow simple guidelines and host a deeply meaningful conversation.

If people are going to sit down at a table with strangers, there has to be a seed person, someone who is warm, welcoming, and gets the ball rolling. Hosts don’t have to have facilitation skills – they just have to run the process, watch for drift outside the agreements and end on time. A Conversation Café is like a dinner party where the host just wants the guests to all enjoy themselves.

We now offer bi-monthly host trainings as well as a monthly teleclass (training over the telephone, which is thus accessible to hosts anywhere in the world).

Once trained, the hosts become part of the Host Learning Circle, a rich community of practice that meets periodically to deepen our capacity to host, to build the initiative, to

eat good food and have fun conversations. We also have a listserve where hosts can raise their questions and concerns about happenings at their Cafés, as well as celebrate their successes and track the conversational themes.

In addition to the prime movers and committed group of hosts, we hired a part-time staff person to maintain the web and organize the trainings. New Roadmap Foundation staff put in many hours each week to keep the calendar up to date and to respond to the many inquiries that come via phone and email. The core leadership team evolved to a team of 10, known as the Advisory Board.

Holding Conversation Cafés in Cafés, libraries and bookstores solves several problems most groups have. Cafés are designed to be public places. A large group can just spread out to more tables. The Café serves food and cleans up as part of its design – indeed, participants in the conversation, from the Café owner’s perspective, are customers. Café owners also get free publicity through every flyer we distribute and through the website.

CONVERSATION CAFÉ AGREEMENTS

Six principles guide the conversations:

- Acceptance: Suspend judgment as best you can
- Listening: Respect one another
- Curiosity: Seek to understand rather than persuade
- Diversity: Invite and honor diversity of opinion
- Sincerity: Speak what has heart and meaning
- Brevity: Go for honesty and depth, but don’t go on and on

CONVERSATION CAFÉ PROCESS

The Conversation Cafés adapt two ancient traditions: the talking-stick circle and deep dialogue. Each of the following elements is essential.

- Gather people (up to eight per table), at least one host, a topic*, “talking object,” and time (60-90 minutes). Explain the Process and read the Agreements.
- Round I: Each person says their name and speaks briefly to the topic while holding the talking object; no feedback or response. (It’s okay to pass.)
- Round II: Again with the talking object, each person deepens their own comments, builds on others comments or speaks to what now has meaning.
- Dialogue: Open, spirited conversation. Use the talking object if there is domination, contention, or lack of focus.
- Final Round: With the talking object, each person says briefly what he or she gained from the conversation.

**Topics can be selected by the host, carried-over from prior Conversation Cafe, generated by the participants on the spot or suggested by CC Central for important national events.*

PARTICIPANT PRAISE

Participants report astounding gifts come to them through joining in the conversations. A few common accolades include:

- *We are healing “wounds” in the community without therapy... differences give us strength when we take time to listen to one another*
- *We are moving away-from-apathy-to-action... without promoting a political slant or stripe*
- *We are create powerful learning among participants without a classroom or a curriculum... neighbors are meeting and learning from each other*

See “Strangely Attracted to Conversation Cafes”, “Conversation As a Creative Advance Into Novelty” and various magazine and newspaper articles posted on the web for more insights and reports from participants.

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**Each act of consciousness tends toward something,
is a turning of a person towards something, and has within it,
no matter how latent, some push toward a direction for action. *Rollo May***

Our purpose and principles

Over six months and multiple conversations with hosts spread across North America, the Advisory Board developed a Charter to guide development and growth.

PURPOSE

~ Personal touchstone for participants and justification to the community ~

To promote community, democracy and wisdom world-wide through generating millions of open, respectful public conversations.

PRINCIPLES

~ What we live by – our personal credo and shared values for relating to others ~

During ongoing Conversation Café's and special events, we will use the Conversation Café Agreements & Process and assure:

- **Inclusivity:** Create an inviting climate in which everyone is inspired to speak and listen, and where diverse perspectives may emerge.
- **One host at least – everyone able to host at best:** Ensure that at least one host is present at each Conversation Café gathering – ideally every table has a host.
- **Open access:** Anyone may participate who follows the “rules” (Process, Agreements and Principles). Conversation Café's are open to all, without charge.

During Conversation Cafés (between the opening and closing rounds) and when working with others to support and grow the initiative, we will insist on:

- **What is said cannot be owned by anyone:** Clarify that what is said in the Conversation Café must be considered to be in the public domain. No one at the table nor outside the conversation can claim exclusive ownership of the ideas that emerge.
- **Commercial-free [and agenda-free] zones:** No one may attend primarily to promote or impose a particular agenda, point of view, outcome, solution or cause – or market a product, service or event.
- **No committees:** There will be no political networking, committee formation or action groups.
- **Continuing to push our edges:** Encourage people to become hosts in a wide variety of settings.
- **Empowering hosts:** Provide clear information to all hosts and participants about the mechanics of hosting a Conversation Cafés and the open, inquisitive spirit of hosting.
- **Maintaining integrity and fidelity:** Any event calling itself a Conversation Café must abide by the Conversation Cafe “Process and Agreements” and principles. Borrowing from or altering these is encouraged, but such adaptations should not be called Conversation Cafés.

The by-laws and certificate of incorporation of the New Roadmap Foundation are available upon request. The Advisory Board of the Conversation Café Initiatives meets every other month. We are expanding our Board at the current time.

The opportunity... on the verge

Almost always, the courageous conversation is by definition the one we do not want to have. For each of us, in this season of falling away, at this threshold of history, when the old has gone and we are yet bereft of the new, what is the conversation, that until now, we have refused? *David Whyte*

BASIC OPERATIONS AND MAGIC

The Conversation Cafés (CCs) are on the verge of a breakthrough. From 3 CCs only two years ago there are now 70 in North America (the US and Canada) and new Cafes starting in Brazil, India, Australia and the Philippines. All this has been achieved through strategic yet small actions – a great website, some great PR events and, of course, inspired volunteer hosts.

Nonetheless, growth opportunities we have not pursued fully include:

- q □ Hosting more SuperCafe's with hundreds of participants on topical themes
- q □ Introducing CCs at more festival events where many folks can be trained as hosts
- Hosting top-notch trainings and support for both new and experienced hosts
- Growing into more neighborhoods — bringing CCs to a variety of neighborhoods
- Deepening relationship with hosts — recruiting community leaders from near and far
- Extending publicity — distributing flyers and posters, daily newspaper calendars
- Forming more partnerships (e.g., the KCTS "Avoiding Armageddon" series)
- Establishing an ongoing fundraising program
- Creating a Conversation Café board game – "Conversation *out of the box*"
- Advertising on bus signs: "Question of the Week/Month"
- Launching "Instant" SuperCafe's — convene CCs for special times/events at a moment's notice
- Extending CCs into more community organizations: Rotary-type clubs, churches, and conferences
- Expanding all of the above into cities, states and regions beyond Puget Sound
- Supporting a new partnership with the Utne Reader, National Center for Dialogue and Deliberation and the World Café to launch a year-long, multi-city initiative to have 10,000 conversations about our values in America and our role in the world.

To date, we do not have sufficient general funding to respond to the many opportunities above and new possibilities coming our way. By the end of 2004 it is our intention to have more than enough to support the Cafés at the current level – and expand to dozens of cities with hundreds more public Cafés. We are estimating that \$75,000 will be both feasible and sufficient to fund basic operations. Of course, we are far more ambitious...

Reports from the field

**We are what we repeatedly do.
Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit. *Aristotle***

Here are a few reports from hosts across the country.

“Just wanted to relate that the bi-weekly Café here in Missoula is coming along nicely. Tonight we had eleven participants, and quite a rousing discussion on the topic of ‘Fundamentalism-Pro and Con.’ I’ve been low key in my advertising, and there is a nice organic feel to the growth and interest evolving. The group tonight liked the Conversation Week topic of ‘Waging Peace in Perilous Times’ and though we will not stage a special event for Conversation Week, we’ll be doing our bit here as well with our meeting on the 30th. Two aspects of hosting here stand out so far: the lovely dialog between twenty somethings and fifty somethings that occurs more and more often, and the repeated exclamation at the last go-round “it is so delightful to talk to all of you and use my brain again!” as one woman said tonight.”

Marianne Spitzform

“We have at least 5 permanent Cafes now with more upcoming. Our email list is expanding and we attracting people of all ages and various nationalities. We are planning to invite, personally, folks from the over 100 neighborhoods in Louisville to begin to form these Conversation Cafes so that we may create a living democracy in Metro Louisville. I am committed to trying my best to promote a living democracy in Louisville, that is, a democracy where folks do not just vote once every year or two and that’s it, rather they eagerly attend with their neighbors to the issues that effect us all on all levels of concern. I think Conversation Cafes are a model for this type of community growth. And it doesn’t cost money for this most meaningful form of growth.”

John Hartmann, Louisville, KY

“I can’t report on what occurred at the other tables (I’ll forward any insights from the other hosts when I get them), but I had major trepidations when I sat at my table: There was a young couple with a baby (gulp!), a gay couple, with one of the partners visibly disabled (shaking and withdrawn), and an elderly woman—all of them newcomers. By the end of the evening, I “saw” a completely different set of people in front of me. The parents had taken turns getting up to accompany the toddler on his ramblings around the building, but both spoke so cogently about their feelings and offered such good insights that it didn’t matter. The disabled man quickly overcame his shyness and had a lot to say. Throughout, his partner maintained his position that we are all hopelessly alienated. But I also noted a clear change in his body language, and they both gave me a big wave and smiles as they left at the end. The “elderly” lady was spunky, funny, and the best informed of all of us, and also the one who seemed to provide the table with its direction and positive force.”

Trish Rosas, Tucson, AZ

The people and participants

**What is real is you and what is real is me;
but what is really real is the experience of we. *Martin Buber***

**Real generosity toward the future consists
of giving your all to what is present. *Albert Camus***

The people who have come together through Conversation Cafes are committed to conversation, engagement in civic life, and democracy. You will find these characteristics ably reflected in the CC Advisory Board and staff.

Members of the Advisory Board

- ❑ Vicki Robin, author, founder of New Road Map Foundation and Conversation Cafes
- ❑ Susan Partnow, consultant, co-founder of the CC initiative
- ❑ Monica Wood, Alternative to Violence Project trainer
- ❑ Keith McCandless, Consultant, Co-Founder of the Social Invention Group, Seattle
- ❑ Kat Gjovik
- ❑ Joe Leeak
- ❑ Katharine Wismer
- ❑ Lloyd Sieden
- ❑ Margot Adair
- ❑ Michael Kerman

Members of the Staff

- ❑ Claudia McNeill: 10 hours/week administration and responding to inquiries from new and current hosts.
- ❑ Leslie Schneider: 10 hours/week webmistress, print production and distribution manager and host training coordinator.
- ❑ Rhoda Walter: 5 hours/week update and maintain calendar of national conversation Cafés
- ❑ Missing: Fundraiser, PR director, Seattle CC community coordinator, Local and National Host development
- ❑ Vicki Robin: 15 hours/week volunteer Executive Director (resigning to write)

The finances, the shoestring we dance on

**A vivid imagination compels the
whole body to obey. *Aristotle***

Initial start-up funding for the CC Initiative was provided by The New Roadmap Foundation, and personal donations from a few individuals. Many of these individuals also contributed essential services, such as website design, consulting, and PR assistance.

The 2002 & 2003 budget of \$25,000 and \$30,000 (in NRF grants and donations) was adequate to cover basic operations, web site development, infrastructure, part-time staff, and super-Cafes seed money to help ensure that the young organization got off to a strong start.

For 2004, our operating budget is \$75,000 with a \$100,000 campaign for the CC/2004 Election Initiative add-on.

CONVERSATION CAFÉS Financial Report, Jan 1 - Nov 12, 2003

INCOME

Sources other than New Road Map Foundation	\$6,791.00
New Road Map Foundation	\$24,052.73
Total income	\$30,843.73

EXPENSES

Materials	\$2,100.96
Printing / copying	\$1,430.13
Earth balls	\$652.50
Supplies, misc.	\$18.33
Publicity	\$1,095.88
Posting in Seattle / King County	\$200.00
Advertising	\$860.00
Website hosting	\$35.88
Events	\$3,394.33
Palo Alto workshop, Feb 2003 (V Robin & J Brown)	\$727.97
Green Festival, Austin, October 2003	\$1,789.28
Bioneers, October 2003	\$627.08
Green Festival, San Francisco, November 2003	\$250.00
Wages, labor	\$24,252.56
Staff on payroll (7 months $\frac{3}{4}$ time; 3 months $\frac{1}{2}$ time)	\$23,048.56
Rhoda Walter, Café schedule maintenance	\$879.00
Larry Gaffin	\$325.00
Total expenses	\$30,843.73

An invitation to join in the conversation

**I can never be what I ought to be until
you are what you ought to be
and you can never be what you ought
to be until I am what I ought to be.
This is the inter-related structure of reality.
*Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.***

We invite you to join the community as host, a sponsor, a philanthropist, a partner, or simply as a Café participant. The easiest way to join up and get involved is to talk with any of our Advisory Board members or staff.

Telephone and e-mail contact information:

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