

Conversation Cafes

Anne McDonagh

In May, two of us from *Learning Curves* went to a Conversation Café in the World Class Café at St. Clair and Christie. When I told my friends I had gone to a Conversation Café, no one had any idea what I was talking about. I figured that probably most of *Learning Curves*' readers had not heard of this phenomenon either and that they might be very interested. What follows is our experience plus a little history of Conversation Cafes in North America. We have also included a list of some of the Conversation Cafes in Toronto.

The group at the World Class Bakers café meets every other Wednesday from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. When we arrived at 7 p.m. on a Wednesday night, we were introduced to the three or four who had already arrived. By the time the conversation began about eight people, men and women, young and not-so-young, were present, and the six guiding principles had been explained to us:

- **Suspend judgment**
- **Listen respectfully to one another (don't interrupt)**
- **Invite and honour diversity of opinion**
- **Be sincere**
- **Don't go on and on**

The topic we discussed was 'Time.' Members take turns facilitating, or leading, the group. The facilitator this evening had prepared a history of how the human race has measured time and philosophized upon it. She also had a number of quotations. My favourite was that *we had to invent time so that everything wouldn't happen at once.*

The discussion was wide-ranging and thought-provoking. We debated whether the 'past' exists or not. Those of us who concluded that the 'past' does not exist were left with the concept that only 'now' exists. There were many more ideas

tossed around, all listened to with respect. No one tried to push his or her point of view, and everyone seemed 'real.' All in all it was a most enjoyable and stimulating evening. I thought about 'time' a lot over the next few days.

Conversation Cafes have grown up across the planet in the past few years. The one we attended belongs to a North American network called Socrates Cafes. Their purpose is to get strangers talking to each other about big ideas in public places, to combat the social isolation and loneliness of big cities and to create a culture of conversation. The premise is that people talking about ideas will strengthen democracy and promote a more thoughtful and informed society. Besides, Conversation Cafes are fun!

In Toronto alone there are quite a number of Conversation Cafes with many different focuses:

The Socrates Café (the Conversation Café we visited) meets every other Wednesday evening from 7:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. at World Class Bakers, 690 St Clair Ave W. New members are always welcome to join in and discuss pressing philosophical issues such as sacrifice, jealousy and the eternal question of existence. For more information go to socratescafe@mystclair.com

Café Elise Conversation Café meets every Wednesday 673 Spadina Avenue from 5.30 p.m. to 7 p.m. Host Michael Kerman has run Conversation Cafes in Toronto for the last four years. Free, one and all welcome to attend, in this public setting. Contact: Michael Kerman, 416-964-1133 or email mkerman@rogers.com

The Science Centre hosts Café Scientifique normally on the third Saturday of every month at 4 p.m. at the Rivoli Tavern, 332 Queen Street West, a place where you can have a drink and learn about the latest ideas and issues in science and technology in an

informal setting. Check out www.cafescientifique.ca for past topics and details about upcoming events.

Java Knights Conversation Café meets on the last Tuesday evening of every month at the Gladstone Hotel, 1214 Queen Street West at Dufferin. It is a unique monthly west-end Multi-Media Fest launched in January 2006 by **Gay West Community Network** and **AIDS Committee of Toronto**. The media fest is not about AIDS and usually includes a 60 minute-Conversation Café afterwards. The group chooses the topic. For more information phone 416-531-4635. or 416-533-6428. Web information is at www.gladstonehotel.com | **Java Knights**

The Toronto Debating Society is the first and oldest non-university debating club in Toronto. Members meet at 7:30 p.m. every second and fourth Tuesday from September to May and debate topical and interesting resolutions. No debating experience is required and spectators are always welcomed (free of charge). The Debating Society holds its regular meetings on the second floor of Swansea Town Hall. 95 Lavinia Avenue in Toronto's High Park area. For more information phone 392-1954.

Toronto Wilde Chats happens on the first Saturday of every month from 2 p.m. to 3. 30 p.m. at the Ground Level Café, 1340 Queen Street West. Come with an open mind for an afternoon of Socratic discussion. Fair Trade coffee or tea served. Vacillator Michael Pare, 416-533-6428, has been hosting various Philosophy and Conversation Cafes in Toronto Ontario for the last four years.

MAY 2006

