

## Peace Cafe

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Claudia (centre) at an Institute Cafe conversation.

My first day of law school was September 8, 2001. September 11th fell during our orientation week. I was profoundly disappointed that, although we are an innovative law school with a very diverse student population, there were few places to gather as a community to talk about what had happened. We heard whispers about it in the hallways. A few of us who were more invested in the news made some hasty phone calls and figured out what was going on. I remember standing outside of the campus pub, staring through the glass door at the TV screen, waiting for it to open. There was no opportunity to gather and talk about it. There was no support. No one who said, "If you feel like you want to go and find out what's going on, or take a moment, go ahead..." There were other

demonstrations and organizing happening on campus; but at the law school that day, nothing.

This need for community led a group of students to start a Human Rights Collective. One of our key missions was to provide an alternative setting for education and conversation that would encompass as much diversity as possible, both of viewpoints and participants. I helped take on the responsibility for designing monthly public forums.

In June 2002 I attended the Convening Strategic Conversations module at the Shambhala Institute's Summer Program, where I was introduced to the World Café. The Cafés at the Institute, with 300 people simultaneously *sharing* conversations, were very provocative. I wanted to try it. My classmates and I decided to give the Café format a shot.

We hosted our first Café to mark the first anniversary of September 11th and the feedback was positive; people expressed their frustration at feeling silenced by their politicians and manipulated by the media. They really appreciated the Café as a way to speak, to have a voice again. We hosted several other Cafés in that school year, and they were all very successful, but the Café I really want to tell you about was one that happened during the run up to the war in Iraq.

We have an on-line forum that had been dormant but suddenly people started posting about the war in Iraq. Within 10 days there were more than 200 posts. Many of the posts began to degenerate into insults, and an intense positionality became apparent. In the middle of all this I posted an offer to host a Café so that we could diffuse the situation, and meet each other face to face. Although there was initially hesitation, the idea took hold, and with the backing of the Human Rights Collec-

tive, the help of the Student Union president, and many others, we hosted our largest Café ever.

It was a Friday afternoon and about a quarter of the law school student body showed up, an amazing response. They ranged from 20 to 60 years old and included a military officer, an international human rights activist, and Middle Eastern students—including some with family in Iraq, Jewish students, retired persons, and students with family members who were foreign correspondents in the region. In addition to a diverse cross-section of the student body, a number of professors were in attendance, which was very unusual for a student gathering. Many people arrived skeptical, including the Student Union president. Some people came with very entrenched opinions.

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I was very nervous about what would happen, and the hosting team that we had brought together was crucial. Leading up to the Café, we invited anyone interested to gather and help design the event, including the question and the agreements we would use. In our other Cafés we'd used reading material to stimulate people's thinking in advance. This time, we decided just to issue a general invitation to everyone who was coming to let us know if they felt inspired to share a very brief personal story about how the current specter of war was affecting them. Two professors (an immigration scholar and a constitutional scholar), a human rights activist, and the military officer volunteered. The military officer had gotten a *lot* of hostile responses to his postings in the on-line forum. We had to persuade him to come because he had been so maligned by the other students.

The military officer was actually the one who inspired the context that was set for the Café. He said in one of his on-line postings, "Look, regardless of all of our opinions on this, what we can agree on is that ultimately what we want is peace. We just have different views on how to get there." When I heard that I thought, "Aha! If we come at it from that point of view it's not like 'you're a war monger who just wants to wreck everything whereas we love peace and therefore we have some kind of moral high ground'." It broke down the moral rightness and wrongness that people had around their views, and opened up the space for dialogue.

When people arrived we set the tone. First, I asked people to remember a time they'd had a really good conversation—a conversation that made them think, or made them curious or caused a good laugh or a cry. I asked them to share it with a neighbor if they liked—and then to share out what helped that good conversation happen. Then I said that I hoped that in this conversation we could wipe the slate clean from the normal adversarial law school way of talking, and all be aware of the aggressive potential in the room. As a hosting team, we asked the group if they would be willing to honor a few simple agreements—confidentiality, making sure there was space for each person to speak, and trying to listen with respect. Students who had participated in our earlier Cafes took responsibility for sharing these agreements and modeling them at their tables. I also described the basic Café etiquette.

Before we began, someone spoke up and suggested that we take a moment of silence, because people's lives were at stake in this whole conflict. When we did that a real shift occurred in the whole room. The silence, and the small bell that we used to mark the transitions in the Café, lent the event a natural gentleness and pacing.

The military officer was the first of the four volunteers to share their story. He shared

how hurt he'd been when people attacked him, and told of a friend who'd been a UN peacekeeper and seen people dying and not been able to stop it. He had faith that if the military, like UN peacekeepers, were used properly in the service of stopping bloodshed and producing peace there could be real hope. He had tears in his eyes. All the other presentations were like that—very personal and real. We just naturally took a moment of silence after each person spoke to really take in what they were saying, whether or not we agreed with them, to simply appreciate their contribution. By the end, many people in the room were in tears.

We began the three rounds of the Café by continuing with the personal storytelling. We asked people (if they'd like) to share "How have you been personally affected by this war?" After everyone who wanted to had a chance to share, we asked them to continue by reflecting on "Where does peace come into your questions around this conflict? What does peace look like? Where is the law in the process of peace?" In the second round we focused on "What societal and individual ideals are reflected in your roads to/visions of peace?" In the third round we brought it back home by asking "What can you do in your life to work toward peace and to create further dialogue and understanding?"

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There's something in the Café process that enabled people to bring their whole selves to the table. Maybe it's the intimate setting that makes being self-righteous and positional really false. Maybe there's no space for high horses when you're sitting talking together with four people at a table with flowers and candles. Could that be it?

For example, my friend, a serious, academically minded woman, was at one of the tables with three guys. They seemed sympathetic to the war, but were also each conflicted. One man's brother was a foreign correspondent in the Middle East and his personal fears about that came out. Another had traveled around the world and been to Cambodia to the Killing Fields, which had deeply impacted his view of the whole thing. My friend had also been to the Killing Fields. A window opened in the conversation. Everyone at the table was deeply moved by the sharing. Once entrenched positions start to peel away it's very hard to put them back up again. There's a chink in the armor and then as you move to another table and connect with new people you realize that it's happened with everyone else too. It's almost like a collective sign of relief seems to happen in that second round of conversation when you realize that everyone is sitting and actually having a genuine conversation, too.

There were some tables where people would start to raise their voice or some other person couldn't get a word in edgewise.... I mean, it wasn't perfect, of course. But do you know what my friend said? She's the one who'd been at the table with the three guys. She really felt there was a genuine softness that came into the room—a feminine quality to the gathering that she really appreciated, especially in the context of a war situation like the one we were considering in the Café.

When we did the sharing at the end, I'd hoped to hear all these great insights about the nature of peace because I heard them come up at the individual tables. Instead most of the whole group conversation was acknowledging how disrespectful people had been of each other in the web forum and how good it was to have an opportunity to come together in this new way.

I was genuinely inspired by what came out of the Café. Some people went out and collected toys to send to Iraqi children, and although it wasn't only as a result of the Café,

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there were other campaigns that happened as well. Justin, our student body president who had been very skeptical and even wondered in the beginning whether he should just be an observer, wrote me a great letter and said we should use the Café for all of our major student issues. In the end, the legacy of the Café was that, even if their perspectives didn't change, the people in that conversation have a much deeper understanding of why people are the way they are. That day it felt like we were really modeling the kind of world I want to live in.

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Excerpted from the forthcoming book *The World Cafe: Bringing Conversation to Life* (tentative title), to be published by Berrett-Koehler in Spring 2005.

**Claudia Chender** is in her final year of law school at the University of Victoria. Claudia is also a member of the Shambhala Institute's Governing Council. With Juanita Brown and others, she is organizing and co-hosting an inter-generational dialogue that will take place during the 2004 Summer Program, June 11-12.