

How to Host a Book

A Conversation with Juanita Brown and Jane Brunette

D i n a h W a k e f o r d

In a world where speed, technology, mobility, eroding family units, and other social issues have reshaped human relationships and created seemingly insurmountable barriers to meaningful face-to-face communication, there is a growing need for significant dialogue about things that matter. Since the idea of the World Café was born a decade ago in the living room of Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, a global community of practice has evolved around this effective approach to purposeful dialogue.

After ten years of intense and diverse experience with the World Café, Juanita Brown and David Isaacs were invited by publisher Berrett-Koehler to write a book about their process and findings. As they thought about how they might go about it, they asked themselves, What would it be like if, instead of being co-authors, we *hosted* the book, using the same simple principles we use to host World Café conversations? Those principles are (1) clarify the context, (2) create hospitable space, (3) explore questions that matter, (4) connect diverse perspectives, (5) encourage each person's contribution, (6) listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions, and (7) share collective discoveries.

Out of these principles more questions surfaced: How could we create hospitable space to allow collaborators' best thinking and feeling to emerge? What are the questions that matter in this case? How should they be framed? How could we, in a sense, host ourselves as a team as well as other collaborators?

With these tenets and questions in mind, the hosting process began. The core team, including Juanita and David, Jane Brunette and World Café webmaster, Ken Homer, decided they needed members of the larger Café community as key contributors. People who had been involved in the World Café process worldwide would be invited to help.

The first step in hosting the Café community was to find a way to make the structure of the book visible. All key headings were typed up large enough so a small group could see them and were posted on a large wall in Juanita and David's house, with plenty of space to add comments. Soon the wall became an outline of the entire book. As people stopped by or were invited to participate, they contributed their best thinking and seed ideas on post-it notes. The post-it notes could then be arranged, re-arranged, taken down, used, and returned to the wall. The wall became a piece of living art.

For over a year the hosting team gathered reflections and ideas, intentionally hosting several gatherings as well as being surprised by unexpected and important insights from people who just "showed up." At the Shambhala Institute last summer,

Juanita hosted a Café for previous Café hosts, for the purpose of sharing and exploring their experiences. There, Juanita met additional storytellers. She gathered their stories on tape, as a basis for additional in depth conversations about their learnings and discoveries.

So far, a very engaged group of over 100 collaborators has been involved in the hosting of the book, offering World Café stories from settings as diverse as the government of Singapore, the American Society for Quality, a law school in British Columbia, multi-stakeholder gatherings in Mexico and Scandinavia, and “Let’s Talk America,” which is bringing people together across the political spectrum to explore their best hopes for America.

A huge piece of hosting is about listening. As Juanita says, “We are listening in such a way that the larger meaning of the work of the World Café becomes visible. We are listening together for patterns and insights, and harvesting and sharing what we have been discovering. The book-hosting process, just like the Café itself, involves deeply and carefully listening to the multiplicity of contributors. Even on the team, listening to each other is crucial, as we explore the intersections among diverse stories and contributions.

The greatest value of hosting the book has come from the process itself. Jane Brunette reflects, “People have been delighted to help and contribute. We have found so many people around the world that yearn to be in conversations that really matter, and they are excited when they feel they can have a part in a learning process like this. The hosting of the book is allowing members of the global World Café community to be in reflective conversations trying to really bring forward our best understanding of the meaning of this work. We are intrigued by the quality of the learning that we’re doing together as part of the co-evolution of the book.”

Jane feels the biggest learning from hosting this book has been “how important it is to let things unfold in their own time, as they will and not try to control it too much. Every time we tried to get an exact schedule it just created anxiety. When we let it unfold, everything worked out effortlessly. We needed to let the project have its natural, organic process without ignoring it or getting off focus, but also without pushing the river.”

Being part of an emergent process and allowing what was revealing itself to unfold within a guiding framework was also a refreshing approach for Juanita, who comes from a background in corporate settings where the expectation is to have projects planned to the last detail.

Not surprisingly, there were bumps—and tremendous learning—along the way. It was a challenge to let things emerge while also fitting the rest of their lives into the process. Juanita and partner David Isaacs had to figure how to have a normal life and at the same time truly embrace the creative process, which in this case meant continuing to work, co-evolving a book and hosting a learning community at the same time. Unlike the period when Juanita wrote her doctoral thesis, isolated in her study, this process was complex and involved coordinating and hosting people from around the world, and then processing their ideas and contributions.

Juanita points out that “hosting the World Café book illustrates experientially what it is that we often talk about more philosophically at the Shambhala Institute. Café work

All key headings were typed up large enough so a small group could see them and were posted on a large wall in Juanita and David’s house.... Soon the wall became an outline of the entire book.

is about interconnected conversations, not solely individual conversations. It is about the space in between and the interdependence of ideas. The Café is about what connects us, rather than what separates us. From that interconnectedness and cross-pollination of diverse perspectives arises something interesting, different, new that is life affirming. In that sense it is very complementary to the ground upon which the Shambhala Institute is founded.”

Although the wall continues to develop, the book itself is in the last phases of evolution and is scheduled to be published by Berrett-Koehler in the spring of 2005. The book is organized into fractals, with focus ideas being conveyed through headings, quotations, artwork, and stories as well as perspectives and observations sections that reveal the living systems thinking which underpins this innovative approach to dialogue.

Juanita hopes that “potential readers from corporations, organizations, communities, schools, and churches will discover in the book that a part of their role is to bring people together in conversations that matter. They will discover that they can help others move in simple ways from small talk to big talk about the questions that are most important to us. People will know that their dialogues are already connected to conversations that are happening elsewhere—conversations that are also taking constructive steps toward more positive futures.

Juanita also hopes that “people will experience this book as an invitation to become a part of a growing movement, of which the World Café is but one part—a dialogue and deliberation movement that encourages us to access our very best collective thinking about the critical issues facing our organizations, our communities and our fragile planet.” For information about The World Café visit <http://www.theworldCafé.com>

“It is about the space in between and the interdependence of ideas. The Café is about what connects us, rather than what separates us.”

* * *

At the 2004 Summer Program, Juanita Brown, Claudia Chender, and others will host “Acting for Our Common Future: An Intergenerational Leadership Dialogue.” This dialogue will bring together senior and emerging leaders from across all sectors. It will focus on such questions as, How can we collaborate to bring forth a more sustainable and positive future? For information about the Intergenerational Dialogue visit the Shambhala Institute website.