

## Voices Across Generations

By Dinah Wakeford

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On June 10-13, 75 people between the ages of 15 and 88, from 18 different countries, convened around the question, “How can we evoke action for the common good in our own sphere of influence, rooted in intergenerational wisdom”?

The seed for this gathering was planted soon after the 2003 Summer Program, when Claudia Chender and Juanita Brown saw a convergence of two streams of inquiry—one around next steps for the Institute’s Emergent Leadership program and the other around what a new social activism across boundaries might look like.

Over the following months, this kernel of inspiration grew, as a twelve-person team worked on planning, raising funds, garnering support, and inviting friends within their various networks. The team wanted to co-create a space for real communication and collaboration, a place where people could explore the question of how to act for the common good in an intergenerational context; experience new ways to reach across traditional divides of age, sector, religious, and political boundaries; and learn with and from each other in order to plan effective action.

I joined the gathering in Halifax, and we were invited to dialogue in so many creative ways. We stood in a circle of age, oldest next to youngest, and felt the surge of energy, the power of diverse voices, the realization that the generations must come together. The world’s challenges demand that we come together. Each decade-group explored its unique contribution, based on life stage and experience, and historical and political perspectives. These gifts and perspectives were then voiced into the larger circle. We listened to the teens who bring curiosity and energy—as long as it’s after noon—and to every group up to the 70-80+ year olds, who bring perspectives born from experience and the luxury of time and reflection.

In “campfire groups” we set principles and practices for interacting, finding a language of deep listening, valuing everyone’s contribution, and talking straight from the heart, ever mindful of respect, simplicity, and dignity.

In a World Café format, we shared stories involving gifts we had received from someone from a different generation—stories of life-shaping gifts from teachers, parents, children, grandparents, students. Ciré, a young man from Senegal, told of a devastating flood that wiped out much of his village,

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sparing his house. He watched as his parents gave away all their food, clothing, furniture to those in need, explaining that material things meant nothing—relationships with family, friends, and community were what mattered. Now Ciré is working to help develop jobs for the young people in his country by facilitating mentorships around projects designed to improve the village as well as develop skills that might lead to jobs.

Ann Doshier, one of the elders, told her story of myriad types of service since World War I and invited us to take up the challenge, handed to us now from Aboriginal leaders and ancestors, to come together to protect our earth. Marianne Knuth, creator of Kufunda, a remarkable learning village in Zimbabwe, challenged us to look at the world through different, more nuanced lenses in order to see the wealth of wisdom available to us.

The Intergenerational Dialogue was such a rich and meaningful experience for so many, no one person could possibly summarize the learning. Instead, I invited participants across generations to speak for themselves...

***What learnings did you gain during this experience?***

**John Doucette (age 15):** I realized how fast everything is moving in the real world outside our community. I need to slow down and take time to really look at things. People from earlier generations led a slower pace. I was also reminded of the Butterfly Effect, that one small action can create side effects we'll never know, so I need to think carefully about my actions.

**Patrick Berrigan (15):** I can actually do more than I thought I could. Usually people don't realize this until they are older. Anyone can do anything if they really want to.

**Melissa Roy (26):** I heard my concerns echoed in all age groups. We aren't the only ones to feel a certain way. If it's something I care about I need to go out and do it.

The young wonder, "When am I going to be old enough to be the teacher?" We always feel like the student. We hear, "Oh, you're too young to understand. You haven't had the experience". But I ask, "What about the scars I have developed and could share?" My grandmother looked me in the eye and acknowledged my pain. I felt that acknowledgment here. I have gained a greater understanding of a deeper connection. I want to make it happen more often.

**Claudia Chender (28):** People naturally want to live in a holistic community. The sense of lightness, play, contentment, and spark we experienced during this gathering was a reminder that things make more sense when you are in a situation that resembles a real, natural community, with different age groups and people who think differently.

We need to drop away the artificial distinctions that separate us.

We don't need a new language to transcend barriers, but maybe we need to find a new way to listen, not talk more, but listen more and listen for the missing voices.

We need to be reminded of the old adage, don't judge a book by its cover. We miss so much. People have so much to offer. Give them a smile and an ear. We need to be open-minded and not pre-judge.

**Carsten Ohm (31):** I was amazed that the elders have an immense capacity to hold space for the younger, and they enjoy it. It gives us courage. I've learned to trust myself more and dare to speak my truth.

**Barbara Doshier (51):** The IGD reminded me that when we do have intergenerational conversations, our connection with young people is usually in the family. We need to also include children outside the family.

**John Roy (56):** My greatest learning involves the role of the feminine qualities in the question of sustainability. More feminine energy is needed. The challenge is that the feminine energy doesn't assert itself. Our male energy is competitive, aggressive, and sometimes destructive. Our female side needs to find a way to assert itself more regularly and effectively to gain balance and a proper, representative, respected spot at the table.

**Toke Moller (56):** This dialogue was real, not just another meeting. It reminded me again of the need to revive the village and our connectedness. Maybe we can be wise again together, instead of being stupid together. Sometimes the young need to call us on our stuff. Wisdom is completely non-linear. It rises and falls. It's reflective.

If it is possible for people to meet and connect over barriers here, we can do it anywhere. The IGD left an imprint in my heart and soul and brain. I'm carrying an insight in me that is a part of the future. We need to focus on what matters and listen together to what connects our stories, what's deeper, the patterns, the insights. Then, each will become a seed carrier for a new conversation. That's how change happens. We need to create homes for the seedlings to grow.

**David Isaacs (65):** The youngest among us have the capability and desire to be mentors as well as mentees for and with the elders.

**Dean Elias (69):** There are many opportunities to convene intergenerational dialogues at our fingertips. Wisdom doesn't depend on age. We too often have a limited view of aging.

One major rediscovery for me was the shift from a preoccupation with ideology to a focus on place and local culture, and trust in what can emerge from community and relationship.

I also gained a new perspective about the "new" activism, activism that is nonviolent and bears creative results, activism that was embodied in the work of many our participants—from emerging leaders in Africa, India, and Europe to distinguished elders from North America. There are many shifts from the old activism to the new:

From criticism to appreciation of strengths and resources

From fear and hate, to relationship and finding the other in myself

From anger to creativity

From seeing a problem to sensing the whole

From goal-orientation to trusting emergence

From a focus on success to a focus on learning

I've been schooled in traditions that valorize critical thinking and critical reflection as the key tools for the transformation of consciousness. Through this experience I realize that the most important "thinking" I/we do is through our hearts, and the key intelligence we need to cultivate is that of empathy, compassion, love

The truth of love, in deed.

***What was it like participating in this dialogue with family members?***

**Melissa Roy:** I have always looked at my relationship with my dad as a gift. As I was growing up I was always treated as an equal, not the child. The IGD experience gave me a richer and deeper understanding of my dad. We relate to each other better now and I'm realizing that we're really not that different. We process things the same way. We are both consummate learners. We are more alike than I thought.

**John Roy:** Participating with my daughter reinforced the importance of the connection already present in our personal life. Because I want to instill in my daughter self-confidence, I've always involved her in important decisions. We have a general respect for each other. I respect her fresh and flexible point of view.

**David Isaacs:** I gained a new respect and admiration for my son and a sense of pride in seeing his evolution into a wonderful young man.

**Barbara Doshier:** Having heard about Shambhala for a long time from my mother, I enjoyed putting faces and personalities to names and sharing an important part of my mom's life.

**Claudia Chender:** Participating with my family was a microcosm of the whole experience. Each family member had a different experience. They were able to plug in their interests and passions. For example, my 14-year-old artistic sister helped with the graphic facilitation. Though this kind of experience wasn't entirely unique for us, it was a chance to see each other shine, to see the strengths we don't notice every day.

***(To members of the design team:) How will you carry your learning back to your sphere of influence?***

**Claudia Chender:** There will be an IGD planning session at the Systems Thinking conference in Boston in December, hosted by people who participated in this dialogue. There will probably be something similar at the Shambhala Institute again next year. I think this event will continue in lots of way, taking root as people take seeds back to plant in their spheres of influence.

Personally, I notice more when I'm not in intergenerational space and make an effort to be there. In any project I'm working on I listen for the missing voices more than I did before.

**David Isaacs:** I have already hosted a circle of 40+ members of my family, from 97 to 5, around the question, What is the meaning of family? It was a wonderful success in the sense that everyone experienced himself/herself as a peer and honored voice or presence in the conversation.

**Carsten Ohm:** Sixteen hours after returning home from the Institute, I am going to an island with family and friends for a weekend retreat, which coincides with my birthday. There will be 18 people. It's about us coming together in a conscious way. I want to inspire others.

**Marianne Knuth:** I returned inspired from the Institute and have changed our programme a little to deepen the inquiry around what we, in the communities, have to build on to move into a different future. The question, How can we reclaim our wisdom, wealth, and imagination? seems to be a guiding one in the exchange and interaction that we are in the middle of now at Kufunda.

***What advice to you have for others thinking of hosting an Intergenerational Dialogue?***

**Carsten Ohm:** Call the dialogue from your own need. Start there, then go one step at a time.

**David Isaacs:** Consider using the seven design principles for hosting conversations that matter in the World Café Resource Guide at [www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com)

**Toke Moller:** We trusted that 12 people who didn't have the chance to convene in person ahead of time could make it work. I think we created a breakthrough.

**Claudia Chender:** Organizing this dialogue felt easy on some levels—not logistically, but people from so many backgrounds were brought into intense conversation, and even though we weren't sure what would emerge a basic simplicity manifested itself. We had a clear purpose and an idea of how we wanted to go about it, but we left room for the magic to emerge, and it did. I would say that if you design an event with the intention of exploring an important question in an intergenerational context, build in faith and uncertainty. If you are looking for a set outcome or have a vision of what you know you want to have happen, then your chances of success are greatly diminished, because you have left little space for learning and magic.

Dinah Wakeford is a member of the Fieldnotes team.