

Learning to Change the World: Using Dialogue as a Pathway to Global Action

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Introduction

In July 2004, at a serene mountaintop monastery in Montserrat, Spain, delegates of the *Assembly of the World Parliament of Religions*¹ quietly started what could be viewed as a global experiment. Approximately 350 leaders attended the gathering. They represented a large number of the world's spiritual and faith traditions, including Sikhs, Jews, Christians, Wiccans, Pagans, Muslim, First Nation/Aboriginals and many others. The meeting in Montserrat was supported by an international volunteer community of over 125 facilitators, graphic facilitators, logistics support and World Parliament resource people. With their help, this multi-lingual, multi-cultural assembly of revered religious leaders departed from their usual highly formalized, convention-laden meeting structures, and found a more "power-balanced" space and "safe" way of engaging in dialogue, decision-making and action planning on four issues of critical global importance. These issues were: supporting refugees worldwide; eliminating external debt burden in developing nations; creating access to safe water; and overcoming religiously-motivated violence.

By deeply immersing themselves in a simple, (yet complex) sequence of small and large-group dialogues, the Assembly crossed an invisible but important threshold from the type of conference meeting which generates *some* knowledge and *little* action to having a meeting which has stimulated *learning* at individual, collective and systemic levels, and this event has begun to spawn a great deal of action, not only having local impact, but also significant global effect.

This paper and the accompanying presentation describes:

1. the process of designing and facilitating these meetings,

¹ see website for a detailed background and description of the Parliament's history, structure and purpose: www.cpwr.org

2. some of the insights from one sub-team of designers/facilitators (the water team),
3. preliminary thinking about the issues and implications: from the perspective of organization development and change.

Background

The World Parliament of Religions meets approximately every 5 years. The last Parliament meeting in South Africa in 1999 drew over 12,000 participants. Just prior to these large Parliament meetings there is an **Assembly** meeting, which is restricted to the leaders of the many religious and spiritual/faith traditions represented at the Parliament itself. In 2004, the meetings of the Assembly and the Parliament took place in Spain, and this paper is about the 3-day **Assembly** meetings in Monsterrat, Spain. The meeting process was replicated (with some variations) during the Parliament in Barcelona, (which despite the terrorist bombings in Madrid, attracted approximately 8,000 people from 123 countries).

The overall purpose of the **Assembly** was to:

- engage key representatives of all faith/spiritual traditions in the development of a groundswell of action focused on change on issues of critical importance to people around the world;
- include people impacted by the issues, youth and subject matter experts as well as representatives of various traditions in each conversation;
- stimulate committed action in one of four issues of critical importance, at the local level—to inspire “simple and profound acts” leading to change;
- introduce participants to a practical, repeatable process which could be easily transported and applied in back home communities—in effect, to offer a way to “snowball” change.

Overview of Project Phases and Timelines

The 2004 lead design and facilitation team initially consisted of a group of North American and European OD practitioners, well-grounded in large-scale meeting design and facilitation, and with extensive experience in managing international projects. Over the course of 18 months the core design team created a three-day design, and then piloted it with groups of diverse religious/spiritual traditions in two different locations: Jerusalem, Israel and Kericho, Kenya. The steps and timeframes are outlined below:

Initial planning	Jan - July 2003
Recruitment of volunteers;	July-Dec 2003
Lead team/design team meeting	Jan 2004
4 Pilot sessions: Israel (Water & Violence) Kenya (Refugees & Debt)	March 2004
Lead team meeting	April - June 2004
Team Preparation: Build facilitator teams and prepare for session (Montserrat, Spain)	July 1-4, 2004
Assembly Meetings on 4 issues (Montserrat, Spain)	July 5-7, 2004 (check dates!)
World Parliament (Barcelona, Spain)	July 9-12-10, 2004 (check dates!)
Follow up & monitoring of commitments made by participants (World Parliament office staff, Chicago, Illinois)	August 2004-ongoing
Lead/design team debriefing sessions	January 2005

Meeting Design Principles

A lot was learned from the pilot sessions in Kenya and Israel, and as a result the team realized that their process needed to be as simple and informal as possible, and that it needed to fully engage all participants in a direct and personal understanding of the issues as well as how these were specifically connected to their many faith/spiritual traditions. With this in mind the design team created a three-day process which employed several wisdom accessing questions which moved the groups through multiple levels of reflection, thinking, and dialogue—from the exploration of the broad and systemic magnitude of each issue, to understanding how the issues being considered connected with specific faith/spiritual traditions, through to individual reflection on what was needed, and what was possible for real, local and relevant change to take place. In short, the design focused on creating a session which would offer participants:

- **Clear and direct knowledge of each issue:** brief fact-sheets, and presentations on each issue gave participants with little direct experience of the issue (e.g. religiously-motivated violence, or refugees) an opportunity to learn more about some of the facts and realities;
- **The “human face” of each issue:** each session included people from around the world directly affected by the issue and invited them to share stories of their personal experiences and the impact on their lives;
- **Deeper knowledge and awareness of specific faith/tradition stances:** *intra*-faith dialogue groupings allowed participants of same traditions to explore their own current, or historic beliefs and religious/spiritual traditions as related to the issues.
- **Development of new knowledge, awareness and tolerance:** *inter*-faith dialogue groupings created broader understanding of the similarities and differences between faith/spiritual traditions’ responses to the issues.
- **Stimulating ideas and (potentially), collaboration opportunities,** by taking time in *intra* and *inter*-faith groupings to:
 - reflect on and discuss current barriers to progress,
 - hear stories of success and progress (some of these very local and grassroots initiatives, done through brief presentations)
 - become inspired to fresh action and ongoing commitment by giving participants the opportunity to discuss the possibilities for change, and to reflect on and develop their own ideas about what they could individually and personally do to make a difference—acting from within their faith/tradition, regardless of their position, location or situation.

Assembly Meetings Overview

Day 1	Pre-workshop. Lead facilitation teams meet (approximately 20 people: 5 people per issue)
Day 2-3	Pre-workshop. Volunteer facilitators, support, logistics and graphic facilitators orientation, and team building sessions (120 volunteers, 25 per issue team)
Day 4	Assembly opens with formal welcome ceremonies and an overall ½ day plenary session (500 ++ people, seated in informal 8-person circles)
Day 5	Assembly participants divided into 4 one-day in-depth meetings, one per issue (water, religiously-motivated violence, debt, and refugees) teams meet separately
Day 6	Assembly closes with half day whole group meeting and sharing of “simple and profound” commitments made during the in-depth meetings. Formal closing & travel to Barcelona for opening ceremony of Parliament

Insights

In terms of the experience of designing and facilitating meetings using dialogue processes our Water Team is reflecting on the following themes:

1. Individual commitment leading to system-wide or multi-system learning and change.
2. The importance of context: setting, space, and time to connect—creating the conditions for inspiration; for the creation of a community which is called to greater responsibility; and for the development of relationships/connections which support and foster ongoing action.
3. Manifestations of collective energy and “spirit”—the power of experiencing the intention of the whole, rather than the parts.
4. The unseen potential of the facilitators and support teams: connectors who can and will continue to guide global learning and change.
5. The importance of building the team of facilitators, graphic artists and logistics coordinators before the opening of the conference.

1. Individual commitment rather than collective consensus

Typically, and with some variations, large-scale meeting approaches such as these seek to have representatives of a broad cross-section of stakeholder groups work together in various ways in order to arrive at “common ground” and to determine action plans which will move the system towards a more hopeful, positive or strategic future. For a variety of reasons, the leaders of the Parliament felt it would be difficult and perhaps even unwise to attempt to achieve consensus on these four issues among such a wide variety of religious and faith-based groups. Therefore, a key difference between this and other large-scale events of similar nature is that the intention was to hold an inter-faith dialogue experience to inspire systemic change, but which would focus on inspiring **individual commitment and action** rather than consensus and collective action.

There is an increasing amount of literature on how various forms of dialogue, nurturing environments, and simple conversation, can substantially contribute to organizational learning and change (Bolton, 2004; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1999; Senge et al, 1999; Kahane, 2002; Kahane, 2004). In effect, each conversation that participants engaged in deepened what Trullen and Torbert (2004) call “second person research”—the type of conversation in which individuals have a shared intention to learn about themselves, the others present, and in this case, rather than learning more about the team culture, they learned more about their fundamental assumptions on the issues, and about their various faith/spiritual practices, and how these varied across cultures, nations and regions as well.

The success of some dialogue methodologies such as World Café resides in the natural and informal communication that is stimulated when people sit together in small groups. There is less pressure to make speeches, and more permission to discuss and disagree with ideas. In the context of these World Parliament dialogues we tried to replicate this informal, natural communication, and we felt it was a particularly effective approach, given that many of the participants were accustomed to attending meetings where there would be a series of formal presentations; and where depending on their positions in the

religious hierarchy, whatever they chose to say would rarely, if ever be debated (and might even be taken as “gospel”).

In addition to these intercultural/inter-religious dynamics, there were linguistic barriers. Communication in the plenary sessions was done in English, Spanish and Catalan. However, 3-language communication was not always possible for the small group work. Some translator volunteers were available, and some delegates brought translators, so those with significant translation needs were supported. Nevertheless, many people were not able to communicate comfortably in English (the language which most of the small groups chose to use). Interestingly, these challenges served to *help* the groups, in that they had to work hard to ensure mutual understanding, and this *seeking to understand* meant that people concentrated hard and therefore further broke down barriers, the stiffness and formality which usually characterizes large group meetings and conferences. This informality, well-supported and encouraged by the facilitators, reduced or eliminated many typical barriers, allowing participants to relax, and to engage more fully, ultimately giving them permission to reveal themselves as “real” human beings, and not just representatives or dignitaries associated with diverse faiths and spiritual practices.

As formality dropped and inter-personal familiarity rose, the awareness of fundamental commonalities between faiths and spiritual practices and beliefs grew. For example, early in the day many participants in the “access to water” dialogue, were astonished to discover that virtually (perhaps all) faiths and spiritual groupings represented there held water as sacred to their traditions and beliefs. This small revelation then inspired the groups more deeply to explore their similarities, and to begin to further open up to and realize the potential power of interfaith collaboration to address water issues. Other facilitators reported a similar dynamic in each of the other 3 dialogues (which were occurring simultaneously). The simple informal, conversational dialogue process allowed participants to step beyond positions, cultures, social, and institutional boundaries, gave them permission to be curious and open to learning more about the ideas and positions of others from traditions very different to their own. Ultimately they didn’t just plant seeds, ideas or positions, they began the development of new

relationships collectively beginning to cultivate system-wide, or multi-system learning, collaboration and change.

2. The importance of context: setting, space, and time to connect

The World Parliament organizers worked long and hard to find a setting which would be suitable for their meetings, and one can imagine the huge number of factors which needed to be taken into consideration. Of course, no one anticipated the impact of the attacks in Madrid (March 2004), and the many risks and vulnerabilities associated with having such a large gathering of highly influential religious leaders, their entourages and followers just 4 months later. Notwithstanding the many important concerns, and despite the need for much more intensive security measures, they proceeded. Montserrat, the mountaintop setting of the first 3-day assembly, provided a unique and logistically difficult meeting place, but it is hard to think of a more magnificent or inspirational place for this type of gathering.

The influence of this setting on the overall event, and on the quality of the results is not to be underestimated. Indeed, consistent with the ideas of Actor Network Theory (Latour, 1998, Law, 1999), it is argued that the setting was indeed an important “actor” in a number of ways:

- the history of Montserrat as a holy place for at least 1,000 years was of significant interest to delegates, and their explorations of the site, and the opportunities to speak with the monks sequestered there, and to hike and explore the many pathways around the mountain offered more openings for inter-religious, and inter-system dialogue and learning outside the more formal setting;
- the geography of Montserrat, the fact that the cathedral and conference facilities are nestled near the top of an unusual formation of crenellated mountains, with sweeping views stretching hundreds of kilometers and access only via narrow winding road, or cog railway, served as an inspiration to think about the “higher” purposes of inter-faith work, and as a haven, offering a feeling of separation, safety and security, away from the world’s violence, noise and confusion;

- the co-location of conference facilities: meeting rooms, as well as accommodation, and meal services, meant that participants were able to continue their conversations and collective learning without being distracted by the details of commuting to and from the site, choices of where to eat, and so on.

These contextual dimensions and factors served most powerfully to create the conditions for the rapid development of social cohesion; the result being that in 3-4 short days the assembly, including the volunteers, became a community—a community called to think deeply about how to actively take greater responsibility for significant global issues; and to develop or strengthen the relationships/connections to support and foster ongoing action.

3. Manifestations of collective energy and “spirit”

These Assembly dialogues were explicitly designed to evoke “simple and profound” individual commitments to change; however, informal reports and written reflections from the facilitation teams indicate that there were a number of powerful *collective* moments in each of the small dialogue groupings, and even during plenary sessions when approximately 100 participants experienced what could be called “presence” (Senge et al, 2004) or “crystallizing of intent,” --a focusing of collective energy and the sense of purposefulness arising from the realization that those present indeed had the power and potential to shape difficult realities and to take responsibility for an emerging future. The emotional impact of this experience is difficult to describe, but could be described as a profound state of clarity and connection; the shift from “letting go” to “letting come” at the bottom of the “U” model described by Senge et al (2004); and also suggested using similar terminology by others such as Jaworski (2000), Scharmer, (2000)Rosch (forthcoming), Arthur (2000) They all refer to it as an important and often collective emotional experience, and one which is fundamental to creativity and innovation.

This experience of suspending mental models and freshly seeing our individual and collective connections to an issue is also fundamental to the learning process. In fact,

Senge et al; and Kahane (2004), argue that the now classic way of viewing learning as a cycle of action and reflection leading to new action (Dewey), is inadequate when facing situations which are chaotic, difficult, uniquely complex, and where the potential future may not have any resemblance to our experiences of the past. They argue that these circumstances, learning and innovation arise in those crystallizing moments when assumptions are completely set aside, and when there is a deep connection to the larger field, what Bache (2000) calls “Sacred Mind.” These are moments when actions and connections made, in this case, throughout the course of the three days of community dialogues”become part of a larger pattern of synchronous developments that could have never been planned and are even difficult to explain after the fact...”(Senge et al, 2004 p. 152). As we reflected on our work, it seemed to occur when our group(s) experienced the *intention* of the whole, rather than the parts, and they then spontaneously began to open up or “realize” ideas for action drawing on sources deeper than the rational mind.

Facilitators and participants alike described these moments as powerful and profound “openings”. They were moments of great clarity and emotion when the intractable issues under discussion suddenly had a more personal connection. The issues were simultaneously more overwhelming and also more possible to influence than they had been before. Some described these moments as larger “knowing”.

In reflecting on our own and others stories of these experiences of “profound knowing” (or “opening” or “presence”) it has become increasingly clear that facilitating experiences focused on rational analysis and orderly collaboration are not necessarily adequate sometimes. For individuals, groups and systems to develop meaningful and practical responses to issues of global complexity, a collective experience of strong feelings--rage, or fear or compassion is not enough either. Somehow there needs to be movement towards and openness to both. This is what we experienced in the course of the Assembly dialogues—on the mountain, as well as during the Parliament in Barcelona.

4. The unseen potential of the facilitators and support teams: “connectors” stimulating global learning and change.

Gladwell's (2000) exploration of social epidemics describes three characteristics of the “tipping points” which contribute to sudden and sometimes extraordinary shifts in human behavior:

1. contagiousness—an often unexpected property of ideas and trends (as well as illnesses);
2. the fact that little causes/changes can have big effects—what mathematicians call geometric progression; and
3. the fact that sometimes change happens not gradually, but suddenly, at one dramatic moment--the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point—the ultimate occurrence often contrary to all predictions.

The 2004 Assembly experience contained a number of elements which may be seen as “tipping points” in the future. These are still difficult to describe, but we can see that in the arena of international social and economic development, where marketplace competition barriers are theoretically fewer, and the logic of inter-organizational cooperation is stronger, some might predict that stimulating and sustaining organizational, sectoral and inter-sectoral (or societal) learning is less problematic. And yet, despite some successes, and many declarations of the desire and willingness to cooperate, robust approaches to organizational or inter-organizational learning, especially on issues of international and global urgency have been notoriously difficult to accomplish. So-called “social” issues such as religious violence, the movement of refugees, access to clean water, and debt are in fact, “messy” as well as “wicked” (Ackoff, 1974). These issues cross all boundaries: political, economic, social, geographic, and religious. What has become apparent from the World Parliament experience is that there are some key assumptions from organizational learning theory and practice which usefully “jump” the divide into this boundary-crossing “messy/wicked” domain, and which invite further investigation and theoretical development.

Parliament organizers decided on the dialogue and individual commitment approach based on their assumption that as individuals go out and perform their “simple and profound” acts, larger momentum for change will build. Is it possible to create a positive “epidemic” of change, or a series of “tipping points” (Gladwell, 2000) on these four issues of global importance? Can a large gathering of individuals, some of them with radically different and often conflicting faiths, beliefs, spiritual practices and traditions create ripples that will have a positive impact on some of the world’s most intractable issues? Results are currently being tracked through World Parliament offices in Chicago, and the early evidence shows that some very interesting and powerful initiatives have begun. It was thrilling to be part of the experience, we await the stories to come.

5. The importance of building the team of facilitators, graphic artists and logistics coordinators before the opening of the conference.

The volunteer facilitation teams for each issue were chosen from applicants who came from all corners of the globe and represented many cultures and faith traditions. Once accepted, they were assigned to issue teams, with attention given to issues of racial, gender and geographic diversity as well as experience and skill. Each team consisted of two co-leads, two support leads, one graphics lead, one logistics lead, about 20 additional people who were circle facilitators, graphic artists and logistics coordinators and one mentor/support person.

The two team co-leads were responsible for contacting their team members and building their team. We will tell here how the team for Access to Clean Water came together. The two co-leads had many conversations about working together, their styles of facilitation, their hopes for working together and for the conference itself. They contacted the other four leads, got acquainted through email, and held several conference calls. Then team members were contacted by email, welcomed to the team and encouraged to tell a bit about themselves. An outline of the design of the conference was emailed to each person and questions and dialogue encouraged. They were also asked to bring a sample of water from their part of the world to share with the group.

Once in Montserrat, the leads met together in person for the first time, reviewed their hopes, talked about working together and reviewed the design. This was followed by two days of facilitator orientation, partly with the whole group of facilitators (for all four issues) and partly in their water team. During this time each person's ideas were listened to and concerns addressed, the team built through spaces with opportunity for connection which resulted in a very cohesive, cooperative and supportive group, ready for the challenges and unknowns which faced them in this never-before-attempted design.

A significant part of the coming together as a team occurred when the group gathered in the courtyard of the monastery and each person poured water they had brought into a communal pitcher and told about what it meant to them. The water then was given a central place in the workshop, and became a meaningful focus. Facilitators and participants were invited to take a small sample back home with them, and some of us have continued to collect water as we travel the globe.

In conclusion, we feel there was a powerful combination that made this amazing learning opportunity possible. A well thought out, tested and refined design to suit the global nature of the participants and the issues, the incredible setting and space provided for the work, the individual and collective intention of participants and volunteers alike, and the amazing dialogue of human beings to create local and global action, a combination rarely available to Organizational Development practitioners. We invite you to learn from this as we did and explore with us.

"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to go to the forest to gather wood, saw it, and nail the planks together. Instead, teach them the desire for the sea."

-Antoine St. Exupery

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