

# The Crazy Wisdom Bookstore Salon Meets the World Café: Shaping our Future through Conversations that Matter

By Lucinda Kurtz, Salon Facilitator

During the past 3 years, the Crazy Wisdom Bookstore Salons have brought many diverse types of people in Ann Arbor together as a community to explore deeply held beliefs and aspirations. We have listened and questioned activists and scholars, visionaries and spiritual leaders, physicians and poets. We have talked among ourselves about how to move beyond some seemingly intransigent problems in our community and society and have celebrated the signs of promising new beginnings.

Based on my reflections of our past Salons and my own experience, we are bringing an intriguing innovation into our Salon for the fall and winter related to the process of our discussions. We will use this new process to explore a highly complex topic that requires a deeper opportunity for dialogue.

Starting in September, we plan to introduce the "World Café" process when we gather for our monthly Thursday evening Salons. It is a specific way of "shaping our future through conversations that matter" that Juanita Brown and David Isaacs speak of in their new book, *The World Café*. I had the exciting opportunity of participating in a 3 day World Café process this spring that David Isaacs facilitated which involved 500 people. I experienced directly the power of this type of collaborative process that taps into the collective wisdom of a group, to the species memory that is deeper than any single conversation. This process can provide a more intimate way for us to tap our collective wisdom rather than relying on "experts" to define a way forward.

At our upcoming Salons, after listening to our guest speakers who will suggest provocative questions to stimulate our creativity, we will sit in tables of 4 people and begin our conversation. There will be one "host" at each table who will help with introductions and moving the energy forward. Each person at every table will have an opportunity to speak their truth on the question put to the group. Each table will be covered by large pieces of white paper and scattered with colored markers so the essence of what's being said can be captured in symbols, words, and drawings on the "tablecloths."

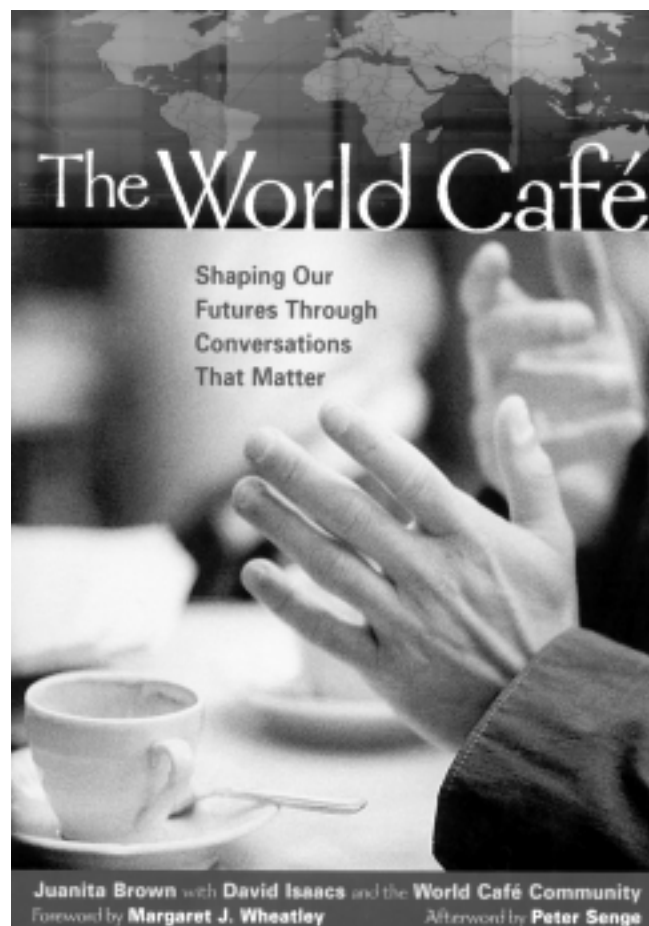
There will be ideally three rounds of conversation. This means that after the first round of conversation where each person has spoken their thoughts on the given question,

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everyone will stand and move to another table except the host who will remain at the table to welcome guests who have been part of other conversations. They will bring "seed" ideas from their tables into the next round where they will add to the drawings on the table and link and build ideas. Patterns and common themes may begin to emerge and help to trigger a larger knowing, a deeper understanding. Insights may begin to emerge that go beyond that of any individual, and a new whole can come forward, the discovery of collective intelligence.

After the final round of conversations, people have the opportunity to share growing insights with the whole group. After a time for reflection, participants are urged to focus their attention and reflect on what's "at the heart of the matter," what is present in the moment as a result of their conversations. Café conversations are based on the assumption that we have within us the intuitive understanding of the answers to our deepest longings, our most challenging questions. We just need to create the container that can receive the intuitive wisdom of each one of us who hold a part of a greater whole. So the World Café process allows us to move quickly from conversations that keep us stuck in past, old patterns and solutions to "conversations that matter," where there is a deeper collective understanding. Let's try it and see what emerges!

So now to the topic of our conversation. Again, the explorations of the past Salons and my own experience lead me to this series of questions: "How do we know what we know? How open are our minds? Are we defaulting into a system of thought? How do we take in and process information? How is the media shaping our awareness about the world? And what can we do to shape what is perceived as viable alternatives to current reality? How can we create social change?" Whew! That is a chunk to tackle, but the good news is that this topic of exploration is actually being tackled by more and more folks who want to create a healthier, more equitable society.



It is being discussed in terms of the concept of "framing," and George Lakoff in his book, *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* lays out in short form what this means: "Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions. In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry our policies. To change our frames is to change all of this. Reframing *is* social change."

Shortly after the 2004 election, I joined a monthly group discussion initiated by Gretchen and David Gruner that set out to understand the mindset of the country that led to the election of George W. Bush. Lakoff's book and the concept of framing became our starting point. We soon began to see the huge implications of this concept and how it contributed to the Bush election. In fact, in this morning's Sunday, "New York Times Magazine", (July, 17, 2005), there is an article entitled, "The Framing Wars" by Matt Bai which chronicles the Democrats discovery of Lakoff, the concept of framing, and how he has tried to assist the Democratic party in framing their issues (an apparently difficult thing to do since the Democrats are having trouble defining what their issues are).

People use mental shortcuts to understand the world. These shortcuts are based on "frames" that are a set of internalized concepts and values that allow us to fit new information into already established systems of meaning. These frames can be triggered by choices of languages, images, and messengers, so different communication elements can have powerful influences on decisions. Lakoff suggests that all of us are programmed to respond to frames that are deeply embedded in our unconscious minds and that the brain will reject facts that don't conform to the frames we already hold. This explains the phenomenon of people voting against their own self-interest and placing a higher value on a tenaciously held belief that defies factual validation.

How do people make sense of what Walter Lippman called "the swarming confusion of problems?" Frames are one way that individuals make sense of their world by helping them judge which issues are central and which are peripheral, using cues contained within the frame. The capacity to frame issues, or in other words, to define the way an issue comes to be understood, is one of the most important and powerful communications strategies available to political elites, social movement activists and the media. By deliberately framing an issue, we may be able to strategically participate and eventually help define how people in this country will perceive critical issues.

In our September 22nd Salon, Ali Webb, Communication Manager at the W. K. Kellogg Foundations and Jeremy Seligman, Director of IT Strategy at the Ford Motor Co. and co-founder of the Huron River Buddhist Sangha, will lay out the concepts of framing and help to articulate questions that stimulate a deeper understanding of this complex topic. Both are involved with the challenges of framing and use the World Café in their own work situations. Jeremy comments, "In the World Café, we are engaged with questions more than answers, with reflection more than conclusions, and with discovering and bringing forth the inherent wisdom and creativity of those gathered together. This is particularly helpful when dealing with the topic of framing that requires some collective digging into our preconceived notions of what is real."

Our October 20th Salon will explore how the news media, television, blogs, and other new forms of communications are framing our awareness about the world. John Hilton, Editor of the *Ann Arbor Observer* and Judd Branan, former *Ann Arbor News* reporter and now master blogger in the private sector, will help create vital questions for this World Café that looks at the influence of news coverage on our interpretation of issues and the social and political judgments we make. John notes, "The shift to visual media is shifting our perspective of reality and confusing news with visual entertainment. The print media has had time to work out what's responsible reporting, but there is no common acceptance of what's responsible reporting in the visual media."

We will conclude this first series on November 17th with Bruce L. Gibb, Organizational Psychologist and Bunyan Bryant, Director, the Environmental Justice Initiative, School of Natural Resources and Environment, University of Michigan, and his graduate students. They will move us beyond the traditional frames and help us to see "Politics not as usual." Bruce is particularly interested in helping us understand framing in terms of the evolution of society and using it to further larger social goals. Bunyan and his students will share new frames in the environmental justice field with our group and help to pose some cutting edge questions.

I invite you to come together as a community to deeply explore these challenging issues in this new and more intimate World Café format. We are fortunate to live in this social cauldron of Ann Arbor where we can experiment with new ideas and new forms. We can create a safe container at Crazy Wisdom Bookstore, in its Tea Room, to allow some unique visions to unfold and perhaps unearth some solutions to these social and political conundrums we face in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. At least we can give it a try.

*(Lucinda Kurtz is a Hands of Light Energy Healer with a private practice in Ann Arbor. For the past three years, she has been the facilitator of the Crazy Wisdom Bookstore Salon which has brought together people in the community around issues of common concern.)*