

The Central Garden: An Invitation

By Amy Lenzo and Rowan Simonsen



*“The insanity of human destructiveness may be matched by an older grace and intelligence that is fastening us together in ways we have never before seen or imagined.” ~ Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest* (2007)*

Acknowledgements:

This article builds upon “Notes on the idea of a Central Garden” co-written by Juanita Brown, Kathy Jourdain and Amy Lenzo, and draws on the authors’ individual and shared work within the Central Garden of participatory practice. We stand on the shoulders, and walk side-by-side with, two of the “giants” of our field - Juanita Brown, co-founder of the World Cafe, and Toke Moeller, co-founder of the Art of Hosting. Each of them has served as mentors to us and made contributions large and small to our understanding of and practice within the Central Garden.

Introduction

Two key stories are vying for attention in countries and communities all over the planet. One story tells of global financial crises, environmental catastrophes, riots in the streets, shootings in schools, terrorist plots, political brinksmanship, and institutional failure.

An alternative story is also unfolding. Stories of valiant, peaceful, and creative human responses to the challenges of our time. Many of them are led by youth, and allied groups from all generations; a tapestry of grass-roots efforts to re-imagine our world through life-affirming experiments-- connecting and learning from each other to re-create common futures.

Stories of collective imagination and engagement are shifting the shape of our world as much or more than the narratives of upheaval and catastrophe. Innovators on every continent and in every field are asking that we actively participate in finding new ways forward. Ways that bring forth our collective intelligence and human capacities for thinking and acting together in order to address the complex challenges we face today.

Many of these collaborative social technologies are practices that use conversation as a core process. The World Café, Open Space, Appreciative Inquiry, Circle Practice, Art of Hosting and Theory U, to name only a few, have introduced significantly effective dialogic approaches to thinking and acting together.

Social innovations coming out of the use of these practices are not insignificant. They are burgeoning both at the margins of social engagement and in mainstream institutions – embedded in personal family dynamics, community “town halls”, and conscious activism of all kinds; in local, national and global government like the European Union and United Nations; in corporate

boardrooms and small businesses; and integrated into social systems around the world including health care, education, law enforcement, libraries, government, and social services.

Citizens are gathering in both public and private spaces to give voice both to their deepest frustrations and their most vibrant hopes. The rest of us bear witness to this bold invitation from ordinary people everywhere who care about the world our children will inherit.



Defining the Central Garden

The metaphor of a Central Garden comes from Juanita Brown, co-founder of the World Cafe dialogic practice, who describes the courtyard in the middle of her adopted grandmother's home in Chiapas, Mexico – lush with vivid bougainvillea, vibrant flowers, and verdant trees in big clay pots surrounding a large fountain in the center. You enter the central garden, or *jardín central* as

they call it in Latin America, by going through any one of the multiple arched doorways that surround this open space in the very heart of the home.

The innovations and practices that we introduced briefly earlier have largely emerged and grown up together in the last few decades; new growth nourished from the same ground of shared values and intentions for co-creating a better world. In our metaphor, these practices are the doorways that lead into the Central Garden, which is the focus of this article.

This metaphor of a Central Garden works on multiple levels. In this article, the individual doorways leading into the Central Garden represent the many unique dialogic practices that make up the field of participatory practice, with our shared commitment to positive change in the world. The metaphor can expand to include any circle of contributors or collaborators as doorways into the Central Garden, with common or shared work holding the center.

However large we are imagining the circle of doorways that surround a Central Garden, what's in the garden itself is always a little bit magical. Inevitably it's a place where things are not entirely known; a place of emergence. It's a practice field that draws on the strength of all of the doorways that lead into it but is not limited to any of them.

To be clear – maintaining the integrity and structure of the doorways is important; without strong doorways, it's not possible to enter the Central Garden. Similarly, the integrity of the practices represented by the doorways need to be respected and acknowledged.

So, the Central Garden we are describing isn't about mashing people and practices together without regard for their unique identities, distinctions, purposes and values. Rather, it is about the creation of a practice field that goes

beyond any one practice. It's about working together in a way that respects and learns from difference and creates something new out of what is being learned.

The Central Garden can be seen as what connects us, what eliminates fragmentation and supports connection. In some indigenous cultures it could be seen as the place of mending the Sacred Hoop of Life because what's at the center of the Central Garden, that abundantly flowing fountain, represents whatever is Life-affirming.

What is Central Garden Practice?

Central Garden practice asks something different of us than practice in the individual doorways does. It asks us to bring our experience in whatever doorway we are entering from and simultaneously move beyond our identification with any individual practice or approach. It requires our full participation and the flexibility to apply all we have learned with an openness to learn from others. Central Garden practice asks us to leave our egos at the door and learn from the differences we each bring; *to learn together* and use what we are learning for the common good.

In some cases, Central Garden practice may look like a flexible application of methodology, depending on what is needed or being called for in a given context. In others, Central Garden practice may be a skillful combining of approaches and methods in order to respond to a stated need or serve a particular purpose.

Central Garden practice is always about focusing on the larger good, the greater whole.

Lineage: From Discoverers to Founders to Practitioners

"If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants."

~ Isaac Newton in 1675

The essence of the central garden metaphor is not new. Collaboration, conversation, and self-organization are natural elements in humanity's evolution. In the arc of time that begins with ancient practices and continues to the present day, however, there were some key moments in this particular iteration of central garden thinking. During the 1980s and early 1990s, there was an important confluence of people that started exploring how to create the conditions for authentic collaboration, meaningful conversation, and life-affirming organizational practices.

This first generation of visionaries opened a path and showed the potential of what could be possible, creating a language for understanding living systems, learning and sensemaking, and the ways we create reality. Humberto Maturana, Fritjof Capra, Margaret Wheatley and others were these Discoverers – offering invaluable maps, principles, and language to describe what it means to collaborate and co-create.

The fertile soil they tilled called out for new ways of collaborating and being in conversation. In the 1990s, a second generation of discoveries named, defined, and founded practices like The World Café, The Art of Hosting, Theory U, Open Space Technology and others. The Founders of these pioneering collaboration practices gifted the next generations with principles, practices, and containers that allow us to change the way we see ourselves, organize, and understand reality.

A third generation of Practitioners found these social technologies early, felt the depth of each pattern and were able to connect to them deeply. They often

worked with the initial discoverers and founders to take their practices into the world and apply them in a variety of ways.

As this story keeps unfolding, new generations continue to connect to this work – creating, mixing, and blending practices intuitively as they organize and invite large-scale engagement around societal challenges. As we continue to evolve as a field, we feel it is important to remind ourselves of the soil our various practices grew from, and the Central Garden that nourishes our collective work.

Intergenerational Collaboration

In addition to the developmental process across generations of practitioners, we are seeing a growing trend toward multi-generational collaboration across age groups; more and more young leaders across the globe are utilizing these social technologies as keys to building positive futures.

We sense a growing hunger for and recognition of the power of multi-generational collaboration around critical issues. Both the World Café's "Wiser Together" initiative, focusing on strengthening intergenerational collaboration in communities and organizations, and the prevalence of multi-generational teams stewarding Art of Hosting trainings are exciting examples of this trend.

Young leaders from The Transition Towns Movement, Avaaz, The Impact Hub, AIESEC and many other organizations are looking to collaborative social technologies as an alternative to traditional adversarial-based models of organizing.

When we connect as elder and younger leaders across generations around questions that are fundamental to this pivotal time in our human evolution, we are discovering that each generation has unique contributions to make, and a role to play as part of a collective response to the times we are living in.

Working in multi-generational teams is not always easy as we confront unconscious and limiting assumptions based on traditional paradigms around “appropriate behavior” for people at different stages of our lives and careers. This opens a rich exploration about what unique gifts each generation brings and an active inquiry into the dynamics of power and privilege.

To keep evolving our work and leverage the impact we are working to create, it is critical we have strategic conversations across generations in the corporate world as well as in government and social sectors. This is no easy task, as our society by and large creates structures that separate younger and older generations.

The fact that multi-generational collaboration is becoming more common despite the challenges we face signals a great opportunity to model our learning across generations with colleagues and clients. All of us are needed, now more than ever.

The Next Generation

Going back and drawing on our history and the lineage of these practices and connecting to our elders and other like-minded explorers gives us a sense of identity, and – beyond our different identities and practices – the knowledge that we are part of a shared, unfolding story. Together we are creating a more life-affirming society.

As the next generation of change agents, it is important that we are rigorous in learning the basic moves of the dance of change, becoming skilled in the use of the methodologies and social technologies that can help us be more awake and take wiser action together. Having a solid understanding and experience of

these practices allows us to explore blending and combining them, to respond to unique needs and contexts.

We need to both understand our lineage, and dare to move beyond what our elders showed us; to be fluid with our strategies; to courageously bring in what is needed to create deeper connections and more effective collaborations; to make contributions that shape our future in a more conscious way.

Stories of Central Garden Practice

To move beyond form you must first know form.

~ Robert Frager, Aikido Sensei

The co-evolution of our social technologies and growing access to the depth of collective intelligence available in the Central Garden is already happening around the globe. Committed practitioners of social technologies are connecting and working together as friends and colleagues to strengthen our common work of creating a more just and peaceful world.

During a gathering of World Café stewards in Brazil in January 2011, the image of the Central Garden was born as a shared metaphor when the gathering expanded from global founders and stewards and practitioners of the World Café in Latin America to Latin American stewards for Art of Hosting, Open Space Technology, Presencing Institute, Society for Organizational Learning, Reos Partners and Appreciative Inquiry. The inquiry into the meaning and possibilities inherent in the concept of a Central Garden was beautiful, heartfelt, and exciting, providing a model for exploring similar questions in future gatherings.

Mille Bojer, Co-founder of Reos Partners, reflected on this opportunity:

“There is now enough maturity and a clear enough sense of individual identity to reach beyond any individual methodology to the collective field of possibility that resides in our midst”.

Over the last two or three decades these social technologies have been tested in government, business and the nonprofit sector. A Central Garden ecology of practice presents the opportunity to contribute jointly to an even greater potential for large systems impact around the globe. This can happen, as we are already beginning to see, because the principles and practices of social and organizational change have been ripening, deepening, and expanding, due to the work that many of us have been doing in our own spheres of influence and impact.

In the European Commission, Art of Hosting practitioners have introduced “Participatory Practices” including World Cafe, Open Space, and Circle at every level of scale throughout the institution. Citizen Cafes in Vorarlberg, Austria utilize the World Cafe and Dynamic Facilitation to build the empathetic capacity of Austrian citizens to welcome and integrate refugees. The Nexus gatherings, initiated by Prof. Steven Cady of Bowling Green University, and a 2012 “Butterfly Moment” gathering that included founders and senior practitioners called by Peter Block, author of *Stewardship* and Toke Moller, co-founder of the Art of Hosting are further examples that reflect our sense that “something is happening here” – something that has great potential.

In 2015 the Presencing Institute launched the u.Lab as a learning experience to invite a new perspective on societal transformation. More than 40.000 people joined this MOOC to learn, be creative together and create prototypes of the sustainable future they sensed was possible. Over the years, a collaboration between the global network of Impact Hubs coworking spaces, the content of the Presencing Institute and the hosting skills of the Art of Hosting community

created a strategic collaboration with the intention to create transformational learning spaces and prototypes to transform society.

Another successful Central Garden initiative was started by Art of Hosting and World Cafe practitioner Lina Cramer as part of a collaborative response to challenging issues around parenting. Partnering with social service agencies in Dade County, Illinois and the local YMCA, Lina and her colleagues pioneered a series of Parent Cafes. People – young, old, single, and partnered (whether opposite or same sex) – who were facing parenting challenges were able to come together to talk about them in a supportive atmosphere where many resources were available. It turned out that the resource with the most value was access to each other. They were able to help themselves and each other at the same time. These Parent Cafes are still active and have now been embedded in the social services system in that region.

Influenced by the success of the Parent Cafes, another collaborative project called Bridging the Divide was born. Bridging the Divide is a coalition between Dade County police departments and the YMCA where ongoing World Cafes between local youth groups and police officers have begun to transform these traditionally difficult relationships. In a World Cafe training, one of the police officers said that participating in the World Cafes had totally changed her perspective. Rather than viewing the youth in the neighborhoods she was patrolling with suspicion as potential threats, she noticed that after having gotten to know some of them, she saw them as community members she was charged with protecting. This program, too, has become embedded in the regional social systems.

These stories are examples of expanding the Central Garden concepts we're exploring here to include not only collaboration between participatory practices like World Cafe and the Art of Hosting, but also direct collaborative coalitions

between dialogic practice and those with whom we are working to change the systems we are part of.

Work within the Central Garden of participatory practice is done in a spirit of generosity and mutual sharing, with the intention to build collective capacity. There is a feeling of family in how we are relating and supporting each other. The founders/discoverers of many of our methodologies and practices have often been close friends, in constant conversation and mutual learning.

As we practice and master different tools and methods for installing more life-affirming change we see the unique contribution of each of these methods and are able to step beyond our own methodology and connect with others.

We are coming to see how these doorways to collective intelligence and wise action overlap in practice and invite us to explore some deeper questions about our common work.

Many of the questions that surfaced in the writing of “Notes on the idea of the Central Garden” are still very much alive for us, as we keep exploring ways to strengthen our practice in the central garden:

- What is the deeper work that we are really practicing and stewarding?
- How do we leverage larger systems of influence in creating the shifts we seek?
- What is the role of friendship, love, and loyalty in fueling the sustainability of the cross-method collaborations we are already witnessing?
- How do we navigate the challenges of collaboration, especially when things don’t go as smoothly as we hoped or expected?

- What is the role of our individual and collective communities of practice at this unique moment of both peril and promise?

We believe that we are at a moment where together we can begin to recognize and honor the deeper Source that connects all of these collaborative doorways for shaping positive futures and explore the behaviors and principles that underlie the co-evolution of our common work.

The Promise of the Central Garden

Jazz is about freedom within discipline.

~ Dave Brubeck

As our capacity for collaboration and co-creation increases, much more becomes possible. As the examples of cross-method and cross-sector collaboration show, working together we can and do create profound change in the social systems we are part of.

We see the promise of Central Garden practice as all of us working together from a place of creative freedom and choice, doing what it takes to find solutions that are Life-affirming.

Larger systemic ripples come from even small shifts. When we are able to think and act together with shared purpose, to further a common cause without individual gain as motivation, social impact at larger and larger scale becomes possible. The ultimate promise of the Central Garden is a culture of collaboration and co-creation in the service of new solutions to shared challenges.

Otto Scharmer, co-founder of the Theory U process talks about this shift using the language “from ego to eco”. Written to describe economic challenges, in his book *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies* Scharmer also speaks to the larger context when he says we need to

“... update our economic logic and operating system from an obsolete “ego-system” focused entirely on the wellbeing of oneself to an eco-system awareness that emphasizes the well-being of the whole.”

There are many others pioneering new approaches to common dilemmas working throughout the world. This group may not yet be in the majority, but it’s clear that a cultural sea-change is happening, and the numbers are growing.

Part of this sea change has to do with shifting models of leadership – from the more individualistic competitive (patriarchal) model that has characterized so much of our recent global history to a more collaborative, mutually supportive model associated with a positive feminine archetype.

The feminine archetype of collaboration is of course embodied in both men and women. By cultivating the central garden across our unique professional identities and boundaries, together we are cultivating the capacities needed for the large system and global impact we yearn for.

One of the qualities of collective emergence in action is that things reveal themselves that no one individual imagined or thought possible. As we inquire more deeply and intentionally into the central garden and its potential, we have the sense that something beyond our current collective knowing is emerging. Our imagination is being engaged in new ways.

We have been developing, honing and cultivating doorways to collective intelligence and committed action on critical issues with great success for three decades. And, finding our way has not always been easy.

Collaboration requires a certain stick-to-it-iveness that is sometimes challenging. Learning how to strengthen the relational field among colleagues from different portals grows our capacity to create systems of influence that none of us could have created by ourselves or even imagined only a few years ago. Our times are calling us to practice emergence and to be open to discovering the principles of conscious evolution, even when we cannot see the path forward.

We believe it is time to step up even more boldly and courageously with what we know works.

Beehive Productions

One of the ways we are doing our part to live into this promised future is in the work the authors are doing together at Beehive Productions. By offering learning spaces that connect people, places and communities of practice, we are creating a Central Garden of both professional skill development and shared meaning-making.

As key practitioners in two strong participatory communities – the World Cafe and the Art of Hosting – we had already worked together for many years, successfully offering online trainings to the Art of Hosting community. As it turns out, the Art of Hosting was a perfect place to begin, as it already embodies so much of the Central Garden ethos.

We started Beehive Productions with the conscious intention to increase skill and build capacity within the larger Central Garden of participatory practitioners; to offer opportunities to come together in online courses that showcase and build upon our best collective thinking *across practices* and make them inclusive and accessible.

We have focused our work on deepening our collective practice within the following six areas that help guide our learning and strengthen the underlying capacities needed for creative collaboration and conversational leadership:



Creating the Conditions

How do we create the right conditions for successful collaboration and participatory processes?

Hosting Conversations

What tools, methodologies, and practices can we develop and cultivate to host conversations that matter?

Harvesting and Sense-Making

How do we collectively learn, make sense of, and share the results of our conversations and processes?

Personal Practice

What personal practices do we need to cultivate in order to lead and host ourselves and others?

Collaboration

How do we work together to create teams and organizations that lead to more learning and meaningful results?

Understanding Systems

How do we understand and affect the systems we are part of and work within?

Our intention has been to reach beyond our “home” communities of Art of Hosting and World Cafe to create a learning space where everyone feels welcome; peer-learning environments where collective participation and cross-pollination are intrinsically designed into the experience.

Although we each have facilitation practices that include face-to-face engagement, we chose to focus Beehive Productions on online interaction. One of the primary reasons for that is because the communities we serve are international. Working online enables us to connect diverse practitioners from all over the world in constellations that would rarely happen otherwise. Working online also makes this financially viable and offers us an array of innovative new ways of working together creatively.

Beehive Productions is values-driven, built on principles that we believe in passionately and use to define the ways we choose to live and work.

The learning experiences we create at Beehive Productions are based on the idea that the knowledge we need belongs to us all. We are committed to making our offerings accessible to everyone who wants to participate – no one is ever turned away for lack of financial capital. We harvest what we are learning and make it available to the wider public. We feel that these choices, too, are part of Central Garden practice.

By explicitly inviting a diversity of experience and perspective when we create new offerings and decide who to collaborate with, we bring people together who may not have had the chance to meet and learn from and with each other before. We've found that when we can invite participants to lay down some of the pre-judgements we all have about practices that differ from ours and listen more closely to what really matters, that there is a kind of common "heart" to the work we are all engaged in. There is something in each practice that mirrors the "deeper work" at the core of each one. Focus on the deeper work reveals a harmonic resonance in the relationships between practices that are answering a similar "call" to step up and be of service in the world today.

Our hope is to illuminate this harmonic relationship in order to create a “community of communities” and unleash the collective capacity we have to achieve much more together than any of us could do alone.

“Life, in all its evolutionary wisdom, manages ecosystems of unfathomable beauty, ever evolving toward more wholeness, complexity, and consciousness.”

~ Frederic Laloux, *Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations*

Closing

We see this article as a “seed” and hope that it will go on to bear fruit in other ways that explore the many ways these basic ideas may be extended and applied; that it will stimulate new conversations about possibilities we can hardly imagine now and serve to surface more and more enlivening stories of where we are already living into the promised future, today.

About the Authors

Amy Lenzo

A global leader in designing and facilitating participatory engagement online, Amy Lenzo has two decades of years of experience in the field. Her company, [weDialogue](#) brings together state-of-the-art digital technology, dialogic social methodologies, and earth-connected hosting for an international clientele and collaboratively-produced learning programs.

Rowan Simonsen

Rowan has been actively organizing events and strategic conversations since 2004 with the Art of Hosting. He is driven by a love for learning in and from nature and for hosting spaces for conversation that matter.

Rowan has worked with leadership development and participatory processes in all sectors and is currently focused on how to help strengthen rural communities to become more resilient, creative and connected. Rowan lives with his wife and two daughters in Colombia.

Amy and Rowan founded [Beehive Productions](#) in 2016.

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