

# **Radical Empowerment: Reflection on the Bowen "Art of Hosting" Retreat**

**By Dave Pollard**

Leaving the rarefied atmosphere of Rivendell is a bit like a crash landing after a visit to a distant world.

I was privileged to spend three days this week in retreat with thirty extraordinary people from across North America -- thirty people with the knowledge, capacities, passion and intention to facilitate meaningful conversations on subjects important to the participants and to the world, subjects that are often difficult, complex, and intractable.

The program is called The Art of Hosting, and it presents a full set of facilitation methods and techniques -- Open Space, world cafe, appreciative inquiry, conversation circle, consensus building and others -- plus discussions on when each is appropriate, and the opportunity to practice each with one's peers.

The practitioners in this retreat were quite advanced. For most of them, facilitation is how they make their living, and these three days were their opportunity to compare notes and hone their skills.

My initial training was earlier this year in Australia with Viv McWaters and Brian Bainbridge, and since then I've become aware that this network of practitioners is global, powerfully connected, and driven to be of use, to make a difference, to make the world a better place. These people are not in any sense like the old style of facilitation consultants, who took instruction from senior executives with a predetermined agenda and pushed participants to deliver on it. Even worse, these old-style arrogant consultants sometimes introduced their own 'expert' point of view into the discussion (usually to the detriment of all).

By contrast, practitioners of this new set of facilitation or 'hosting' techniques aspire to nothing more or less than *to enable more effective conversations leading to peer-consensual decisions*

*and self-selected follow-up actions.* If the participants do not have the complete freedom to decide and to do what they in their collective wisdom know is right, then the responsible facilitator will simply refuse the assignment up front as a fraud.

It is hard to overstate how radical this is. It is a reassertion of democratic principles, personal responsibility, true empowerment and the wisdom of crowds. It is a rebuff to the infallibility and 'greater wisdom' of executives, managers, consultants and 'experts'. Practitioners of these techniques can be catalysts for important and truly revolutionary change, and in large calcified organizations, public and private, it may well be the *only* way to bring about significant change at all.

It is a recognition that the vast majority of actual work that gets done in organizations, the vast majority of value actually created, is the result of bottom-up decisions, workarounds and changes (often hidden from management for fear of retribution for violating official policies) made by the thousands of individual workers on the front lines. Those of us who have worked with large organizations recognize that they are substantially incapable of innovation, and that they drive their mavericks, bright thinkers, and imaginative people out, while absurdly over-rewarding (and over-punishing when things go badly) their senior executives. The potential 'facilitated re-democratization' of previously hierarchical organizations could reverse this brain drain and reverse their creative stagnation, to staggering effect.

I think the people who are doing this groundbreaking work realize the power it has, and that's why they have embraced it with such passion and have been relentless in urging their customers and potential customers to use these techniques to set their employees (and in a way *their* customers as well) free, free to do *their* best work.

As our world enters a period of unprecedented challenges and uncertainties, the success of these people to spread this new way of learning, decision-making and acting could well be pivotal to our economy's and our civilization's ability to cope, improvise and perhaps even survive.

As we went into the third and final day of the retreat, I began trying to figure out what it is that

makes these thirty people, and those increasing numbers like them around the world, so extraordinary, to the point that I actually *ached* leaving them. The intellectual and emotional high I received in their company has been followed by the typical withdrawal symptoms of quitting a euphoric drug cold turkey. Since I left a few hours ago I find most 'outside' people annoying, unbearable. For three days we were the type of intentional community that idealists only dream of. Now bland, desperate reality with its horrific imaginative poverty and ignorance has reemerged as the terrible reality of most of this world.

The world needs these revolutionary facilitators, these artful hosts, and thousands, millions more like them, self-organizing, connecting, smashing learned helplessness, corpocracy, hierarchy, bureaucracy, and inertia.

While this list is probably incomplete, here are the qualities and capacities I recognized in these amazing people:

- a thirst for truth, and an insistence on speaking the truth and being honest to a fault
- extraordinary perceptiveness, attentiveness, and presence
- intellectual and emotional sensitivity
- an almost erotic level of passion and energy
- total dedication to their chosen practices, pursued as *lifelong* practices, through which they seek only to get better (i.e. no expectation of mastery)
- great instincts
- wonderful improvisational skills
- a love of aesthetics, and not inconsiderable artistic and creative talent (my sketchbook yesterday was my struggle to keep up, as they all seem to be able to draw brilliantly)
- a high level of self-confidence, but never arrogance (in fact, humility)
- a desire to be of use and service to others, and the courage to do that anytime, anywhere (though when I asked them they said it was the only thing they could conceive of doing that would have meaning for them, so it wasn't courageous at all)
- exceptional communication skills -- oral, written, and *non-verbal*
- delightful imaginations

- great trust and respect for each other and for others who are, like them, dedicated to unselfish pursuits
- an aversion to power, and the use of power, and aversion to hierarchy and the cult of leadership
- great intelligence, knowledge and curiosity
- a subtle and gentle sense of humour, sometimes self-deprecating, never cruel or demeaning of others

Where did these people come from? Most of them are drop-outs from jobs in which they were absurdly under-employed. Most of them are substantially *self*-educated -- they are extremely well-read and have exceptional vocabularies despite not having much more formal education than the average North American. They come from caring, informed parents. Two thirds of them are women. One third of them are LGBT. They skew towards boomer age but there is a healthy range of ages, and their children seem destined to follow in their footprints. They love language. Most of them work in the public sector, as social entrepreneurs. They have amazing networks that became much more amazing this week.

I expect my euphoria from this week will wear off, but I am determined to find a way to sustain the incredible sense of peace, joy, openness, connection and presence I found and felt this week.

Those of you from Rivendell who are reading this, thank you, my amazing new friends, artful hosts all, for the privilege of your company. You have filled my heart with love and joy and hope. The conversation started before it began, and it will continue long after it ends.