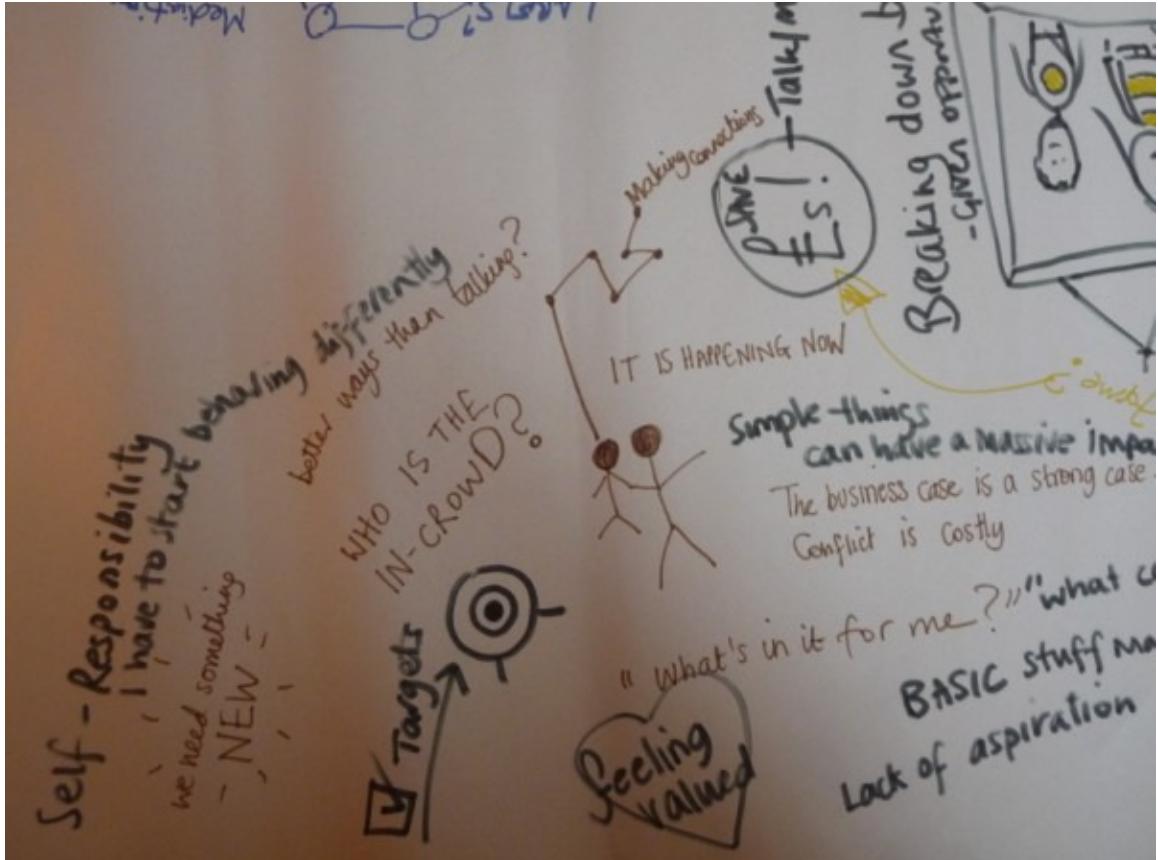


# THE ART OF HOSTING & HARVESTING CONVERSATION THAT MATTER



## WHAT NEW QUESTIONS DOES LEEDS NEED TO BE ASKING ITSELF FOR THE 21st CENTURY?



On 28 September 28th 2009, 82 people from Leeds and West Yorkshire came along to Boddington Hall to hear about the **'Art of Hosting & Harvesting Conversations that Matter'**, an event organised by the Leeds based organisation Together for Peace.

The event was set up as a taster for a full four-day training in January 2010 and was offered to leaders, facilitators, managers, teachers, politicians, entrepreneurs, social innovators, community and youth workers in Leeds. Anyone interested or wanting to experience a different perspective on setting free other people's creativity and intelligence to achieve better cooperation and results together.

The core purpose of the afternoon was to offer a taste of Art of Hosting in Leeds, to share the practice of a relational way of working and to work on what really matters together. This newsletter contains essences of what happened.

## WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

Linda Mitchell offered a welcome to everyone who had come along today, from health, education, local authorities, community cohesion, faith and from the many grass roots organisations across the city. What an amazing bunch of people to turn up with their curiosity. She introduced the art of hosting team of Sarah Whitley (a Yorkshire lass but now living in Greece) Toke Møller from Denmark, Phil Cass from Columbus Ohio, Maria Scordialos from Greece



and Jill, Ed and Mike from Together for Peace.

Linda spoke about her experience, of hosting conversations using processes like open space and world café which really could transform meeting spaces into places where people showed up in all their glory, places where people took part, hierarchy was dealt with and collective wisdom emerged. – Linda's question was, "*what if simply convening meetings in a different way was enough by itself to achieve the changes we are all looking for?*"

Mike Love then spoke about how for a long time he had been convinced that if we could work together across all sectors, in the same way as Common Purpose connected people in Leeds, then Leeds really could achieve its potential. He felt that the time had come for us to find new more human ways of working together. The question he was holding was "*what kind of city could we have if we had conversation scored for all the many voices?*".



## CHECK-IN & CAFE CONVERSATION

Linda invited people to check in with others at their tables about what had brought them here today, where they had come from and what were they curious about.



Maria Scordialos thanked Linda and Mike for the invitation to Leeds, she had shown up today because two friends had invited her and asked her to come and share what she did and what she knew, so she was simply here as a friend.



Maria spoke about how we were living in extraordinary times, that much was dying and changing and much newness was emerging. There was a lot that was no longer working and the need for new solutions were calling us together. What were people noticing about this time in Leeds and what was calling us together?

At the heart of Art of Hosting was the simple human competence that we all already know, of good quality conversation. So she was inviting us all into a good conversation now around our question:

*What time is it in Leeds, our city that calls us together?*



People had a couple of rounds of conversation with the opportunity to mix up and carry their conversations to new tables and speak to new people.

Maria then invited each table to reflect on what they had been talking about, Their collective insights were harvested by speaking aloud to the room 'the questions that mattered to us now' and 'how hosting and harvesting conversations might serve.'

As people came to the microphone to read aloud their questions a ripple of energy ran round the room, it was as if we all recognised the simplicity and truth of what was being spoken. The first person spoke of Trust and asked **how can we restore more trust between us?** trust that generates new stories, that communicate rather than just asking for accountability. A few shouts of BINGO as people recognised their own questions in that one. **How can we become more human?** was number two, then they came thick and fast, each one delivered with real commitment and intention.





## **How could hosting and harvesting conversations that matter serve us at this time?**

*Give us opportunities for storytelling, sharing human growth*

*By involving everyone to have a say/voice in what is seen as success (not just economic)*

*Hosting and harvesting would enable pictures to be gathered to show what Leeds has been, is and will become*

*To help generate a social movement with relationship at its core - that inspires us all to rise above the systems that control us, divide us and disempower us.*

*Conversation face to face rather than twitter allows opportunity for change/action rather than just more chatter*

*Recapture healthy debate, learn from different perspectives, make it about people again*

*Help to create dialogue to bring grassroots up feedback into every institution*

*By enabling us to discover common values as a spur to action.*

*Real conversations... would result in people coming away from them with a sense of what is possible + empowered to take personal responsibility for 'my' part in it- what I do matters.*

*Use dialogue + negotiating to find out what the baseline values are*

*Hearing each other's common needs and acting on it*

*Help us to see things from a different perspective - really*

# TEACHING SESSION

After a break for coffee we returned to an open circle. Maria began by explaining that we were going to have a short teaching session to give people a taste of some of the fundamentals of art of hosting. She spoke of 5 basic assumptions:



- The world needs new solutions, the way we have been working in our world no longer serves us
- We find those new solutions in the space between the word chaos and order, it's the space between knowing and not knowing, we need collective courage to be in places of not knowing
- As human beings we have one core competence, which is having conversations that really matter. Not talking shop conversations which don't take us anywhere. If we practice conversations like we just did, we surface powerful questions
- If we are in meaningful conversations with our hearts open it does lead to action

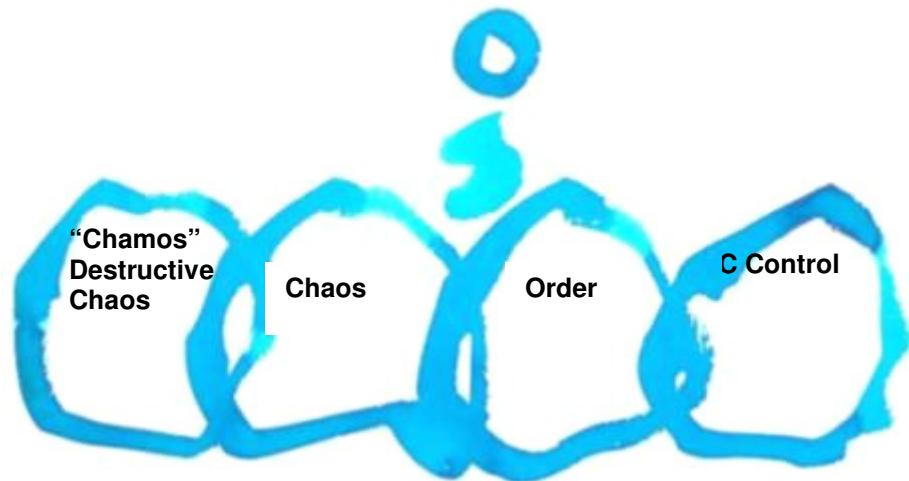
- It's time to pay attention to organising as a living system not as machines, not time to explain all this but 3 elements of it are:
  - based on relationship, each of us knowing each other and creating relationship
  - self organisation, no one tells us what to do or how to do it, we know
  - Clarity of purpose is the thing we self organise around

Toke talked about the basic organising pattern of sitting together in circles



and invited us onto the floor (if our pants were not too fine) to hear him speak about the chaordic space. He played a rap by Tim Merry called **time to awaken** so we didn't take ourselves too seriously (Linda has a copy of the rap if anyone wants it)

**Emergence  
(of new awareness &  
new solutions)**



Toke spoke of walking the path between chaos and order, the chaordic path. He talked about our need to give up power and hierarchy, and collectively move through conflict and confusion towards clarity. He spoke of some work that was currently being done in the European Commission with commissioners wishing to learn more about a new form of participatory leadership.

We shy away from disagreement and conflict or hope that someone else will deal with it, but that isn't good enough. We have to work together and walk through our fears. How? By having good questions that draw us and by having real commitment to conversations that matter.

Someone asked about the Nazis, how do you have dialogue with those who are fundamentally at odds with your beliefs? Toke replied he didn't know, as he hadn't lived in that time. But suspected that if he had, he would have fought them with every bit of strength he had. There are certain things you just can't accept, for example he was currently doing some work right under the nose of Mugabe.

BUT we do have to create the space to diffuse conflict, yes its important not to be too idealistic, but right now our service is offered for peace. Toke likes to think he could have had a conversation with a Nazi. 'We have to work with the willing and awaken the citizen in all of us'. The best people to have conversations with about conflict are the grandmothers. Someone spoke about justice circles in Rwanda and South Africa.

Phil went on to talk about his experiences of hosting as a place where people experience healing. Phil is involved in health care in the US but is aware of the need for those of us drawn to this type of work to get strong enough to hold the pain of hearing some of these stories.



Phil spoke about his experiences of how Art of Hosting played out in his city Columbus Ohio. He had met Toke in 2002 they contracted together by shaking hands, to do some work to find a new way for workers in the city to be together, to work together.

Seeing the possibility of conversation as a mechanism to do that intrigued Phil. He was asking, "what might happen if I drew city leaders together to train in hosting conversations? Could I intentionally train in dialogue and conversation across the city? Could we shift the quality of civic dialogue, was I crazy or just a bit crazy?"

In 2005 there was the first training of 36 leaders. Now there are 350 conversation hosts in the city including the police and fire departments, education, social work and even the parks department.

He knows of one operating theatre where they host the patient and even have a conversation before surgery. One neighbourhood in the city is currently planning a 35,000 citizen dialogue about the 2015 master plan for the area. They want to involve people and not make it just about zones and planning but about the quality of life. Hosting is helping to make that happen

There was then a bit of time for people to reflect on what they had heard today. Sarah explained there were many forms to hosting and they had been modelled here, hosting process, hosting space and hosting meaning and harvesting.

She invited people into a final conversation about what people had heard and experienced today – *How might this apply to their own work, what would being a host mean to them individually?*



## END OF THE AFTERNOON

Linda ended the afternoon by thanking everybody for having given their time so generously. She looked forward to welcoming the hosting team back to Leeds in January for the 4 day training, where those of us that were interested would be able to deepen our understanding of hosting and work together on more connections for future work and better conversation practice.

Full details of the training will be out soon but the dates are:

**21<sup>st</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> January 2010.**

It's going to be a non-residential event (Art of Hosting trainings are usually residential) as we can't find the right residential venue, and will be in Leeds or very nearby. There will be a cost, but this is not a profit-making venture and we will look to provide some subsidised places.

Linda asked people to leave any ideas they had about what would make a Leeds Art of Hosting training amazing, the following comments were left:

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- Hold it in the Town Hall/Civic
  - Having people there who make decisions on a strategic level
  - Please include some outcomers from South Yorkshire
  - A 2-way graffiti wall?
  - How does this work with people who are not used to putting their voice across in the most deprived community settings? The areas that perhaps most need this 'healing'.
  - Need to reach the disaffected + not just like minded
  - We need city-wide' places' to have capture/conversations. How can we build up to do this as a city?
  - Space to discuss politics 'new party or movement' or alliances
  - Weekends are really difficult for people with kids
  - To incorporate/set up a Community event
  - Within school hours? (9-3)
  - Is there an art of opening conversations where there are very strong differences in values (a coded way of asking about political division)

**THANK YOU TO  
ALL**

