come together
the mystery of collective intelligence
by Craig Hamilton
The Mission of *What Is Enlightenment?* magazine

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It’s July 2003, and fifteen top telecom executives have gathered at a small island retreat off the coast of Maine. Tensions are high as they head into a three-day summit to discuss the future of the industry. Since the advent of wireless service and the web, companies have been scrambling to stay ahead of the technological curve, and amid growing market competition, it has become clear that some new thinking is needed.

For the first two days, the talks are frustrating. Experts take turns trading theories and speculations, but everyone remains guarded. Finally, at the suggestion of one executive, on the third morning a “dialogue facilitator” is flown in to try to bring the group together. After giving a brief introduction about the importance of listening and suspending assumptions, and a plea to remember the common goal that brought them together, the meeting begins. Already, there is a different quality in the room. Around the circle, people seem more relaxed and more attentive to one another. A few minutes into the discussion, the CEO of one of the large wireless providers shares his vision: “I think we need to stop thinking of our work in purely business terms,” he states, pausing, groping for words. “What if we began to see one another not simply as competitors for market share, but as partners in uniting the world through technology? If you really think about it, in a sense, isn’t our larger mission to create the infrastructure that will make it possible for the Global Village to become a real community?” His openness seems to catch everyone off guard, and for the first time all weekend, there is a brief silence. In this silence, an almost imperceptible, vibrant energy begins to grow in the room. “I’m glad you had the guts to say it,” another executive offers. “I think we’ve all grown tired of just chasing the bottom line.” “I agree,” a third adds. “If there’s anything this industry needs right now, it’s vision.”

The shift in the group is now becoming palpable, and several people comment on it. There is an electricity in the air and a sense of space that seems to envelop everyone. More members join in, and as each
individual speaks, it seems to pull the group deeper into a unity, not only of interest but of vision. Several people try to speak at once, only to burst into laughter upon discovering that they all spontaneously had the same idea. A creativity seems to swirl in the room, carrying everyone with it, and a mysterious recognition begins to dawn in the group that they are no longer operating as separate individuals but are actually thinking together. Hours pass, but nobody wants to stop. Eventually, the meeting comes to a natural close, and everyone sits together in silence for a few minutes. Nobody knows what has happened. But they all know it was important.

In a world where many of us are still apt to think that there is nothing genuinely new under the sun, something seems to be emerging on our collective frontier. Around the country and across the globe, from corporate boardrooms to social change think tanks, people are responding to an impulse to come together in shared exploration. And in their midst, something miraculous is being born. “When the group reaches a certain level of coherence, generally there’s some higher level of order that comes into the room and it’s very noticeable to people,” explains organizational consultant Robert Kenny. “It’s like something has shifted. People stop fighting for airspace and there’s a kind of group intuition that develops. It’s almost like the group as a whole becomes a tuning fork for the inflow of wisdom.”

Call it collective consciousness, team synergy, co-intelligence, or group mind—a growing number of people are discovering through their own experience that wholes are indeed far more than the sum of their parts; that when individuals come together with a shared intention, in a conducive environment, something mysterious can come into being, with capacities and intelligences that far transcend those of the individuals involved.

“In these group experiences, people have access to a kind of knowing that’s bigger than what we normally experience with each other,” describes author and researcher Carol Frenier. “You feel the presence of the sacred, and you sense that everybody else in the group is also feeling that. There’s a sense of openness and awareness of something larger than yourself. Your ability to communicate seems broader. What is astounding to people is how much creativity comes forth in a setting like that. You have a sense that the whole group is creating together, and you don’t quite exactly know how.”

As Frenier, Kenny, and a growing cadre of other researchers in this new field are finding, it seems that in the spaces between us, unexpected higher-order collective potentials can emerge that make even our greatest individual capacities look insignificant by comparison. And the implications for the way we understand ourselves and the way we work together are as startling as they are profound. Juanita Brown, author of the forthcoming The World Café: Bringing Conversation to Life, observes, “What’s happening in these settings is that you’re actually bringing up the new. That’s what makes it so exciting for people to be a part of. You’re bringing up the next level—whether it’s deeper or higher or broader—and people sense that there’s something there of immense value. Sometimes it shows up in the inner experience, either individually or collectively, as an ‘Aha!’ Other times, everybody will go silent, because they’re all reflecting on what has just been revealed. It’s almost like a revelation of some sort makes itself visible.”

If you’ve never read a book about this “collective intelligence,” you’re not alone. Despite its widespread emergence, it’s a phenomenon that until recently has almost escaped the lens of the social sciences. For the past decade or so, this nascent social dynamic has been quietly simmering on the cultural back burn-
ers, slowly building up steam for the moment when it would burst forth into full boil—a moment that may have just arrived. Thanks to the strong voices of a few key movers and shakers, this newly recognized potential is rapidly catching the attention of a growing number of innovators intrigued by the possibility of harnessing the creative power of collectives toward the resolution of our most complex problems.

Google “collective consciousness” and you’ll get over 64,000 results. “Collective intelligence” brings 30,000; “group mind,” 20,000. A visit to some of the sites listed reveals a host of new organizations with names like the Co-Intelligence Institute, the Collective Wisdom Initiative, and community-intelligence.com, all dedicated to chronicling and furthering our understanding of higher-order group functioning. Peppered throughout the latest literature on leading-edge organizational development are an ever-growing number of references to concepts like “developing group synergy,” “tapping the group mind,” “unleashing collective creativity,” and “developing team coordination.” In increasingly diverse fields of endeavor, it seems, the power of the collective is coming to the fore.

The fact that coordinated teams faced with a common task can access higher levels of functioning is, of course, not a new revelation. Ask a sampling of soldiers who faced combat in a platoon whether they ever experienced a heightened awareness of the whole, or even a “group mind,” and you might be surprised to find how many will have a sense of what you’re talking about. Indeed, rescue crews, sports teams, dance troupes, and music ensembles have for years been reporting remarkable experiences of team synergy or group flow that have lifted them to undreamt-of heights of coordination and effectiveness. Add to that several millennia of group worship and other shared religious practice, and you might be inclined to ask what the fuss is all about. From a certain point of view, it could be argued, experiences of communion are as old as the tribe. However, what seems to be new about what’s happening today is that this phenomenon is not only arising spontaneously in increasingly diverse groups throughout the world but, according to Otto Scharmer, cofounder of the MIT Leadership Lab, “more and more people are having this type of experience in the context of everyday work and professional settings. What’s interesting today is that this kind of experience is something that no longer occurs in retreat from doing your real work, but in the midst of doing your real work—particularly when the work is related to profound social change and innovation.”

How to account for this new emergence is not entirely clear. Perhaps in our increasingly secular global culture, the sacred dimension is simply being forced to find new, more secular channels by which to make itself known in the world. Or it could be that, in response to mounting threats to our very survival, a kind of adaptive impulse is arising in the species, calling us to come together. As Juanita Brown puts it, “Perhaps in the face of the collective danger we’re experiencing, our collective survival instincts are waking up and we’re searching for a way to pass forward that will not be suicidal.” But among those who experience it, there is an increasing sense that whatever is bringing this collective awakening about, its implications are nothing short of evolutionary. As Bill Veltrop, former Exxon executive and founder of the International Center for Organization Design, puts it, “We’re absolutely convinced that we’re experiencing the beginnings of an evolutionary shift that’s greater than anything we’ve ever experienced . . . as [a] society.”
OF COURSE, FOR MOST OF US IN THE CONTEMPORARY WEST, the idea of becoming part of a “group mind” hardly sounds inviting. In a postmodern culture that has elevated individuality, independence, and autonomy to near-sacred status, the thought of a “collective consciousness” is likely to send many of us running for the nearest mountaintop. What Star Trek fan would disagree that of all the formidable foes faced by Captain Picard and the Next Generation crew, none was as intimidating as the “collective entity” known as “The Borg”? Traveling from planet to planet, “assimilating” every intelligent species it encountered into its own ever-expanding communal mind, this archenemy of interplanetary biodiversity was not only a cleverly imagined cosmic villain but also a clear reflection of our cultural wariness around anything resembling group consciousness. A wariness that’s not unwarranted.

From the witch hunts of the Middle Ages to the great social experiments of the past century, history has shown us more than enough evidence of the horrors that groups can perpetrate when mobilized behind a destructive ideology. And in case Nazism and Stalinism hadn’t struck quite close enough to home for those of us in the democratic West, in 1972, Yale psychologist Irving Janis sounded a wake-up call to us all with his landmark study on the dangers of “groupthink.” Analyzing some of the major U.S. foreign policy fiascoes of the mid-twentieth century, Janis demonstrated that the forces that drive collectives to bad and sometimes perilous decisions were alive and well, even in groups driven by more wholesome aspirations. In cohesive decision-making groups of all kinds, Janis found, our most basic social drives for belonging and acceptance become magnified, giving rise to an unhealthy climate of conformity in which important questions never get asked.

There may, however, be more to our cultural paranoia around groups than meets the eye. For, upon closer examination, our resistance to being part of a collective reveals itself to be rooted in something more fundamental than a fear of coming to a misguided decision, or even of being swept into dangerous collective madness. Is not our most basic fear of collectives a fear of losing our individuality, our autonomy—and thus, our freedom—in the group? As the Borg story makes clear, it is hard for most of us to imagine a collective consciousness that does not inherently suppress our independence, our liberty to think and act for ourselves. And while at first glance this fear seems well-founded, it does beg an important question: How independent are we really?

Insightful observers, from anthropologist Gregory Bateson to Gautama the Buddha, have been telling us for millennia that despite our perception of ourselves as “independent thinkers,” most of us rarely, if ever, have a truly independent thought pass through our heads. In describing culture as “an ecology of mind,” Bateson illuminated the fact that our thinking is, on the deepest level, conditioned by the narratives of the social environment in which we live. As consciousness researcher Chris Bache explains it, “While individuality is extremely precious and extraordinarily important from an evolutionary perspective, if you look carefully at what that individuality is, you find that it’s an open system which reflects...
the larger cultural and psychological history of the species.” Then there’s the evidence from developmental psychology that even our minds themselves only develop in relationship with other minds, that if left in isolation during our formative years, we would end up with but a fraction of our current cognitive and emotional capacity. Add to that the growing body of scientific research which suggests that our minds are not “locked” in our brains at all, but are actually fields that constantly interact with one another to create larger social fields with a tremendous influence on our behavior, and our fear of losing our independence begins to look like a bit of a red herring.

In light of these findings, the issue, then, does not seem to be so much whether it’s a good thing to be part of a group mind. If what this research is telling us is true, in some sense, for better or for worse, we already are. From this perspective, the real question facing us is: What sort of group mind are we a part of? Fortunately, in this new emerging collective consciousness, a radical alternative to the dangers of “groupthink” seems to be afoot. “This type of collective is very different than the old way of thinking about the collective, in which the individuals are subordinated or diminished,” Otto Scharmer observes. “In this new type of collective, the individual is actually enhanced. One has the experience that this way of operating actually connects one to one’s highest future potential.” According to Scharmer and others who have experienced the emergence of this collective mind, autonomy and individuality, rather than being suppressed, are actually strengthened by participation in the group. Tom Callanan, a program officer at the Fetzer Institute, explains: “My experience with these groups is that the stronger the collective wisdom present, the stronger my sense of unique individuality—only now it’s within the context of the whole rather than separate from the whole.”

The Blue Angels probably come as close as humans get to flocking. Flying in precision formation at supersonic speeds, these sky-dancing Navy stunt pilots have been inspiring American fairground goers since 1946 with their breathtaking display of grace and coordination. And in this case, it’s a grace hard won.

Every winter the Blue Angels leave their spouses and families behind and head out to the desert together for two and a half months. But theirs is no vision quest. It’s a training mission—with a uniquely collective twist. “It takes a long time to get everyone in sync, to get into a rhythm together,” Commander Russ Bartlett explains. “So, we’re out here to learn the way each other thinks, learn their idiosyncrasies, learn everything about the way we operate so that when we fly together, they can tell by my intonation and the way I’m flying the jet exactly what I’m going to do with it. We fly so close together that we have to execute everything simultaneously.” And in this case, “close together” means close together. In their tightest formation, the Blue Angels overlap their wings until, as Bartlett explained, “my wingtip is twelve inches from my buddy’s head.”

In preparation for this high-stakes journey, before each flight the pilots spend forty-five minutes sitting together, eyes closed, listening to Bartlett recite the commands he will use during the flight—an exercise that at least one researcher has compared to the entrainment rituals practiced by hunting tribes. Although Bartlett declares that there is nothing “cosmic” about the synergy that allows these Angels to fly as one, his own descriptions seem to suggest that there might be more to the story than “rote repetition” and “muscle memory” could account for. “Sometimes you have these shows where everybody is on top of their game. Everybody’s flowing together. The maneuvers are coming off well, one after another, and nobody has to get out of the formation for any reason. Things go like clockwork. And when you come back, you just go ‘Wow! That was awesome.’"
START ASKING PEOPLE TO EXPLAIN COLLECTIVE consciousness in scientific terms, and it won’t be long before you hear something to do with the “quantum vacuum” and the “zero-point field.” It’s no surprise, perhaps, that the latest scientific theories to have infiltrated the New Age seminar circuit would have found their way into a field as open to theorizing as collective mind. But there is a connection between physics and the group mind that is perhaps a bit less esoteric. His name was David Bohm.

A renowned physicist with a passion for inquiry, Bohm is probably best known for his contributions to plasma theory and his widely celebrated dialogues with the great Indian mystic J. Krishnamurti. But toward the end of his life, Bohm’s attention became increasingly drawn to a potential he saw for a new kind of conversation that he felt held “the possibility of transforming not only the relationship between people, but even more, the very nature of consciousness in which these relationships arise.” He called it, simply, “dialogue.”

For Bohm, all the problems of human affairs could be traced to the “incoherence of our thought,” and particularly, of our collective thought. Looking at the way our unexamined cultural presuppositions, beliefs, and ideas prevent us from coming together in meaningful exchange on matters of importance, he proposed a new mode of inquiry that would both reveal this incoherence and point the way beyond it. Drawing from the Greek dialogos, which he defined as “meaning moving through,” Bohm explained that in this new form of dialogue, “a new kind of mind . . . begins to come into being which is based on the development of a common meaning that is constantly transforming in the process of the dialogue. People are no longer primarily in opposition, nor can they be said to be interacting, rather they are participating in this pool of common meaning, which is capable of constant development and change.”

The basic idea behind Bohm’s dialogues was simple. Gather a group of between twenty and forty people into a circle and have them talk to each other—about almost anything. Following a few basic, if challenging, instructions—like suspending one’s strongly held ideas, listening closely to others, and speaking authentically—Bohm felt that the group would enter into a deeper current of engagement, one that would begin to reveal the unexamined assumptions behind our thinking and propel the group into a higher level of congruence and a new collective understanding. But for Bohm, the significance of this dialogue pointed far beyond the experience of those in the group. By bringing “a new kind of coherent, collective intelligence” to bear on the very thought structures underlying culture itself, he felt that this inquiry “might well prove vital to the future health of our civilization.”

Bohm’s ideas on dialogue began to take shape in the early
eighties, and for the eight years leading up to his death in 1992, he made a considerable effort to demonstrate and interest others in the potential he was seeing. During that time, many reported having profound experiences of the kind of collective opening he was pointing to, and a small movement began to form around his work. Bohm was certainly not the first modern thinker to have seen the potential for a collective mind. In the twentieth century, such visionaries as Sri Aurobindo, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Alice Bailey, Rudolf Steiner, and M. Scott Peck had all spoken of this extraordinary potential for the emergence of conscious collectives. But it was in Bohm's work that this emerging vision would first begin to capture the attention of a broader, more secular audience, thanks in large part to the interest of a few key figures, foremost among them the renowned management consultant Peter Senge.

It was 1990 when Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* rocked the business world with its groundbreaking translation of systems theory into hands-on strategies for a corporate learning revolution. In addition to introducing a radical new way of thinking about management, Senge also devoted considerable attention in the book to the merits of Bohmian dialogue as a method of “team learning.” As the book's sales skyrocketed into the hundreds of thousands, this late-formed idea from a thoughtful physicist began to find an unexpected audience in the boardrooms and conference halls of American big business. And within a few years, the demand for skilled practitioners and serious study of this largely unexplored discipline had reached a threshold. Armed with a sizable grant from the Kellogg Foundation, William Isaacs, one of Senge's colleagues at MIT’s Sloan School of Management, launched the MIT Dialogue Project in 1993.

The goal of the project was straightforward: to explore the potential applications of this new “social technology” across a broad range of practical settings. Over the next several years, Isaacs and his colleagues did just that. One group brought together leaders in Colorado healthcare management. Another worked with citizen groups in urban settings. Isaacs himself took dialogue into the heart of a union/management battle in Kansas City. And at the core of the project was a practitioner group that was brought together to experiment—on themselves.

As Mitch Saunders, who was part of that group, describes it, “We saw ourselves as a group of guinea pigs, and we tried everything we could imagine to explore the dimensions of the field, both at the individual and collective levels. And this was before the field had been defined at all.”

Testing the limits of Bohm’s ideas, and experimenting with their own, during the three-year life of the project these pioneers of conscious conversation began to chart the terrain of collective thinking in a way that no one previously had. In the course of their research, they learned a lot about the need for a variety of approaches to meet the diverse demands of real-world situations. Some settings, particularly those involving strongly opposing sides, demanded more structure and facilitation. Others, where the inquiry was more open-ended and exploratory in nature, called for a less directed approach. But across all the modes of their research, there was at least one finding that remained universal: when people came together with a willingness to look beyond their preconceptions, something remarkable came into being between them. As Saunders describes it, “In almost any session, you could count on it happening. That magic in the middle of the circle was becoming a reliable feature of life. So much so that our fascination began to shift from the emergence of that magic toward the question of what to do with it. How could we use that phenomenon, where everybody drops into a collective mind, to take the next step and move into collective *leadership*? Is there some way this kind of consciousness could serve the evolution of something more coherent, to give shape to what’s emerging?”

Saunders is not alone in his question. Indeed, as the field has expanded far beyond those initial experiments in dialogue into ever new domains over the past decade, the question of how our higher collective capacities can be used to our collective advantage has been coming increasingly to the fore. In the case of one organization, it has become the focal point for an initiative that is attempting to mobilize this still-fragmented field into nothing less than a movement.

“We’re absolutely convinced that we’re experiencing the beginnings of an evolutionary shift that’s greater than anything we’ve ever experienced . . . as a society.”

Bill Veltrop
A COLLECTIVE WISDOM INITIATIVE

Then another person stepped forward, and another, and another, telling their stories and offering their experiences and questions. I got this sense that there was a stew that we were making together. There was this cauldron in the center of the circle... From the outside it might have looked like just a group of people talking. But it was totally magical. Toward the end, I would say something, and somebody across the room would say, “You know, I was thinking the same thing.”

Tom Callanan, Kalamazoo, MI

A NYONE WHO HASN’T BEEN LIVING IN A CAVE for the past fifteen years has probably noticed the surge of interest in mind/body healing that has recently swept the West, and particularly the U.S. From PBS’s immensely popular “Healing and the Mind” series with Bill Moyers to the superstar status attained by Deepak Chopra and Andrew Weil, we’ve seen the field of mind/body medicine gain a firm foothold in the modern psyche seemingly overnight. But what hasn’t yet made it onto Oprah is the unique, catalytic, behind-the-scenes role that the Kalamazoo-based Fetzer Institute has played in this explosion. And, more importantly, what collective intelligence has to do with it.

A small, endowed foundation with a spiritual mission, Fetzer has, since its inception in 1962, earned a reputation as one of the primary sponsors of research into the upper reaches of human potential. But unlike most foundations, which issue grants to fund individual projects, Fetzer is what’s known as an “operating foundation,” which means it takes a more hands-on—and more collective—approach. As program officer Tom Callanan explains it, “We proactively go out into a field and ask, ‘How can we help advance this field?’ We pull the leaders in the field together, and then instead of competitively giving grants to the best projects, we say, ‘We’re going to support a project to advance the field. How are we going to work together to do that?’”

As part of its mission to bring thought leaders together, in the mid-nineties Fetzer built a small conference center in southwestern Michigan, where it began to host a series of think tanks with the leading luminaries in mind/body health. The goal, Callanan explains, was “to create a container where breakthrough thinking could happen.” But as the discussions got under way, what soon became clear was that it takes more than great thinkers to make a think tank. As Callanan put it, “Good conversation doesn’t just involve getting the best people in a room and saying ‘Let’s talk.’” Occasionally, an unexpected intimacy and vulnerability would emerge between the participants. But often the groups struggled to find cohesion. At times, something magical would occur, and a remarkable collective creativity would be unleashed. But at other times, the dialogues ended up being little more than a sharing of diverse ideas and opinions. They had all the ingredients of a good think tank. But for a foundation whose goal was to “support the cutting edge of individual and social transformation,” the results were too unpredictable.

It was out of this recognition that in early 2000, Fetzer launched a research project to begin to look for ways to increase the effectiveness of its dialogues and to deepen its understanding of the dynamics of group wisdom. What was this experience of “magic” that emerged when groups were at their best? What was the mysterious intelligence that often seemed to accompany it? And more importantly, what were the conditions that would make it more likely to occur? With these questions as a leaping off point, a handful of researchers began to pull together the fragments of a field still in its infancy, to see what had been learned by those who had already been working with group intelligence and how they could be encouraged to join forces to move the field forward.

It wasn't long before they realized they had gotten more than...
they had bargained for. Alan Briskin, an organizational consultant with a long history of working in groups, was one of the initial researchers on the project. As he explains it, “We began by simply seeking out people who we thought might be able to inform us about these questions, and the response was so enthusiastic that people not only welcomed the chance to talk about this, but they directed us to increasing numbers of people in the field. So the project that we had initially imagined would involve talking to maybe eight or nine people grew to over sixty interviews.”

The findings of that project were eventually published in a small, spiral-bound 2001 book entitled: Centered on the Edge: Mapping a Field of Collective Intelligence and Spiritual Wisdom. And according to Callanan, along the way, Fetzer learned enough about collective wisdom for its mind/body healing think tank “to become one of the collective wisdom engines of the mind/body health field.” For Fetzer, however, this initial foray would become but a catalyst for further exploration. Having come across a field that was ripe for pulling together, the research team, headed by consultant Sheryl Erickson, proposed a new, more comprehensive project that would not only document the body of knowledge that was surfacing but also would serve as a self-organizing structure around which the field itself could begin to take shape and move forward. Excited by what their initial inquiry had opened up, the foundation’s board agreed, and the Collective Wisdom Initiative was born.

Visit collectivewisdominitiative.org and you’ll find a wildly configured conglomeration of information on topics from collective intelligence to collective resonance to group synergy to group creativity. Go through one “doorway” and you’ll land on a long string of “personal profiles” of people who work in the field. People like Jim Rough, whose pioneering “Dynamic Facilitation” process of dialogue has generated phenomenal breakthroughs in the most entrenched disputes. Or Tom Atlee, whose initiation into collective intelligence during the Great Peace March of 1986 inspired him to found the Co-Intelligence Institute, a networking and research organization committed to tapping group wisdom for social and political change. Click on another “doorway” and you’ll find a series of interviews with people about their spontaneous experiences of collective wisdom and “flow”—from a Marine sergeant’s description of the deep brotherhood he experienced with his platoon to a police officer’s account of the “collective resonance” that enveloped her and all the other participants at a heated crime scene. On the “Concepts” page, you’ll come across research papers and essays with titles like “Group Magic: An Inquiry into Experiences of Collective Resonance” and “Exploring Essence: Collective Wisdom and Group Experience.” Under “Social Applications,” you’ll learn of an experiment in dialogue that brought together leaders on both sides of the abortion debate—with some surprising results.

Taking in the site as a whole, what becomes undeniably clear is that this phenomenon is real. It is happening. And it is more widespread than one could have imagined. What started as one foundation’s attempt to increase its understanding of “group magic” has become a nexus for a thriving, connecting, and rapidly expanding community of individuals for whom furthering the advance of this new collective potentiality has become nothing less than a life’s mission. Through their efforts, a growing body of knowledge is emerging about the mysterious ways in which collective wisdom works and how it can be cultivated, enhanced, and directed toward the greater good.

“What’s new today in the world is that now the first and most accessible gateway into deeper spiritual experience is not individual meditation but group work.”

Otto Scharmer
A remarkable thing happened that evening in the second round of conversation. It was an almost indescribable feeling—like another being was in the room. I guess we could call it the collective, but that doesn’t do it justice. It was palpable in an almost physical way. I could feel its energy and I could feel a commitment to it—a kind of love for it. People sensed it and spoke up about it. One person described the ‘being’ as glue. He said, ‘It’s what joins us together—a larger whole that we always knew was there, but never really appreciated.’ And this ‘being’ had a momentum of its own, so I didn’t need to take responsibility for making something happen. It was happening by itself. I could just run along behind it. 

Emmett Miller, M.D., Nevada City, CA

I think it really comes down to grace, “ Juanita Brown explains. “You can set the conditions that make it more likely for that ‘magic in the middle’ to happen, but you can’t predict that it will happen. I do think, though, that you can increase your chances quite substantially by being highly intentional in setting up the preconditions.” For Brown and many others who’ve dedicated their lives to working with groups, identifying what exactly makes collectives tick has become a primary point of focus. Some, like Brown, have developed elaborate sets of guidelines for creating just the right preconditions for group magic to emerge. Others seem to prefer a more open-ended approach in which a facilitator follows his or her instincts in guiding the group into greater depth. But while no two approaches seem to concur on every element of what makes group magic happen, among collective consciousness researchers one hears a lot of talk of shared intention, trust, vulnerability, not knowing, authentic participation, interest, and perhaps most fundamental of all, listening.

“It’s a different kind of listening than we’re used to,” describes Anne Dosher, a community development specialist and an elder in the growing “women’s circle” movement. “It’s listening for a deeper meaning, knowing that out there in the field there is something wise to be learned, and listening for when that begins to be spoken, listening for the shift in meaning.” Otto Scharmer observes: “This type of listening focuses on the essential self of another. It’s that part in the other person that is connected with his or her highest future potential that you can help to come into the present moment when you focus your attention and intention on it.” By whatever words it’s described, what’s clear is that by some means or other, an unusual quality of shared attention must be evoked in a group for our higher collective potentials to come into being.

In attempting to cultivate or evoke this quality of deep attention, many group facilitators have emphasized the importance of creating a trusting and supportive environment, in which diversity is honored above all else and every voice is given an equal hearing. In the midst of this “safe space”—so rare in our competitive world—individuals find themselves free to express an unusual authenticity and vulnerability, which seems to break down social walls and allow for a remarkable coming together. But among those who work extensively with groups, there are also those who feel that what is more important than creating any particular atmosphere is bringing the group together in a common interest or aspiration that focuses their attention on something higher or larger than themselves. In this common higher focus, they report, individuals naturally seem to forget about their personal agendas and concerns, the group’s attention unites, and unexpected potentials emerge.

Both of these approaches no doubt hold their value, but it does seem that the latter might ultimately prove to have more real-world applicability. For while, in grappling with life’s stickier dilemmas, we may not always be able to create a “safe space” where everyone feels personally acknowledged, heard, or valued, it is at least plausible that we might be able to identify common purposes capable of capturing our collective attention and interest long enough to open the doors to group wisdom.
The Soul of Teamwork
by Ross Robertson

“Basketball is a sport that involves the subtle interweaving of players at full speed to the point where they are thinking and moving as one.”

Phil Jackson, Sacred Hoops

Los Angeles Lakers coach Phil Jackson—by percentage (.738) the winningest coach in NBA history—is renowned for his ability to turn megastars into team players. And his secret is spiritual. “The most effective way to forge a winning team,” he writes in Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior, “is to call on the players’ need to connect with something larger than themselves.” Blending principles from Zen Buddhism and the teachings of the Lakota Sioux with his experience from over twenty years as a professional player and coach, Jackson led Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls to three consecutive titles not once, but twice, from ’91 to ’93 and ’96 to ’98. Then he did it yet again with the Lakers and Shaquille O’Neal and Kobe Bryant, from ’00 to ’02. Before Jackson arrived, both the Bulls and the Lakers were teams that, despite the presence of breathtaking talent, had failed to achieve the harmony needed to win championships. Yet under his guidance, schooled in his characteristically unselfish, team-oriented style, they went on to record-breaking success. So what does this remarkable head coach have to say about the heightened group consciousness that can awaken when teams come together beyond the divisive forces of the ego? WIE spoke with him last December, as the Lakers were coming off a ten-game winning streak, to find out.

WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT?: In Sacred Hoops you write about “the energy that’s unleashed when players put their egos aside and work toward a common goal.” You also refer to “a powerful group intelligence [that] emerges that is greater than the coach’s ideas or those of any individual on the team.” What is that powerful energy and intelligence that emerges in a collective when the ego is set aside? How is it experienced?

PHIL JACKSON: When a player surrenders his self-interest for the greater good, his fullest gifts as an athlete are manifested. He’s not trying to force a shot, or do something that’s not in his repertoire of basketball moves, or impose his personality on the team. It’s funny—by playing within his natural abilities, he activates a higher potential beyond his abilities, a higher potential for the team. It changes things for everybody. All of a sudden, the rest of the team can react instinctively to what that player is doing. And it just kind of mushrooms out from there—the whole begins to add up to more than the sum of its parts. We see this a lot in critical situations. When players are totally focused on the team goal, their efforts can create chain reactions. It’s as if they become totally connected to one another, in sync with one another, like five fingers on one hand. When one finger moves, the rest of them all react to it.

For example, we have a ballplayer on this team who loves to chase balls for steals on defense. If he’s worried about scoring points at the other end of the floor, or worried about what happened on the last play, he won’t do it. But when he commits himself on defense, his teammates react to his natural opportunism and come to cover for him, because they know intuitively what he’s going to be doing. Everybody is activated, and good things start happening. It’s interesting—the other players are consciously aware of the fact that they’re anticipating their teammate’s behavior. Somehow, mysteriously, they just know the timing is right. They simply feel something out ahead of themselves and make their move. It’s not an out-of-body experience or anything like that. They just feel the tremendous pull of an activity, of what has to happen next. At that moment, they’re called to activate themselves. I think that’s what players mean when they say “I had to go; I had to commit.” It doesn’t even occur to them that they shouldn’t.

WIE: What does it take to bring about this shift, this conscious shift of attention from the concerns of the individual to the success of the team? Superstars, especially, tend to have big egos and to want to stand out from the group. How have you managed to convince them to, as you put it, “surrender the ‘me’ for the ‘we’”?

JACKSON: Well, one has to demonstrate that if a person does this, they’re rewarded for it, because the team succeeds. The fact is, selflessness is the soul of teamwork. We have a practical rule in our game: when you stop the basketball, when it resides in your presence and you hold it for longer than two counts, you’ve destroyed our rhythm. When the ball is in your hands, you become the focal point. And when you become the focus, our system breaks down. It’s that simple. Suddenly the defense can catch up, and the spacing is destroyed. So it’s the unselfish players—players who are more interested in reading what’s happening and keeping the flow going on the floor—who are the most valuable players that you have. They may only be averaging seven points a game, four points a game, or whatever, but their ability to play in a selfless manner gives the team its real opportunities. In those individuals, the power of we instead...
phenomenon, including at least a handful of models rooted in the “new science.” But none seem to have conferred legitimacy to this otherwise esoteric field like the new sciences of chaos and complexity have. “I would say that collective intelligence is a systemic phenomenon. It’s a nonlinear dynamic,” Juanita Brown explains. “If you think of it in terms of living systems or chaos theory, it’s like the collective intelligence emerges as the system connects to itself in a variety of diverse and creative ways. If you are collectively focusing attention around a real-life question, and you intentionally increase the cross-pollination between individuals—the synapses, let’s call them, in the social brain—the likelihood of collective insight emerging increases. So it’s a product of the systemic interactions, not simply the product of one plus one.”

At one end of the spectrum, there is what we might call the “additive model,” which suggests that collective intelligence is simply the compounding of our individual intelligences. Get a few individual minds together, the reasoning goes, and you’ve got a group mind. Two heads are better than one. And three are better than two. Robert Kenny explains: “Sometimes people who have these experiences simply say that a collection of individual minds kind of aggregate in some form or combine and become a group mind, a kind of new entity with its own particular characteristics.”

At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who suggest that by coming together in a receptive state, we are simply making ourselves available to a deeper collective consciousness that is already there. Tom Callanan states, “I believe that collective consciousness already exists, and our individual consciousnesses are nodules that are poking up out of that like little islands. We imagine that we’re separate, so we go about trying to build bridges across the gaps between our islands. But through conversation you actually sink to the level of collective consciousness where you’re already connected. There’s no need for the bridges.”

Between these two poles are countless other theories and subtheories attempting to make sense out of this mysterious phenomenon, including at least a handful of models rooted in the “new science.” But none seem to have conferred legitimacy to this otherwise esoteric field like the new sciences of chaos and complexity have. “I would say that collective intelligence is a systemic phenomenon. It’s a nonlinear dynamic,” Juanita Brown explains. “If you think of it in terms of living systems or chaos theory, it’s like the collective intelligence emerges as the system connects to itself in a variety of diverse and creative ways. If you are collectively focusing attention around a real-life question, and you intentionally increase the cross-pollination between individuals—the synapses, let’s call them, in the social brain—the likelihood of collective insight emerging increases. So it’s a product of the systemic interactions, not simply the product of one plus one.”

In the emerging science of complexity theory, the notion that wholes are greater than the sum of their parts is no longer a matter of poetic fancy. Studying the complex behavior of beehives and ant colonies, cities and economies, researchers are discovering that when individuals combine forces, higher-order collective properties emerge that cannot be explained by studying the individuals in isolation. A close look at an ant colony or beehive reveals a remarkably orderly and surprisingly complex society—surprising, that is, given the fact that ants and bees have brains that are less than one-millionth the size of a human brain. Does that mean that they are all just working automatons taking orders

Despite our perception of being “independent thinkers” most of us rarely, if ever, have a truly independent thought pass through our heads.

Jaime Campbell, Santa Fe, NM

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CHAOS, COMPLEXITY, AND THE EMERGENCE OF HIVE MIND

There was a high-frequency energy being passed between people, and I could sort of see into people’s minds. And there was a period of time where the whole group had a very discontinuous awakened experience, where we could basically perceive the same reality together but express it in each of our own unique ways. It was almost as if we were suddenly surrounded by this ambient energy that allowed each person to leap, inside of themselves, into a much vaster way of being in expressing themselves and interacting with one another.

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ATTEMPTING TO UNDERSTAND A PHENOMENON as mysterious as collective wisdom, it turns out, is a bit like trying to understand God. Although everyone kind of knows that their concepts will only take them so far, it doesn’t stop anyone from putting forth their best guess—with confidence. If you ask a handful of collective wisdom researchers what exactly is happening in these experiences, you’ll end up with a list of explanations that run the gamut from the scientific to the sublime.

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from the more intelligent “queen”? Not likely. It turns out that the queen herself is equally unintelligent and has no executive power whatsoever. “Mother” would perhaps be a better name for her, as her anointed role owes entirely to her maternal capacities.

How, then, does a hive decide to swarm and go in search of a new home? And moreover, how does it choose its new home once it gets there? How does an ant colony know how to organize itself into an elaborate city with the garbage dump in one place, the cemetery in another, and the dwelling units wisely as far away from both as possible? The answer is what has become known in complexity theory as “hive mind.” But the implications may not be as esoteric as they sound. Wired editor Kevin Kelly, writing in his 1997 book Out of Control, states that the general scientific view is that this emergent “mind” has a “technical, rational explanation” and is not a product of “mysticism or alchemy.” To most scientists in this field, the simple explanation for emergent complexity is that when you get a large enough group of individuals following the same few simple instructions, complex patterns can emerge that begin to look like higher intelligence—or at least intelligent behavior. But is there actually anything like a thinking mind driving the hive’s behavior? And moreover, does the hive mind have anything resembling self-awareness? Does it know that it’s knowing? In the eyes of most scientists, the answer to all of the above is “no.” For them, the hive mind is simply a metaphor. There is no ghost in the collective machine.

So, despite the obvious analogies that beg to be drawn between hive mind and human collective intelligence, it does seem worth questioning whether in fact the group mind that emerges between conscious, self-reflective humans can ultimately be accounted for by the prevailing theories of emergent complexity alone. It is of course plausible that the awakening of collective intelligence experienced between human beings is in fact something like the hive mind made conscious. But there are at least a few scientists who see something else at work in these experiences.

of me is more advanced. They feel more responsibility to the group, and that’s why you’re better off with maybe two very, very talented and perhaps selfish people on the team than five or six or seven. That’s why teams that are less talented but more selfless and group-oriented can have more success. You might say the San Antonio Spurs were a successful team last year because of that ability that they had. The Bulls were a very successful team because of that ability. And the Lakers, when I first started watching them in the late nineties, were not successful—even though they were very, very talented—because they couldn’t do that.

You see, the real reason the Bulls won six NBA championships in nine years is that we plugged into the power of oneness instead of the power of one man. Sure, we had Michael Jordan, and you have to credit his talent. But at the other end of the spectrum, if players 9, 10, 11, and 12 are unhappy because Michael takes twenty-five shots a game, their negativity is going to undermine everything. It doesn’t matter how good individual players are—they can’t compete with a team that is awake and aware and trusts each other. People don’t understand that. Most of the time, everybody’s so concerned about not being disrespected. But you have to check that attitude at the door—that defensiveness, that protection of your own image and reputation. Everybody needs help in this game. Everybody’s going to get dunked on. We’re all susceptible to falling down and being exposed. But when we lose our fear of that, and look to each other, then vulnerability turns into strength, and we can take responsibility for our place in the larger context of the team and embrace a vision in which the group imperative takes precedence over personal glory.
In last night’s discussion, we all went into new territory. It was as if a profound unified structure in consciousness descended down into us and between us, and at the same time mysteriously seemed to be functioning within its own dimension. No one could be said to be creating this, but everyone who gave themselves to its expression became animated through its explosive power. As we established ourselves firmly in this liberated field, extraordinary things began to happen. One woman who was in a struggling emotional state transformed into a joyful radiance. Another woman who was sincerely concerned by world issues shed tears as she collided with the profound meaning in what was happening.

Patrick Bryson, London

THE FIELD AND THE FLOCK

If scientific models of emergent complexity ultimately feel a bit too reductionistic to explain collective intelligence among humans, according to biologist Rupert Sheldrake, they don’t really account for the group behavior of most other animals either. “When you look at a flock of birds flying, you can get an entire flock of hundreds of birds suddenly changing direction, suddenly banking, turning almost at the same time. They all know where to go without bumping into each other. This is more complicated than you might think, because it happens too quickly to explain it just in terms of the birds looking at their nearest neighbors.” Sheldrake explains that early attempts to create complexity-based computer models that simulated flock behavior, though initially impressive, ultimately failed because they tried to reduce the flock phenomenon to a few simple instructions followed by each individual. “By basing their models on nearest-neighbor interactions, they produced animations that looked a bit like flocks, but were biologically naïve. The best state-of-the-art models of flock behavior are ‘field models’ where you treat the whole flock as if it’s in a field, the field of the whole group. This is what I think of as a morphic field, a field that organizes systems where the whole is more than the sum of the parts.”

For most who have witnessed the emergence of collective intelligence, Sheldrake’s notion of group fields seems to have some resonance. Indeed, one of the most common ways people describe the experience of collective consciousness is as an increasing awareness of being in a field together, a field of knowing and seeing that unifies the group. But what makes this notion of collective fields particularly intriguing, in light of collective wisdom experiences, is the way it seems to account for one of the most remarkable phenomena of group experience: the sense that, once it emerges, the collective mind seems to take on a life of its own.

Central to Sheldrake’s theory of morphic resonance is the notion that collective fields, once created, should begin to impact other groups engaged in similar activity around the world. His well-publicized research seems to demonstrate convincingly that once one individual or group breaks through to new knowledge or capacities, it becomes easier for others to access that same knowledge or capacity. And, in speaking with practitioners of collective wisdom, again and again one hears stories that seem to confirm Sheldrake’s theory.

Jerry Sinnamon, a Connecticut hospital administrator faced with the challenge of transforming his failing institution, described how, through a series of dialogue-type workshops with hospital staff, a new collective vision for the hospital progressively developed—despite the fact that each workshop comprised an entirely different group of people. “It was almost as if the same group was meeting month after month, when in fact there was no overlap of attendees between workshops whatsoever,” Sinnamon describes. Regardless of the individuals involved (and there were a thousand in total who participated over the course of two years), each successive group seemed to pick up where the previous one had left off, moving the inquiry forward. Sinnamon recalls, “It was as if
the collective consciousness of the organization was building this new vision for what the hospital could become. And as a result of this process, we not only rebuilt our reputation in the local community, but we ended up actually gaining an international reputation as a healing place."

Among the researchers and practitioners of collective intelligence I spoke with for this article, such phenomena seemed to be almost a given. Dialogue pioneer Sue Miller Hurst described a series of workshops she led in which each new three-day gathering seemed to begin where the previous one had ended, in spite of the fact that each workshop was attended by a completely new group of participants. "It’s as if there was a hideout who'd been at the last one, who came there and said, ‘Okay, you guys. This is what we’re going to do.’" Chris Bache described a similar phenomenon in his university courses, the development of what he called “course mind.” According to Bache, a kind of learning field develops around each course that, over the years, makes it easier and easier for students to grasp the material. “I find that every few years I have to redesign my entire course, because the students are starting out at a higher level of understanding and receptivity. They get it faster. Now, this could be caused by improved pedagogical delivery or by cultural shifts that are taking place in the background. But I’m convinced that one of the things that’s happening is that the learning which previous students have undertaken actually makes it easier for subsequent students to pick up these same concepts. So you can move through things more quickly.”

As mind-bending as these stories are from a conventional scientific standpoint, for Sheldrake they are not in the least bit surprising. In fact, when I described this phenomenon to him, rather than offer an in-depth explanation, he simply responded, “Yes, that’s the sort of phenomenon you’d expect with morphic resonance. Theoretically, this kind of thing is what my hypothesis actually predicts.” And while the existence of such phenomena is not ultimately a proof of Sheldrake’s field theory itself, it does seem to suggest that whatever this collective mind is, it appears to exist independent of the ongoing participation of the individuals who gave birth to it. And that in itself is a mystery worth pondering, a mystery with far-reaching implications.

“When groups get really good at this, it can lead to very fast decision making, because you’re drawing on intuition, as opposed to a linear process of rationality and discursive logic.”

Robert Kenny
While the Jury’s still out on what exactly collective wisdom is, one thing no one seems to be debating is the fact that it is a powerful force for change. Throughout the literature of this emerging field are countless testimonials to the awesome power of collective mind and its mysterious capacity to transform the individuals and groups it touches. And among those who have experienced it, the conviction it evokes is nothing short of religious.

First, there is the impact on the individuals involved. "A year of therapy could not do what being held in a group can do," Anne Dosher observes. "I’ve seen miracles happen. I’ve seen people being born again. Once they were given an opportunity to be in a circle where they were held to be responsible, they became healed and connected and able to find a purpose for their lives." For Dosher and many others, the discovery of collective consciousness is not simply a new and helpful complement to the spiritual path. It is the very foundation for individual transformation. As Otto Scharmer sees it, "What’s new today in the world is that now the first and most accessible gateway into deeper spiritual experience is not individual meditation but group work. What happens is that, in quite a spontaneous way, you tap into this deeper process of awareness and consciousness as a group. And then, once you..."

“What Is Enlightenment?”

A NEW CONTEXT FOR TRANSFORMATION

“Atom-splitting” is too mild a description for the sheer force of this collective consciousness. Not a gross physical sense of force, but a force of intelligence that no words can encompass. It permeated every possible space within the small room we were meeting in. It said “no” to separation; it engulfed any insistence that we need to produce anything to make this happen. It is us. It is our life on the edge of creation. Our minds, hearts, voices—all were one in this, united in a vortex of boundless positivity, on a mission to evolve by any means necessary.

Jody Paterson, London

COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS ACROSS THE AGES

3RD MILLENNIUM B.C.E.

"Meet together, speak together, let your minds be of one accord, as the Gods of old, being of one mind, accepted their share of the sacrifice. May your counsel be common, your assembly common, common the mind, and the thoughts of these united. . . . Let your aims be common, and your hearts of one accord, and all of you be of one mind.”

Hinduism. Rig Veda 10.191.2-4

1ST CENTURY C.E.

"Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

Matthew 18.19-20

3RD CENTURY C.E.

"If two sit together and the words between them are of Torah, then the Shechinah is in their midst.”

Judaism. Mishnah, Abot 3.2

6TH CENTURY C.E.

“And when a company meets together in one of the houses of God to pore over the Book of God and to study it together among themselves, the Shechinah comes down to them and mercy overshadows them, the angels surround them, and God remembers them among them that are His.”

Islam. Forty Hadith of an-Nawawi 36

1841

“In all conversation between two persons, tacit reference is made, as to a third party, to a common nature. That third party or common nature is not social; it is impersonal; it is God. And so in groups where debate is earnest, and especially on high questions, the company become aware that the thought rises to an equal level in all bosoms, that all have a spiritual property in what was said, as well as the sayer. They all become wiser than they were. It arches over them like a temple, this unity of thought. . . . All are conscious of attaining to a higher self-possession. It shines for all.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson
have done that, you can say, ‘Well, I want to sustain this quality in my own life, so therefore I will pick a practice or two to do on a day-to-day level.’ I think that for many people today, the collective is the most important teacher on this whole journey, because it allows us to explore a territory that is much less accessible, if at all, for individuals.

Beyond the individual benefits, of course, there is the benefit to the group itself. “When groups get really good at this and practiced at it, it can lead to very fast decision making,” Robert Kenny points out, “because you’re drawing on intuition, which is a way of direct knowing as opposed to a linear process of rationality and discursive logic.” Part and parcel of this collective intuition seems to be the capacity for truly original thinking that can often lead to breakthrough solutions. Glenna Gerard, coauthor of Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation, explains, “When the group has really come together and there is collective wisdom present, there seems to be the ability to generate thinking that transcends what any one individual has thought before. It really is new thinking.” But to Gerard, what is perhaps most distinctive about the kind of intuition that emerges in groups is its ability to reflect a sense of the whole. “I think one of the functions of collectives is that we become able to add what we see through our different individual lenses into the center, and the collective then becomes an instrument for perceiving the whole.” This kind of vision can have dramatic effects. “When this happens, individuals act differently, both in the circle and then as they move out of the circle,” Gerard continues. “There seems to be some heightened, embodied knowing about interdependence. Such individuals become agents of the community. They don’t give up their individuality, but for example, when they speak about the purpose of the team, they speak from a shared understanding. Their actions and choices are informed not only by how they see something but by how that’s going to sit within the whole. There is this kind of collective responsibility.”

The potential for groups to access a larger, holistic perspective is something that has excited collective consciousness researchers and practitioners from the beginning. Indeed, it was this capacity for discovering wholeness that served as much of the catalyst for David Bohm’s own enthusiasm for the power of dialogue. For Bohm, as for many of those who are working in the field today, it was this higher order of thinking that held out the greatest promise not only for the transformation of individuals and groups but for the healing of our fragmented world.

1889
“O contending peoples and kindreds of the earth! Set your faces towards unity, and let the radiance of its light shine upon you. Gather ye together, and for the sake of God resolve to root out whatever is the source of contention amongst you. Then will the effulgence of the world’s great Luminary envelop the whole earth, and its inhabitants become the citizens of one city, and the occupants of one and the same throne.”

Bahá’í Faith. Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh

1923
“Through the process of absorbing anthroposophic ideas, a real spiritual being emerges in the room. . . . We can feel as if there were a being looking down on us, floating above us, being spiritually truly present. . . . People awake through each other. They awake through each other by finding each other again and again . . . only there we become real awake human beings. . . . Then real communal Spiritually descends to our workplace.”

Rudolf Steiner

1949
“In this new world . . . what would bind and hold all together would be . . . a common consciousness consolidating a common life. All will be united by the evolution of the Truth-Consciousness in them; in the changed way of being which this consciousness would bring about in them, they will feel themselves to be embodiments of a single self, souls of a single Reality, illumined and motivated by a fundamental unity of knowledge, actuated by a fundamental unified will and feeling.”

Sri Aurobindo

1954
“In the passage of time a state of collective human consciousness has been progressively evolved which is inherited by each succeeding generation of conscious individuals, and to which each generation adds something. Sustained, certainly, by the individual person, but at the same time embracing and shaping the successive multitude of individuals, a sort of generalized human superpersonality is visibly in the process of formation on the Earth.”

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

1972
“There is a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a sub-system. This larger Mind is comparable to God and is perhaps what some people mean by ‘God,’ but it is immanent in the total interconnected social system and planetary ecology. . . . A certain humility becomes appropriate, tempered by the dignity or joy of being part of something much bigger. A part, if you will, of God.”

Gregory Bateson
A TIPPING POINT

I’m noticing a new way of working together, where our interest in what is possible—from the most creative to the most practical—comes deeply alive and our flow of ideas is like a dance, where we are each paying attention to one another, taking in the thinking and research that each individual has done prior to the meeting, and responding in such a way that we really come together. It is so far from any meeting I’ve ever had in any other work setting—and I don’t know how it is happening—but we’re able somehow to bring forward the ideas we have without being attached to them, and without our identity being wrapped up in them. It is as if this creative mind just sweeps down on us, and the more we pay attention to each other and keep open the space between us, something else happens.9

Laura Hartzell, Lenox, MA

IT’S RARE TO FIND CONGRUENCY IN ANY FIELD, let alone one that is still in its first stages of emergence. But among the twenty-plus researchers and practitioners I spoke with for this article, and the many more I read, nearly all had arrived at the same burning question: How can we use collective wisdom to change the world? Perhaps it has to do with the awesome power revealed in these experiences. Discovering a force with such potent capacities, it seems natural to ask how one might harness such a power to create positive change. Or perhaps it owes to the collective nature of the phenomenon itself. It makes sense, after all, that if such a thing as a group mind came into existence, its concerns would necessarily be collective ones—that its emotions, its will, its conscience would inherently be tied to matters of greatest significance to the whole. But whatever the source of its unified aspiration, what’s clear about this collective consciousness is, when it puts its mind to something, it’s a force to be reckoned with. As this fledgling field enters its second decade, several major movements and initiatives are already under way, with a vision for bringing the power of the group mind to the complex dilemmas facing our beleaguered planet.

“Any innovative path forward through these very complex issues—whether it’s the environment or water or AIDS or the kind of divisiveness that’s being exacerbated around the world right now—is going to come through real conversations about questions that matter.” As co-originator of the burgeoning international “conversation movement” known as the World Café, Juanita Brown is a woman who knows whereof she speaks. Along with her partner, David Isaacs, and other World Café hosts around the globe, she is applying what she’s learned in her twenty-five years as a senior-level corporate strategist and researcher toward the creation of a dialogue modality capable of nurturing large-scale social change.

And it seems to be working. Since its inception in the mid-nineties, the World Café’s innovative approach to large-group inquiry has spread to five continents and been engaged across a broad range of organizational and social settings. In the Middle East, it was recently used to assist in bringing new perspectives to tough Israeli/Palestinian conversations. Mexican government and corporate leaders have applied its methodology to scenario planning and national social development. And in Singapore, it is now being used in several government ministries to support the nation’s goal of becoming a “learning society.”

And the World Café is but one of a handful of collective intel-
Intelligence movements with aspirations to transform our global culture. Mitch Saunders’ Laboratory for Social Invention project is attempting to harness collective thinking to prevent civil war in Venezuela, Liberia, and Indonesia. Harrison Owen’s “Open Space Technology” has been used to successfully bring about a ceasefire in a bloody, seven-year-long conflict between two ethnic nationalities in the oil-rich Niger Delta region. And here on the home front, organizations like Sandy Heierbacher’s National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation are working to reinvigorate the democratic process by mobilizing groups of citizens to think together about the country’s future. From Dynamic Facilitation to Deep Dialogue to Appreciative Inquiry, new collective technologies are spreading across the country and to the corners of the earth, mobilizing and empowering countless organizations and communities to reach for innovative solutions to their most troubling social dilemmas.

In keeping with the inherently cooperative emphasis of the collective wisdom movement, most of these approaches tend to be self-organizing or “bottom up,” lacking any central governing structure to steer them. And this absence of a strategic body guiding and controlling the effort is certainly an important part of the magic that is allowing it to spread so far and so rapidly. But while this grassroots collective activism no doubt has the potential to play a major role in catalyzing large-scale change, there are at least a few individuals who feel that a more centrally organized approach is also needed to grapple effectively with the magnitude and complexity of the challenges we face. Inspired by the possibility of creating a unified planetwide transformative team, a small group of dynamos out of Boston are about to launch what may be the single most ambitious collective wisdom effort yet. Determined to grapple head-on with the most troubling problems facing the world today, Peter Senge, Joseph Jaworski, Otto Scharmer, and their team of colleagues are rolling out the Global Leadership Initiative—an effort that aims for nothing less than to “generate a ‘tipping point’ in humanity’s ability to address its most critical global challenges.” By developing a network of leaders “from all sectors of the human community—who understand how to harness the collective power of small groups to co-create better futures,” over the next five years, they plan to “launch ten international projects that will address inherently global challenges, such as AIDS, malnutrition, water, and climate change.” And what’s more, they intend to do it with “a standard of excellence and professionalism unsurpassed by any other organization or institution.”

In our cynical age, it’s not often that you find a group of people so confidently optimistic about their capacity to bring about significant global change. But before you write off this activism-on-steroids as the product of naïveté, hubris, or hyperbolic idealism, consider that the individuals at the helm are some of the most influential organizational minds in the world. In their work at MIT, Generon Consulting, and the Society for Organizational Learning, these management moguls have been pushing the envelope of collective learning and innovation for two decades. At the vanguard of large-scale systems change and leadership development, they’ve worked closely with multinational corporations, government agencies, and NGOs throughout the world.

At the heart of this initiative is a deep conviction in the potential for small groups to generate breakthrough thinking. Over years of “action research,” they’ve developed what they feel is a “rigorous” state-of-the-art methodology for “creating unified learning fields in which teams made up of highly diverse individuals become capable of operating as a single intelligence.” Using collective wisdom to actually solve our most pressing global problems, it turns out, is a dream that may not be as outlandish as it seems. Even a few years ago, it would have been hard to imagine such an idea being taken seriously by business and government leaders. But these are indeed rapidly changing times. And given the receptivity these pioneers are finding to their vision, there is at least the possibility that a lot more positive change may be in store for us all.

What’s clear about this collective consciousness is, when it puts its mind to something, it’s a force to be reckoned with.
As we spoke, and the circle widened, it seemed like one structure of relationship was giving way to another, and one could observe the shifting of boundaries from the old to the new. The fact that we were conscious of it, consciously grasping our way into a new dimension, was perhaps the most extraordinary quality of what was occurring: imperfect beings, aware of our conditioning, consciously choosing to evolve. . . . Our attention expanded, and we could see the structure of universal spirit, incarnate as many, using us as its mouthpiece, revealing the perfection of Being—a vast impersonality that rendered our notions of personal significance completely obsolete. One knew that this bigness is our destiny.⁹

Melissa Hoffman, Lenox, MA

IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY, French Jesuit priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin put forth a radical new vision for our human future. “We are . . . moving forward towards some new critical point that lies ahead,” he wrote in The Human Phenomenon, “a harmonized collectivity of consciousnesses equivalent to a sort of super-consciousness. The idea is that of the Earth not only becoming covered by myriads of grains of thought, but becoming enclosed in a single thinking envelope so as to form, functionally, no more than a single vast grain of thought on the sidereal scale, the plurality of individual reflections grouping themselves together and reinforcing one another in the act of a single unanimous reflection. . . . Beyond all conflict of empires, peace in conquest and work in joy await us in an interior totalization of the world on itself—in the unanimous building up of a spirit of the Earth.” It was a vision with far-reaching collective implications, culminating in a final “unanimization” that he called the “Omega Point.”

And while Teilhard’s vision would not come to be realized in his lifetime, nor has it as yet in ours, his words, written over a half-century ago, continue to shine as a beacon for anyone who has ever experienced collective wisdom and pondered its larger implications. For although our understanding of this mysterious collective consciousness is still only beginning to take shape, what is clear to most of those who discover it is that the experience itself seems to be pointing us somewhere. Carol Frenier, in synthesizing the personal accounts of over 150 individuals for the Collective Wisdom Initiative, found that the vast majority of those who have experienced the emergence of collective wisdom feel that the purpose of this wisdom is “to midwife a new social/spiritual order of an evolutionary magnitude . . . that is already emerging of its own power.” What exactly is the nature of this new order, this evolutionary leap? And what role might we play in “midwifing” it into existence?

The answer, it turns out, may lie in the very nature of collective experience itself. For if, as all the reports suggest, the collective
mind really does think better, create better, and function better than any of our individual minds, and if our own individual capacities are actually enhanced by our conscious participation in this collective intelligence, then wouldn’t the first evolutionary question be: What would it take for us to remove any barriers to the emergence of collective consciousness, not just as an occasional peak experience, but as a permanent ongoing capacity? What would become possible if even a small group were able to live and work together on an ongoing basis with unbroken access to this higher communal mind? And moreover, what if such a phenomenon were to begin to occur on a wide scale? If the growing body of evidence for Rupert Sheldrake’s theory of morphic resonance is real, what could prevent such an occurrence from spreading through an ever-increasing number of groups throughout the globe?

In his landmark book Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny, Robert Wright argues convincingly that the march of human history has not been random in direction but has in fact been progressing along a very specific trajectory—toward increasing cooperation and unity. As the parameters of our capacity to feel and express “brotherly love” have expanded from kin to tribe, from tribe to nation, and beyond, he writes, we have gradually “become embedded in larger and richer webs of interdependence”—on a course that leads, at least plausibly, toward the sort of ultimate Omega Teilhard envisioned. As Wright speculated in a recent interview, “Five hundred years from now, maybe the whole kind of techno-social organism on this planet will be sufficiently cohesive to have a unified field of subjective awareness. Maybe it will be like something to be planet Earth. If Teilhard is right that, more and more, there is such a thing as the collective mind of the planet, and that human beings are kind of neurons in some giant global brain, then maybe someday the planet will, in some sense, have a unified consciousness.” Could it be that we really are on a journey to Omega? Is it possible that the murmurings of shared wisdom arising in small groups throughout the world are but the initial stirrings of a much greater wave of collective consciousness trying to be born? Whatever the ultimate verity of Teilhard’s vision, in our increasingly connected world, it is at the very least, to use Wright’s lingo, a noncrazy idea.

However, if imagining a grand Omega centuries down the line feels a bit decadent given our current global predicament, at the heart of the experience of collective wisdom is another understanding—one with subtler and perhaps greater implications for the lives we’re leading right now. What does it mean, after all, that we can come together in a collective higher mind? If the nature of our individual consciousness is such that it can merge with or be transcended by the collective, what does that say about the nature of who we are? As Chris Bache pointed out, “experiences like these teach us that whatever individuality is, we have to think of it in a way that is more like an open system than a closed system.” What if, in the face of this knowledge of our permeability and interdependence, the ground of our identity were to shift away from our cherished sense of separate individuality to the whole in which we are embedded? What if our overriding preoccupation with our personal welfare—the ego’s endless chain of wants, desires, and fears—were to pale to insignificance in the face of a concern for our larger, collective identity and destiny? What kind of human world would come into existence then? Freed from the moorings of self-concern, what could our individuality express? And more importantly, where could we go collectively that we could never reach in our present, fragmented condition? Admittedly, given the current state of human affairs, this vision too seems a far cry from fruition. But in light of the remarkable potentialities emerging in our midst, it is hard to imagine a possibility more worthy of our collective aspiration.

Robert Wright

“If human beings are kind of neurons in some giant global brain, then maybe someday the planet will, in some sense, have a unified consciousness.”

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THE SCIENCE OF COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

by Robert Kenny

WITH MORE AND MORE PEOPLE TALKING about collective consciousness, it seems natural to wonder, Is there any scientific research to back it up? The answer, increasingly, appears to be “yes.” In fact, a growing body of recent research suggests not only that a field of awareness and intelligence exists between human beings but also that through it we influence each other in powerful ways.

Just as Gene Roddenberry imagined a future in which Star Trek’s Spock could “mind meld” with others, more of us are now becoming aware of our remarkable capacity to intuit each other’s thoughts and emotions, as well as to consciously think and create together without communicating through the five senses. Collective consciousness becomes most apparent in our ability to intuitively sense and work with the interactions between our and others’ physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual “energy fields.” Although science has long been convinced of the existence of gravitational, electric, and magnetic fields, significant research in the frontier science known as parapsychology, or the study of psychic (“psi”) phenomena, indicates that other types of fields—including thought fields—may also exist.

A fundamental psi phenomenon is extrasensory perception or influence, perhaps made possible by the apparent ability of consciousness to operate beyond the constraints of space and time. Examples include telepathy and remote viewing. The existence of psi (or tele–prehension, as Ken Wilber calls it) has been convincingly demonstrated in numerous scientific studies carried out by Marilyn Schlitz, Dean Radin, and others. In typical remote viewing experiments, for example, one individual is sent to a distant, undisclosed location while another individual, who remains in the lab, attempts to “remotely view” and describe that distant location in detail. Across a large number of experiments, remote viewers have been able to describe another’s surroundings with a statistically significant degree of accuracy. Intriguingly, pairs who had an emotional bond have obtained the strongest results. These findings suggest that groups whose members build a sense of connection and trust with each other may have an increased capacity to access and understand each other’s perspectives, to “see through each other’s eyes.”

Biologist Rupert Sheldrake and others have conducted several ingenious experiments that show how widespread psi abilities are—even in animals. Using synchronized video cameras placed in the homes and workplaces of dog owners, he has proven that dogs go to wait at the front doors of their homes at the precise moment their owners decide to return home from work, even when those times are varied daily. Sheldrake, Radin, and others have conducted numerous telepathy experiments on human beings as well, demonstrating that people can sense the thoughts and intentions of others across space and time. This research includes studies on a common experience called “the sense of being stared at.” By separating two people in a laboratory setting, with the first person hooked up to equipment that monitors his or her nervous system and the second person staring at the first person at random intervals on a closed-circuit television, researchers have collected evidence for the existence of this phenomenon with statistical “odds against chance” of 3.8 million to one.

Sheldrake has also demonstrated in a number of studies that we can assist each other’s learning across distances, without any external interaction or communication. In one study, for instance, a group of individuals completed a newly created crossword puzzle, and their average completion times were recorded. The same puzzle was then broadcast to millions via closed-circuit television, researchers have found that when people complete the puzzle while it’s being shown, their average completion times are faster than the original group, suggesting that as a result of so many individuals having done the puzzle, knowledge of the puzzle was somehow etched into the field of collective consciousness, making it increasingly easier for others to solve.

Radin, the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research (IPPEAR) Lab, and Roger Nelson’s Global Consciousness Project have taken evidence into consciousness “field effects” even further—into the realm of mind/matter interactions—by conducting a series of intriguing experiments with random number–generating (RNG) computers. RNGs can basically be thought of as sophisticated coin-flipping machines, programmed to issue zeroes or ones randomly. That is, just as if you were to flip a coin one hundred times and could expect the “heads” and “tails” sides to come up fifty times each, so it is with an RNG—producing, on average, an equal number of zeroes and ones. Ordinary people, however, have used the power of thought alone to create order out of this randomness, causing RNGs that were sometimes thousands of miles away to issue significantly more of one number over many trials, simply by intending to do so. Bonded pairs—couples in a relationship—produced effects that were six times stronger than individuals. Like the remote viewing experiments, these results indicate that people with an emotional connection, when acting in concert, are more influential than individuals acting alone.

Perhaps not surprisingly, groups produce far stronger RNG results than either individuals or couples, even when the group members are unaware of the RNGs and therefore cannot intend to influence their output. For example, when merely the attention of groups has been captured by
high-interest public events, RNG effects have been three times greater than when individuals have demonstrated an intentional influence on RNG machines. During certain widely televised events that have captured mass attention, such as Princess Diana’s death and the 9/11 tragedies, the combined output of sixty RNGs around the world significantly deviated from chance. For example, on October 3, 1995, the day that the verdict was read in the O.J. Simpson murder trial, Radin, Nelson, and University of Amsterdam professor Dick Bierman decided to run RNGs in each of their labs to test their hypothesis that something significant would happen in the field of collective consciousness. An analysis of their combined results clearly confirmed that hypothesis. As Radin describes it in The Conscious Universe, “Around the time that the TV preshows began, at 9:00 AM Pacific Time, an unexpected degree of order appeared in all the RNGs. This soon declined back to random behavior until about 10:00 AM, which is when the verdict was supposed to be announced. A few minutes later, the order in all five RNGs suddenly peaked to its highest point in the two hours of recorded data precisely when the court clerk read the verdict.” These results suggest that millions of minds, when united with a specific focus, can have a powerful effect on the material world, mysteriously influencing normally random physical systems toward higher degrees of order.

Just as we can create order in physical systems through focused attention or intention, a number of experiments have suggested that two or more people can create synchronization or coherence between their nervous systems. For example, in research funded by the Institute of Noetic Sciences and others, Marilyn Schlitz and William Braud have shown that individuals who are calm and relaxed can intentionally reduce the anxiety of others in distant places, and others, Marilyn Schlitz and William Braud have shown that individuals who are calm and relaxed can intentionally reduce the anxiety of others in distant places, and they meditated together.

On community, societal, and even world-wide levels, more than twenty experiments, published in respected scientific journals, have demonstrated that Transcendental Meditation groups representing one percent of a target population have caused significant improvements in measures of quality of life and physical and mental health and have reduced crime, accidents, conflict, and war in the entire target population, apparently by reducing stress in the collective psyche. These and other studies provide strong evidence that we can develop and work with our collective consciousness to produce a number of important interpersonal, organizational, and social benefits—from increased empathy, understanding, and respect to enhanced health, cooperation, and creative collaboration. In our increasingly diverse workplaces, communities, and global institutions, where we are challenged by extremely complex and urgent problems, cultivating these capacities will not only promote the common good but also could ensure our survival.

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SELECTED REFERENCES