

Opening talk April 2006 - Albrecht Mahr

What is Collective Wisdom? ❀

Opening speech given by [Dr. Albrecht Mahr](#) at the
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Convened and designed by Dr. Albrecht and Brigitta Mahr, the [Collective Wisdom Conference](#) was a collaboration of ISAIL, the Institute for Systemic Constellations and Integral Solutions, FPA, the Research Group on Political Constellations, and Friendship Across Borders, a peace project with young Germans, Israelis, and Palestinians.

[Translated from its [original German](#) into English by [Tom Kennedy](#).]

Over Easter we spent a few days on vacation, and during this time we came across these two – our friendly companions and patron saints for this conference:



Many of you may recognize them: one is the archangel Gabriel as he announces the birth of Jesus, and on the right is Mary as she receives this news from Gabriel. They were created in around the year 1280, and they can be found in St. Peter's Cathedral in Regensburg. The religious or art history background isn't important for me here – it could just as well be Jewish

or Buddhist forms, or simply other human faces. What matters is what the two “angels” – I’ll call them this for simplicity’s sake – are expressing: friendliness; merriment; and a natural lightness and ease.

What do these qualities of our two angels have to do with collective wisdom? Well, collective wisdom deals with matters which are really close to our hearts. Just as it’s said in the World Café, which we’ll soon put into practice together: We can’t afford to waste our time and our lives with matters which don’t fulfill our spirit, and which don’t really touch our hearts.

And we know this: What really touches our hearts also lets us smile, and it often has the quality of lightness; it naturally incorporates our interest in issues close to the hearts of others, our fellow human beings; and our own heartfelt concerns bring us into contact with our natural and compassionate generosity and inclusiveness, especially even towards those who at first appeared to us to be unfamiliar, alien, or even repulsive.



What is Collective Wisdom?

So, what is collective wisdom - the subject of our conference? I would like to name just a few traits.

1. With collective wisdom it’s about something apparently paradoxical.

Summed up, collective wisdom can be described this way: “Together we know more.” If an issue important to all of us exercises the effect of an “attractor” and gathers the group around it, a third thing, something new, can take shape in our midst which is more than the sum of all the individuals, and which creates a special connection among us.

AND: While the individual steps back a bit and becomes part of the larger commonality, he or she simultaneously lights up in his or her own individual uniqueness, irreplaceability, and specialness. The conscious experience of collective wisdom and the conscious experience then of unmistakably becoming ourselves, are one process and one movement.

From this consciousness, this “together-knowing” – coming from the Latin roots “con” = together, and “scire” = to know, giving us the Latin conscientia and the English derivative conscience – out of this “consciousness from together-knowing,” new solutions actually become possible in all spheres of life, from the family domain to politics - solutions which at first seemed inconceivable to us. (By the way: We may also be trying to develop collective wisdom even when we’re alone, when we talk to ourselves - we’re attempting to speak with another self in order to know more together!)

Example: A number of years ago a mountain climbing guide told me about a survival training trip he had made with a group of 20 in Canada. A woman in the group suddenly began running a high fever and had tremendous pain in her lower abdomen. There was no doctor in the group, and the next telephone station was at least 12 hours away by foot. Under these circumstances, the guide asked each person in the group to write down the following two things on a slip of paper: first, the probable diagnosis and the seriousness of the situation; and secondly, what should be done. The paper slips were then read out loud, and each point was voted on by the group until the result became clear. Probable diagnosis: acute appendicitis with immediate threat to life. What had to be done was: setting a fire in the forest near a clearing, and laying out an “S.O.S” sign with the participants’ colored jackets – both

measures to attract the attention of pilots in planes flying overhead so that they could then pass on the call for help. The woman was on the operating table within six hours and her life was just able to be saved. The mountain guide's comment: I never would have come up with these ideas alone! ❀

2. Collective wisdom doesn't recognize any particular experts –

there are only experts. Collective wisdom can more easily arise where we lower or eliminate the often so restrictive barriers based on hierarchy, or those based on ethnic or religious affiliation.

Of course we're very happy here to have our many presenter experts, and we're curious about their knowledge, their experience, and their inspiration. But at the level of collective wisdom there are no status or knowledge differences: We're all equal – and that is a beautiful challenge for all of us! If we tend to see ourselves as “smaller” and others as “bigger,” then we can start to play here by giving up these postures. If we're in positions of leadership, or tend to direct and guide others, then we can use this ability here to encourage others to equality, and to challenge them to become aware of their own potential for collective wisdom.

Maybe there really are experts in collective wisdom: these are people who have especially great confidence in collective wisdom, and in the possibilities of fostering it. Here is an example of one such expert who awakened collective wisdom in a small enterprise with an affectionate comment, and in doing so saved it from dying out. ❀

This incident relates to elements which are central to the unfolding of collective wisdom: recognition and valuing of differences; and with this: consideration and respect as a basic posture towards others; and: esteem and recognition as well for one's own dignity.

Many of you may already know this story:

It's about a once thriving monastery, which at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, after a long period of decline, was so diminished that only five monks were left in the crumbling main residence. This group included the abbot and four monks, all over 70 years old. Very clearly a dying monastic order.

The abbot, tormented by the imminent demise of his order, one day came up with the idea of going to visit the nearby hermitage of an old rabbi and asking him whether he might have some advice on how the monastery could be saved. As the abbot was explaining the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only express his sympathy.

“I know how it is!” he cried out. “The spirit has left the people. It's the same in my congregation. Almost no one comes to the synagogue any more.” And so the old abbot and the old rabbi cried on each other's shoulders. Then they read passages out of the Torah and discoursed quietly together on profound matters. The time came for the abbot to take his leave. They embraced each other. “It was wonderful after such a long time that we've come together again,” said the abbot, “but still, I haven't achieved the aim of my visit. Is there nothing that you could say to me, no advice that you can give me, which could help me save my dying order?” “No, I'm sorry,” answered the rabbi. “I have no advice to give. The only thing that I can say is that the Messiah is one of you.”

When the abbot returned to the monastery the brothers circled all around him, clamoring:

“Well, tell us, what did the rabbi have to say?”

“He couldn’t help me,” answered the abbot. “We just cried and read the Torah together. The only thing that he did say, though, just as I was about to leave – it was rather mysterious – was that the Messiah is one of us. I don’t know what he meant by that.”

In the following days and weeks and months, the old monks brooded over this, and asked themselves whether the words of the rabbi could possibly have some kind of significance.

The Messiah is one of us? Could he have possibly meant one of us monks here in the monastery? If so, then which one of us could it be? Do you believe he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant one of us, then presumably the abbot. He’s been our spiritual leader for more than a generation.

On the other hand, he could also have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light.

Certainly he couldn’t have meant Brother Elred! Elred with his bad moods. But looked at more closely, even if he’s a thorn in the side for people, Elred is practically always right. Often quite right. Maybe the rabbi actually did mean Brother Elred!

But surely not Brother Philipp. Philipp is so passive, a real nobody. But, on the other hand, almost in magical fashion, he has the gift of always being there when you need him. He simply appears at your side, as if by a miracle. Maybe Philipp is the Messiah!

Of course, the rabbi didn’t mean me. In no way could he have meant me! I’m just a very ordinary person. But, assuming he meant me - assuming I’m the Messiah? Oh God, not me! I really couldn’t be so much for You, or could I? -

As they began reflecting in this manner, the old monks began to treat each another with extraordinary respect for the improbable case that one of them really was the Messiah.

And for the most improbable case of all, that each one of the monks himself could be the Messiah, they also began to treat themselves with this same extraordinary respect.

The rare visitors to the monastery, it was reported, began to sense the aura emanating from this exceptional respect which had begun to surround the five old monks, and which seemed to have penetrated the entire atmosphere of their home. The place began to have something oddly magnetic about it. Indeed, it took on an almost irresistible quality.

And so it probably shouldn’t come as a surprise that eventually novices began to ask for admittance, and that thanks to the rabbi’s gift the monastery awoke over the course of just a few years to a new and vibrant life. —

Thus ends this story about the experts, that we all are. ❀

So please, look at yourselves during the time of our conference – and also, of course, in the time afterwards! – in this sense as experts who are bringing along your own special potential for common wisdom.

In daily politics you can often observe how hard it is to break up the “expert monopoly” and

put it into many hands. Around the middle of April 2006, our Federal Minister for Families in Germany started a so-called “Alliance for Education” with the Catholic and Protestant churches in the country. Its purported goal is to support parents in imparting explicitly “Christian values” while raising their children. Immediate reactions to this ranged from irritation to outrage within the Jewish and Muslim communities, as well as among other groups, such as teacher associations and the union representing those involved with education and science. They felt that they were being excluded from this important issue about values, and hence demeaned. Is there such a thing as “Christian values,” or is there something about asserting them, which, in somewhat exaggerated terms, is already like a subtle “declaration of war” against “the others,” for example, against the other religious denominations? (We forget so easily: No religion can claim for itself more truth or nearness to God than any other. Were there numerous, powerful, and impossible to ignore Christian voices being raised against the Nazi regime; or 12 years ago against the genocide in predominantly Christian Rwanda?)

What could an alternative process on the part of the Family Ministry look like which would make use of the greater capability of a collective search for solutions for this important question of values? For example, a World Café with participants representing all key population groups, including children and youths. Together they could, for example, address the question of: “According to which values do I want to be treated? And how can I contribute to having everyone else treated in just this same way?”

At this point, I would like to make a small digression on **collective stupidity, blindness, oppression, and destructiveness**. In light of the collective acts of cruelty continuing up the present day, particularly those of the very recent past, the word “collective” has a sinister and frightening overtone for many of us.

So, let me take a moment to ask: What could turn us, the ca. 700 participants of this conference, into a more or less homogeneous, blind, and destructive mass? How much time would be needed for this – how many decades, or maybe only weeks, days, or even hours? And which external and internal circumstances could lead to this?

Many factors for such a development are of course known: economic distress and poverty; collective humiliation, for example after a lost war; an external threat like imminent or already occurring warfare; and the accompanying collective need for strong charismatic and quasi-religious leadership - and much more.

I would like to mention here a very ordinary factor which contains the seed of collective blindness and war: “Over there” we see “the others,” who in our eyes embody, or are doing something upsetting, bad, or harmful. ❀

Here in our circles “those over there” might be, for example, religious fundamentalists, right-wing radicals and Neo-Nazis, terrorists, globalizers, and sometimes also “the American government,” etc., etc. From rejection to demeaning and condemning, all the way to the wish and supposedly justifiable actions to make them disappear, there are but a few steps to which each and every one of us is capable. This hasn’t just been proven again and again by the collective crimes of the last century, but also by the terrifyingly simple experiments of Milgram, and later of Zimbardo in the 1970s. During these experiments people like us became willing within hours or just a few days to commit severe acts of cruelty on test persons. Zimbardo’s results were recently directly confirmed in reports about the rapid onset

of brutality among prison personnel throughout the entire world, and not just in Abu Ghraib.

What I'm leading to is this: We here are certainly not particularly special people, and most definitely not a collection of saints. We all tend to judge and condemn, sometimes overtly, often only subtly. And with each of these judgments we nourish the seeds of exclusion and collective blindness. Judging and condemning often relate at first only to ourselves, but subsequently go on to affect many others.

I would therefore like to propose that over these three days that we conduct a little mindfulness exercise: that every once in a while we pause to simply just observe how we're seeing ourselves, and others. And if we recognize that we're tending to make a judgment against ourselves or against others, that we then take a couple of good deep breaths, develop a feeling of friendliness and sympathy for ourselves and the others, put the judgments aside for the moment, and then perhaps sense the relief which comes from this. This is a wonderful little exercise, and in sum just as much a wonderful little contribution to dealing cleverly with the warlike potential in ourselves, and hence to collective wisdom in the best sense.

3. An element of collective wisdom which isn't always explicitly named is, of course, non-violence.

On one side, non-violence corresponds to our original nature, our original goodness, as the Buddhists say. It doesn't take much, though, as was pointed out, to give up and lose the connection to this inner clarity.

Talking most competently on this subject will be Marshall Rosenberg – tonight after the evening break – whose life's work is dedicated to non-violent communication. I don't want to fail, however, to tell one of the many stories which remind us of the surprising options that we so often have in life. This story has been recounted by Tom Atlee (in "The Tao of Democracy"), whose task throughout his life has been the promotion of what he calls "cointelligence."

This story is about an actual occurrence concerning a sheep farmer in Indiana, who was being threatened by his new neighbor's dogs. They had been running around free and were attacking and killing his sheep. The usual reaction by sheep farmers to such incidents, of course, consists of court action, barbed wire fences, or ultimately the use of firearms.

This man had a better idea: he presented baby lambs to his neighbor's children as pets. Subsequently, the neighbor started voluntarily tying up his dogs, and after a while friendly contact began to develop between the two families. ❀

Now I would again like to come back to our next step together, the World Café. Peter Senge, who is perhaps known to some of you as an especially astute and far-sighted organization developer, and a very good authority on the World Café, says this about it: "The World Café is not a technique. It is an invitation into a way of being with one another that is already part of our nature."

And Senge goes on to say: "The underlying purpose of the World Café is to let loose the true desire of the larger whole." ❀

Maybe at first this sounds too "big" or too abstract, but what is meant is this: The World Café

is about carrying on conversations under friendly and pleasant conditions about things that matter to us, and which touch us.

So, what is it in the end that really touches us, what is this? I believe it's this: that we can find out what it is that we value and love in ourselves. That we can face our own limitations and faults with sympathy. And that with both our best aspects and our limitations, we can contribute to the well-being of others, indeed to the common good. As Desmond Tutu says: "Contributing to the common good is in one's own best self-interest."

Our nature is both: personal and transpersonal, meaning that we're also part of a larger whole, and we would like to live this out, give it expression, serve it, and enjoy it. We would like to have the happiness inducing experience of serving the common good – this is not a moral imperative, but is rather an intensive urge to achieve personal satisfaction. It is not the urge for self-confirmation or to go down in history as a "good person," but rather the desire to give expression to our original social / communal nature. That which touches our personal uniqueness and our possibilities to serve the common good, these are good issues. ❀

Can / should we create a better world? I don't know. To me, this question seems more to confine the space, rather than widen it. But if we follow what really touches and nourishes our hearts, with the light ease and the smile which are natural to the heart, then we allow for movement and the emergence of what our two patron saints are heralding – something new that we don't yet know, but which we can still entrust ourselves to. What really counts to us, and moves us, therefore really has nothing to do at all with commandments and morals.

I can recall an example – and each of us here has experienced such examples – of a tire installer in the USA who, after we'd been waiting for hours on a lonely highway, eventually appeared out of the night with his tiny service vehicle in order to fix the flat tire on our RV: extremely focused and so alert, as though he had just discovered a surprisingly new variation in the work which he had already done a thousand times before; and above all: he worked with complete enjoyment, and laughed the whole time.

So, it's not about heroic altruism or something similar; no, it's about simple gestures of interest, of concern, sympathy and patience there where we are at the moment – whether that place is one of the current crisis areas of the world or where we are now, in a region where peace currently prevails. It's about these kinds of simple and central questions, which we pose at the beginning in the World Café. ❀

The conference begins and ends with all its currents in the Community Council on the last day. In the Community Council, following old Native American tribal traditions, the entirety of our conference community is reflected in eight basic positions and perspectives on life, corresponding to the eight points on the compass. In the words of Ingrid Ebeling (who will conduct the World Café and the Community Council together with Andrea Steckert): "From these different perspectives we want to look at the conference we've gone through together. It's now about making the multifaceted things we've encountered, the results, the personal and collective experiences of the conference, visible for the community in our own specific way, and to carry this out into the world." ❀

Under the experienced direction of Ingrid Ebeling with the support of Andrea Steckert, we can now begin with the World Café.

Thank you very much, Ingrid and Andrea - I'm now turning it over to you.

**To share your thoughts on this subject
please join our seeded conversation.** 

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