

# Dawning of Free Communities - Arthur Zajonc

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Dawning of Free Communities for Collective Wisdom

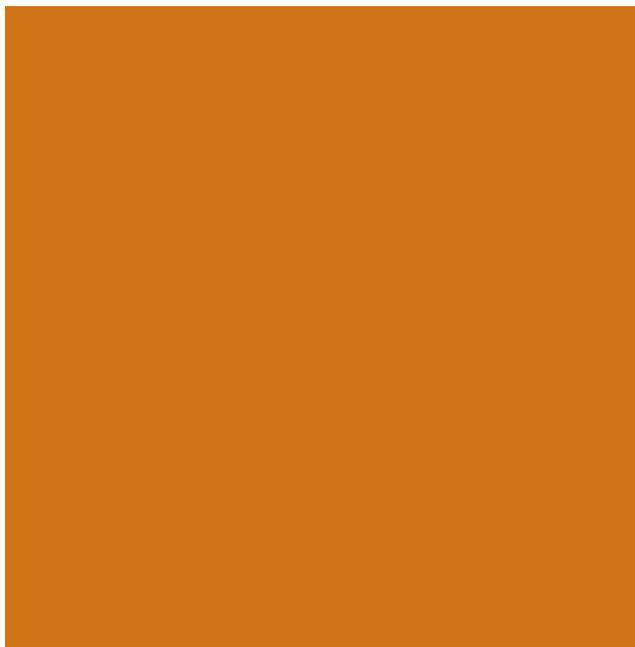
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Come out of the circle of time  
And into the circle of love.  
Rumi

Thirty armed conflicts are currently active around the world. In them peoples, frequently from the same country, are pitted against one another, destroying villages, taking lives and committing the atrocities of war. The groups involved in such conflicts are often formed on the basis of motives such as greed, power, ethnic hatred or religious intolerance. Over and against these groups, however, are communities that have been formed for high ideals and that practice love in their relationships to others. In what follows I wish to inquire into the nature of the various types of collectives of which we are a part, and the relatively recent emergence of groups especially well-suited to contemporary humanity.

We often presume that the love which governs human relations is of a single type, but this is not the case. Awareness of these differences in our loves will prove helpful to our understanding of the different types of collectives and their development through history. Nor should we presume that the Self has been similarly developed or expressed in all historical periods and societies. I am particularly struck by the emergence of publicly powerful yet sensitive women in the south of France during the twelfth century. I have come to see this as a watershed period and of particular importance for our own time, especially as it concerns the formation of what John Fetzer termed “communities of freedom. In a world wrought by conflicts and seeking insights, we can ask, what special contributions can a community of freedom offer?

### **Natural Gatherings**

As we take up the question of collective wisdom, it perhaps is useful to consider briefly those natural factors, both in ourselves and in our world, that lead to the development of collectives or groups of individuals. Groups are often formed on the basis of one or more identifiable factors. The first of these is kinship, which can reach beyond our immediate family circle to those who share our ethnic and religious identity. A second factor is vocation; we’re put into groups through the kind of work we do in the world. A third factor that governs the formation of collectives is geography; inasmuch as we live in a particular region or neighborhood, those around us (including those unlike us vocationally or ethnically) become known to us. Finally, we may come together with others simply on the basis of a shared interest or commitment. Each of these reasons for the formation of collectives could be explored at some length. Here I will only venture a few remarks before passing on to our main theme.

Our first experience of selfless love is often the love that can flourish within the family. Familial relationships have offered powerful occasions for the expression and development of the impulse of love between individuals and for the formation of collectives. This can occur within the immediate family or can extend to an entire tribe or ethnic group. The archetype of maternal love has been depicted countless times in the Madonna and Child. In his book *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis terms this form of love “affection,” or in Greek *storge*. He views it as the most natural of the impulses to love. The Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner viewed familial and tribal affections as the schoolhouse for love. When, however, they persist beyond their rightful time and place, familial or tribal affection can become the basis for “ethnic cleansing” and genocide. The intelligence of the collective can become demonic, even if it was once benevolent. Indeed, the infection of the collective by a malevolent ethos may well be more common than its contrary.

The second factor in the development of collectives is work. In traditional societies individuals have often formed castes or guilds based on the type of work they do. Vocational groups shared a schooling in the practice, theory and mythic dimensions of their craft. In traditional societies such schooling has always been a form of initiation replete with accompanying ritual celebrated within a rich mythic context. In the past, the trades were tied closely to families or insular kinship communities, and so the love of family or clan often carried over to others of the same vocation. But even without this factor, the education, craft secrets, and skills held in common by a group of workers bound them together in powerful ways. Still today the challenge of acting through one’s profession in a harmonious and concerted manner towards some worthy goal is a high ideal of the vocational community. One thinks, for example, of the firemen of Manhattan.

Of course until relatively recently, ethnically homogeneous groups lived together. That is, geography and ethnicity were highly correlated. Woodrow Wilson's doctrine of ethnic self-determination of nations was predicated on distinct homogeneous populations located within a geographical region. It was disastrous because we have entered a time when populations are increasingly heterogeneous, and thankfully so. Where we live today is likely to throw us together with individuals of diverse social backgrounds, creeds and racial identities. Our circle of acquaintances is extended by this fact, a wider range of friends is found. In considering these natural factors that gather us, we sense their insufficiency in characterizing the modern situation. Whatever the wisdom and dangers associated with family, vocational and geographical groups, the real question we must address today concerns groups formed through no outer factors, but rather out of the freedom of the individual. There has been an evolution of the individual and so also an evolution of the forces that bind people together into communities. In my opinion this development is foreshadowed in the achievements of the twelfth century, but it is only in our own time that a truly new basis for community is both required and fully possible. It will be a form of loving relationship that honors the specificity of individuals yet lifts them out of the contingencies of time and space, that is, beyond kinship, vocation, and geography. Paradoxically it requires people to be more fully themselves, and simultaneously to embrace their opposite. With this new basis for community arises also the possibility for a new kind of collective wisdom.

### **The Free Association of Individuals**

As the formulae for traditional associations become increasingly problematic, we require another basis for the formation of community. Free association is a factor that will become increasingly important to collective life in the near-term future. Imagine the difference it would make to North Ireland or Palestine if race, religion and ethnicity were not factors supporting violent conflict. What does the Palestinian "see" in the Israeli? Is it a person or the projection of an ideology? We could ask the same about an Israeli seeing a Palestinian youth. Reflect on the power the collective has over the very way we view each other. How could the collective work in support of the clear view of the unique human spirit that abides in each? It would require, in my mind, the community of freedom that John Fetzer and others have celebrated.

This element of freedom is already affecting the formation of traditional groups. In the choice of a vocation, for example, increasingly a young adult makes his or her own decision, even over the objections of family. That is, we are no longer born or 'breed' into a trade. We regard the choice to be the individual's own. We witness here, as so frequently in modern life, the strengthening of the Self against the traditional forces that shape collectives, and the emergence of a new principle of association. In this way vocational groups have become not only a place of shared professional capacities, vision and ideals, but a collective of individuals, rather than a predetermined group based on lineage or the traditional values of the collective into which one happened to be born.

Likewise, in joining together with others for some cause independent of vocation, religion or other common background, we create a community of common concern. We burn with an inner ardor to rectify an injustice or to redress a failing in society, and we do so together with other individuals. Through our personal social commitments we find friends with whom we share aspirations and intimacies.

It seems to me that the basis for all community formation – traditional as well as modern --

must be love in its various forms. Yet when we speak of love, we must reckon with its multiple meanings. As C.S. Lewis, points out, love manifests in a variety of forms. These loves have had different words associated with them in the past: storge, philia, eros, agape. We have mentioned already the love of mother for child (storge). To it we can add friendship (philia), romantic love (eros) and charity (agape).

### **Cherishing the Beloved**

For our purposes, an essential issue in considering the collective is the place of freedom in its formation. What had been mandated by custom can today only properly arise through individual choice. When did this capacity first assert itself as regards human relations? The fealty sworn by vassals to their liege lord was a political act of great consequence, but when did we learn how to pledge our pure hearts to another? To answer this question we must turn to the twelfth century and the south of France, to the region called Languedoc. In this remarkable period a connected pair of developments are foreshadowed: namely, the emergence of the modern individual, and a novel form of love suited to the new experience of personhood. The twelfth century expressed imperfectly but forcefully the reconfigured nature of human relationships in its exploration of “courtly love” between women and men.

The idea of romantic love as the basis for relationships between men and women is relatively recent. Many, including Joseph Campbell and C.S. Lewis, would date it to the appearance of fin amor or courtly love in the twelfth century. Prior to this time, the most powerful human affections were often between man and man, woman and woman. Recall that for the ancient Athenians corporeal beauty was to be found in the young boys wrestling at the gymnasium. We can witness the development of romantic love in the twelfth century in the songs and poetry of the troubadours, and in the medieval romances such as Tristan and Iseult. In his book *The Allegory of Love*, C.S. Lewis credits these first romantic poets with changing our ethics, imagination and daily life in a way that separates us forever from the classical past or Oriental present. “Compared with this revolution the Renaissance is a mere ripple on the surface of literature,” writes Lewis. Dante’s late-thirteenth century account of his immortal love for Beatrice in *La Vita Nuova* [The New Life] refers specifically to the model of the poetry of Languedoc as his inspiration. In his book *Love in the Western World*, Denis des Rougemont explores the theme of love through the myth of Tristan and Iseult and the troubadours, connecting them both to the Cathars, that remarkable religious sect that flourished in the south of France until they were ruthlessly oppressed by the Church in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

I agree with these authors and believe that the birth of courtly or romantic love marks a new phase in the development of human relationships. The nature of this new phase is revealed by the free choice of one individual for the other. The details need not concern us here, but suffice it to say that aristocratic women became for the first time more than pawns in a political game of power played by men or a means of insuring succession. Courteous and chivalrous suitors (not husbands) courted their beloved. Rather quickly this grew to an idealization of the feminine that would reflect itself in religious devotion to the Virgin Mary. Over a longer period of time it would fundamentally change the mores of male behavior and of marriage in the West. Today rather than entering an arranged marriage, two adults, mature to the point of determining their own lives, select one another. It would take time for this breach with tradition to be widely adopted, and there are many parts of the world where it still is not common practice. Yet the rise of the individual, and especially of the individual woman appears in history at this time.

In the twelfth century and in the south of France, we encounter for the first time an issue that is central to our contemporary concerns. At this time and place, a relative handful of women and men explore their full and unique identities, and do so through intense and romantic relationships recounted in verse and song. As the consciousness of self develops from out of the ancient forms of the collective, we need to explore the ways in which that strong self may bind itself once again into the collective.

### Love and the Solitary Self

I hold this to be the highest task of  
a bond between two people: that each  
should stand guard over the solitude of  
the other.                      Rainer Maria Rilke

In his “Letters on Love” Rilke rejects the easy notion that love merges the lover and the beloved. He writes, “A togetherness between two people is an impossibility... even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist.” In writing these words Rilke is speaking as a modern soul who knows the reality of loneliness even in love, even within the intimate embrace of the beloved. Rudolf Steiner wrote likewise of the change in human experience of the self that dawns in the late Middle Ages and is fully formed by the late eighteenth century. He termed it the dawning of the “consciousness soul,” one of whose hallmarks is loneliness. Even the troubadours knew the ennui of what they termed “distant love.” In the face of the new reality of isolation and solitude, what is the nature of love? Rilke declares that “the highest task of a bond between two people is that each should stand guard over the solitude of the other.” We are not called upon to mitigate or dispel the solitude of the beloved, but rather to honor and protect it, for only within it can the full potential of our unique humanness develop.

Thomas Merton, a deep student of Rilke’s writings, writes movingly of the profound relationship between love and solitude in his essay by that name. “The paradox of solitude is that its true ground is universal love – and true solitude is the undivided unity of love for which there is no number.” In other words, the powerful experience of solitude can lead love beyond obsession with the individual partner to become a larger, more inclusive love, “a love for which there is no number.” We learn love’s true nature first with a single person, but as Merton and Plato describe, we can and should move beyond the particular to the universal reality of Love itself. Then, rather than experiencing love as an action we undertake by the individual towards another, we participate in Love. In meditation we are called upon to shift our consciousness from the Self to the No-Self, from what Merton calls the Hearer to the No-Hearer. So too we can change from being the Lover to the No-Lover. Yet in making the shift we all the more fully participate in the Love that is the ground of all things. Now it is not the product of our longing but of our heightened awareness. Love, writes Merton, is the true ground of solitude, that is, of the contemplative life, and so if we live in the world from the space of meditative awareness we live out of Love.

What emerges in the twelfth century is the first experience of our true solitude, in which we feel ourselves cut off from all others and even from God. A form of love is required that does not resolve that separation but can sustain it, contain it so that the soul’s hard labors can be performed each day and the fruits of that important work, which often emerge in suffering, can appear. It is a period of growth and transformation in the fire of loneliness and longing. And yet as Thoreau said, “There is no remedy for love but to love more.”

## Extending Love

What is practiced first between two solitudes must in the end extend beyond the pair to encompass others, indeed many others. The Israeli Jew must come to honor and protect the distinctive solitude of the Muslim Palestinian. Here we touch on the greatest and most difficult goal of all, one spoken of by Christ in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:43-48. Although dating back to the start of our Common Era, these words really concern our distant future. They are meant as an admonition to reconfigure radically the geometry of love.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

Here, the Christ raises the expectation: Do not even the tax-collectors and Gentiles, those who were considered morally retrograde at the time of Jesus, do not they love their neighbor and hate their enemy? Do not they love those who love them, love their brethren, their family? More is being asked by Christ, far more, namely that we reach beyond family, reach beyond neighbor, reach beyond those who have affection for us to include in our love, ultimately, all human beings, from whatever race, creed, color, family background, etc. This is an extraordinary and paradoxical challenge, an expectation that addresses us in our solitudes, in our complete individuality, but which reaches far beyond the conventions of past affections to the highest of loves, to charity or agape.

In Plato's dialogue on love, *The Symposium*, the temple priestess Diotima instructs Socrates concerning the path "the candidate for initiation" into love must follow. It is the path of beauty, and begins with the concrete beauty around him or her. Yet before long the beauty of one beloved partner is compared to the beauty of others, and the candidate realizes that his or her passion is not for the individual but for the many instances of beauty. Continuing, the candidate goes on to understand that his or her longing is not even for the beauties of the body but actually for the beauties of the soul and spirit. In this way, working from the specific and concrete to the general and more abstract, Socrates arrives at "beauty's very self."

Whereas Socrates would have us love the high ideal and eternal Form of Beauty, Jesus would have us see beauty in neighbor and enemy alike. The transcendent love of Socrates, if handled well, can retain its purity and universality even as we learn to see beauty in the finite and fallen world, to seek and love the beautiful also in our enemy. As a pupil traveling the path that connects Plato's two worlds with one another, love refines and ennobles the human soul, guiding it to the heights of heaven and back again. Most important, however, is discovering heaven in everyday life, for only in this manner does love enter into the world. This practice, which depends on us, roots love in the world.

We have seen how ethnic groups based on exclusion and superiority can breed a distorted vision of those around them, and precipitate acts of unspeakable cruelty and violence. Instead of true seeing, the fears and hatred of the collective are projected on every neighbor of a different belief or race. True seeing, deep and intimate knowing, is of a completely other character. It can only fully flourish in the light arising from solitude, freedom and charity

(agape).

## Insight and the Collective

For help in understanding the nature of true seeing, and its application to collective wisdom, we may turn to the work of Goethe. In a letter to a friend, Goethe once remarked that everything depends on the *aperçu*. What Goethe meant by this remark is that our view of intelligence or understanding is far too narrow, too circumscribed. Logic, or pure deduction, does no real work for us. It may clarify, make more lucid a line of argumentation, but ultimately the conclusions that follow by the application of logic are implicit at the origins. What then is the basis for real insight that leads beyond mere logic or calculation? It is to this that Goethe was pointing in his use of the word *aperçu*. *Aperçu* is from the French *apercevoir*, meaning to see, to gain a perception of something that may have been difficult initially to make out. The gaining of insight, the making of a discovery, relies on this profound human capacity, the capacity to see coherence, to penetrate with our inner vision that which may not have been immediately transparent to our understanding.

This activity, the formation of insight, is well-known to each of us as individuals. We know when we are confused; we also sense when we have finally penetrated a problem with which we struggled for a long time. But when we concern ourselves with collective wisdom, the question arises, how does insight arise through a group? Is something like Goethe's *aperçu* possible--not only for an individual, but for a community, a collective formed out of many individuals? How is it that we come to or can hope to come to a collective insight, the formation of collective wisdom?

In certain work with groups that is being done today, very often the real goal is to lead, through a carefully organized and yet open process of dialogue, a group of individuals to a shared *aperçu*. It may even be an insight that was relatively clear to group members at the outset. The point is not the production of an expert viewpoint that is then communicated in a cold, lifeless way to the group, but rather the collective exploration of a field of inquiry. That process of collective exploration knits the group together, forms it into a single organ that allows that community or collective to come to a joint perception. Experiencing the *aperçu* in community can be a profoundly transformative moment for the group.

Goethe's famous line "every object well-contemplated creates a new organ within us" is just as true for a group as for the individual. Having come together through our loving relationship to one another, we form an organism. One could speak of a psychic or psychological organism that, through the development of collective inquiry, attends to a new object, to an object at first not understood. As we engage that object, an organ is formed within the organism of the community, an organ suited to the understanding, in the high sense of the word, of that to which we attend. Once that organ is formed, each individual within the collective has the opportunity to make use of it.

It seems to me that in this way collective wisdom emerges through, first, the forming of genuine human relationships and, second, a kind of collective contemplative practice or engagement, leading to the formation of an organ of perception not only within the individual, but within the group. Just as a profound insight can be transformative in our own lives, so also an insight within the collective can have deep ethical or moral consequences that can go far beyond what accompanies a simple, abstract deduction. Genuine collective insight gains special impact because through it we experience what Michael Polanyi would call "personal

knowledge,” but now one shared by a group. We could also say we have together had a contemplative encounter that carries a force that logical inference cannot possess. In the Buddhist tradition the insight experience is termed “direct perception” and is considered the surest and fullest form of knowing.

### **Communities of Freedom**

For genuine insights to arise within the collective requires the same kind of clarity and freedom in collective inquiry as that required of the individual. These characteristics are not always present in groups, as I have emphasized. For this reason communities based on free association are of special importance today. In them the required freedom of thought and feeling can flourish.

John Fetzer often spoke of communities of freedom. When we come together not out of tribal or family affections, but through the high principle of love spoken about in the Sermon on the Mount, then we honor the full and distinctive humanity of the other, and bring our full individuality into the group as well. We relate to one another in the fullest and freest manner possible. The success of such communities depends on the dynamic relationship between our own individuality, more and more strongly developed, and the collective. We are bound together no longer by romantic love or traditional forms, but by the true spiritual love of which the Christ was speaking. It is only this high, indeed highest form of love that can create the vessel capable of embracing the full self of each member of the group. We do not bring our egotism, but all our capacities, indeed our very being, as gift to the community, and receive the same from others.

At this moment the high principle of invitation is essential. Rather than being concerned that our voice is heard, and that it wins in the contest for importance, we are required to become quiet and listen into others. We listen for the gift of the other and invite it into the circle. In performing this practice with each other, all egoism vanishes and the joy of being truly seen, of being recognized, becomes the fundamental mood of the group.

Just as the strength of an ecosystem is in proportion to the diversity of species that comprise it, so also is the resourcefulness of a human ecology enhanced by the diversity of its members. Through exactly this variety we learn to see with the eyes of the other and to act in concert with them by sounding our own voice, making our own distinctive contribution. This enables us to bring about together what alone would have been impossible. In Goethe’s fairy tale “The Lily and the Green Snake,” the death of the prince is averted only because all characters in the story respond properly when the wise man with the lantern says, “let each assume his role and do his duty, and a universal good fortune will subsume individual sorrows, as a universal misfortune consumes individual joys.”

Rudolf Steiner’s four plays written from 1911-1914 owed much to Goethe’s fairy tale. In them, Benedictus, who is like the wise man with the lamp, helps each aspiring individual along his or her distinct path. At one point Benedictus says of them, They have unlocked their souls, each in his own way, in order to receive the spirit light according to his or her destiny. What they have conquered for themselves each one shall render fruitful for the others. But this can only happen if their powers, in harmony of measure and number, form willingly a higher unity. This unity alone can waken to true life what otherwise could merely stay as single bare existences... So may their separate souls now join themselves to sound in unison, attesting to the principle that harmony of spirits may achieve what each alone could never bring about.

By practicing deep listening we can bring the full array of gifts to expression within the collective “in harmony of measure and number.” That is, a special human geometry is established, “a harmony of spirits.” All this occurs in free and generous association, as we participate in an inclusive love that honors every difference. From this living constellation of human relationships we gain a power to perform deeds of great intelligence, compassion and importance, deeds far beyond our individual capacities or even the simple sum of our capacities.

### **Spiritual Practice and the Invocation of Powers**

In order to form communities of compassion and intelligence, not only socially and psychologically, but also spiritually, requires one further ingredient. When traditional Western religious orders were established, they formed around a so-called Rule. The Rule described the order’s way of life and its spiritual, contemplative and ritual practices. For instance, wherever the Benedictines were, be it in Europe, the Americas or Asia, the same Rule of St. Benedict required five to six hours of liturgy and prayer, five hours of manual labor, and four hours of scriptural study. Each Benedictine monk knew the Rule and lived by it. The liturgical practices were performed at certain prescribed hours of the day. In other words, not only did the Benedictines share outer lifestyles, but they also shared religious practices, practices of the spirit, that were common to all of them. One can ask, What is the effect of such common practice? What does a common practice create by way of a spiritual substance that connects one individual to others? I believe that a common spiritual culture arises through such shared spiritual efforts, one whose importance should not be underestimated.

We are no longer in the Middle Ages. The specific rules and forms of the monasteries, while instructive, are no longer suitable for most of us. Nonetheless, I believe that the spiritual principles that underlay the development of these common practices are still pertinent. I therefore ask the question: As we form communities of freedom, how can we come together inwardly through spiritual practice, a practice not imposed by a rule, but undertaken because of a shared aspiration? How do we contribute to the life of the collective, not only outwardly, but also inwardly, even when separated by distance from other members of that community? In other words, there is an exoteric aspect to the formation of the collective, but there is also, shall we say, an esoteric, or spiritual set of considerations that are equally or perhaps even more significant.

For over twenty years the Protestant theologian Walter Wink has articulated a view of social life that recognizes not only visible structures and forces but invisible ones as well. In his recent book *The Powers That Be* he writes, “Every business corporation, school, denomination, bureaucracy, sports team – indeed, social reality in all its forms – is a combination of both visible and invisible, outer and inner, physical and spiritual.” Wink uses the biblical language of “powers and dominions,” that is, of over-lighting spirits who inspire groups. One finds such language in all spiritual traditions, from Asian to the indigenous peoples of the Americas, from stories of the Grail community in Europe to stories of guidance experienced by the Hopi during their migrations. In all these traditions the community is more than a mere assembly of people. Through common ritual and practice a “harmony of spirits” is achieved, and a higher Spirit is invoked whose character reflects the intentions and qualities of the community.

If however the collective of today rejects the fullness of the individual then, in Wink’s language, a “domination system” arises that displays an oppressive intelligence all its own.

Here we should pay special heed to Ken Wilber's concept of the "pre-trans fallacy." Namely, as we form collectives today, are we really transcending the previous traditional social form to create a new form better suited to our time and our experience of solitary consciousness? Or are we reverting to an old tribal group consciousness? If we find solace in reversion to the older form, then we can be assured that the threat of domination is nearby.

I think the treasuring of human freedom within the collective will be a guidepost in navigating our way to healthy collectives well-suited to our time. In those groups where individuals are required to sacrifice themselves for the collective we run the perennial risk of reverting to an old form, as opposed to discovering a new. To truly have a community of freedom we must sense the authenticity and individuality, the full scope of our neighbor in the community. It will only be in such communities of freedom that a true ethic for the future will be formed and that insights can be gained that are larger than those any one individual can bring forth.

To undertake an endeavor recognizing freely those with whom we are to work, to place ourselves fully within that collective, to treasure the diverse gifts within that community, and to work inwardly and outwardly to create a sheath, a body or organism that can become an organ for insight, and an invitation to a higher over-lighting spirit, is a powerful guiding imagination for me as we approach the question of collective wisdom.