



Movement Building for Transformational Change

Bringing Together Diverse Leaders
for Connection and Vision

By Frances F. Korten and Roberto Vargas

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ovement Building for Transformational Change is published by the Positive Futures Network, publishers of *YES!* magazine. This paper is written especially for individuals and organizations seeking to bring together people from different backgrounds and cultures about social change.

The lessons the paper brings forth, however, provide universal guidelines for creating space in which the “soul shows up,” authentic communication is possible, and true learning can take place.

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The State of the Possible retreat series was held with the guidance and support of a great many people. We are especially indebted to the Fetzer Institute for their financial support, for the use of their beautiful Seasons retreat center for our fall retreats, and to their program officers, Tom Callanan and Eric Nelson, who shared their considerable wisdom about convening.

We are grateful for the financial support from Tom and Cathy Crain and the late Stuart Abelson, which enabled the first retreat. We wish to thank the Convening Committee of the Positive Futures Network, chaired by Fran and composed of Rod Arakaki, Jill Bamburg, Tanya Dawkins, Kevin Fong, Nicole Pearson, Gifford Pinchot, Belvie Rooks, and Sarah van Gelder, who provided consistently valuable ideas and guidance throughout the entire series.

We are indebted to Herman Gyr and Akaya Windwood, who, along with Roberto, lent their valuable skills to facilitating the retreats. We are grateful to Mark Dworkin and Melissa Young, who patiently edited hours of videotape to produce a video of our October 2002 retreat. We thank Michael Leonen and Jacob Galfano for the design and production of this booklet and Sarah van Gelder and Rod Arakaki for their insightful editorial advice.

We want to especially highlight the contributions of Grace Boggs, our beloved elder, who gave generously of her experience and energy at five retreats and helped in many other ways to make the retreats a success. Finally, we want to express our appreciation to the 201 amazing social change leaders who shared so fully of themselves in these retreats and from whom we have learned so much.

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The gathering impacted me in ways that few conferences have. I returned home truly energized about new possibilities and deeply grateful to be in a web of involvement with those who attended. Ideas and possible collaborations were hatched that I am very eager to explore.

Charlie Murphy

We live in a time of transition, opportunity, and responsibility. It is a time of deeply systemic social and ecological crises, of extraordinary new technologies, and of rapidly changing institutions and power equations. The uncertainties and possibilities that accompany this transition are spawning new social movements and networks, while well-established movements, such as the labor, environment, peace, human rights, women's, and human potential movements, are evolving into new forms.

These movements and the networks within them represent tremendous creative energy for promoting peace, love, fairness, and sustainability. Yet the movements and networks are fragmented, which limits their power to bring about the transformational changes needed at this time. While many share underlying values, each group focuses on a particular constituency or a particular topic, and members generally communicate little with those from other movements and networks.

People pursuing "schools not jails" may know few or none of the people passionate about

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solar energy; those advocating voluntary simplicity may know almost no one in the immigrants' rights movement; those involved in the peace movement may know few people working to contain the sprawling patterns of our cities. Yet, viewed in a larger perspective, these are interrelated efforts aimed at bringing about societies that respect the dignity of each individual and the living Earth, on which we all depend.

At the Positive Futures Network, publisher of *YES!* magazine, we desired to promote transformational change by creating connections and common vision among many different social change movements. To do that we conducted a series of 10 retreats for movement and network leaders. The retreats, called the "State of the Possible," were held between 1999 and 2004, and brought together over 200 leaders.

The retreats were designed to develop trust among the participants, generate new collaborations, and stimulate a sense of the practical possibilities for creating a world based on the values of justice, sustainability, and compassion. Participants' responses showed that the retreats accomplished those goals. Participants were inspired by the breadth of possible allies and the consequent real potential for transformational change. They made friendships and began to work together in ways that crossed the usual divides of race, religion, cultural background, and topical issue. They placed our current struggles in an epic historical context many called "The Great Turning" — the dying of one era and the birthing of another. They gave each other support and inspiration at what were often quite difficult times. Many deepened the connection between their inner spiritual world and their outer world of action. Most experienced breakthroughs in their understanding of the racial dimensions of injustice and opened themselves to seeing the world through the eyes of another.

The movements and network are fragmented, which limits their power to bring about the transformational changes needed at this time.

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Purpose of this paper

During the years that we held these retreats, we learned many lessons about how to bring diverse activists together for inspiration and learning. This paper brings you the story of this experience. You'll find lessons about how to create a safe, sacred space in which people of diverse backgrounds can come together to learn from one another, understand each others' perspectives, share the passion of their work, and become inspired by a vision of social transformation.

We have written this paper especially for individuals and organizations seeking to bring together people from different backgrounds and cultures for conversations about social change. The lessons, however, provide universal guidelines for creating space in which the "soul shows up," authentic communication is possible, and true learning can take place.

The authors

This is an intimate account of the retreat experience by two people deeply involved in the series. Fran, as head of the Positive Futures Network, oversaw the vision and implementation of the entire series and served on the facilitation team for each of the 10 retreats. Roberto joined as a co-facilitator for the fifth retreat in October 2001 and continued in that role for all of the succeeding retreats.

Each of us was profoundly affected by the experience. The retreats deepened Fran's understanding of the centrality of race in the lives of people of color in the U.S. and in the history of this nation. The friendships she made widened her appreciation for the many different communities struggling to bring about a more just, sustainable, and compassionate

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world. Each retreat deepened her sense of the transformational potential of this historical moment. Roberto discovered that the healing gifts of his culture could be shared to assist people from all cultures to discover more about creating community, listening deeply, and practicing multicultural respect. The experience also helped him believe more strongly in his own responsibility to make the U.S. the nation of vision and justice that it should be. He also learned more about forgiveness, optimism, and multicultural respect, which have helped him interact with others outside of the retreats in ways that are more respectful and courageous.

Retreat participants

The retreats were invitational. Staff of the Positive Futures Network spent considerable time reaching out to identify people who would provide the right mix of backgrounds and perspectives for each retreat. At the beginning we drew primarily on individuals that our staff and board knew personally. Later, we elicited suggestions from past retreat participants, which continually widened the network. We selected people who had demonstrated exceptional social change leadership; who were connected to broad networks of people; whose work was based on the values of justice, sustainability, and compassion; and who were ready to bring their full selves into a space and be open to inner change as significant as the outer change they sought in the world.

We sought a rich diversity in the backgrounds of the participants. In each group of about 30 people, we had participants who ranged in age from their early 20s to their late 70s or 80s. They represented most of the major racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. as well as a balance of men and women. Participants came from different parts of the U.S., and a few

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came from aboard. They were working in the forefront of such social concerns as indigenous rights, voluntary simplicity, economic globalization, socially responsible business, race relations, inner-city education, media reform, immigrant rights, nuclear disarmament, environmental justice, philanthropy, labor, food systems, and local government.

This diversity of backgrounds combined with commonalities of values made the dialogues rich opportunities for learning and growth. For many participants, the State of the Possible retreat was their first experience in a group with such a great degree of diversity. The diversity, coupled with the open-hearted quality of the dialogue, required participants to consider their own perspectives in a new context and gave them a chance to practice respect for people of very different cultures. Those from the dominant culture and people of color were challenged to listen, learn, and be transformed by the experience of others. This was not only true regarding racial issues, but also the diverse spiritual practices, political ideologies, and activist priorities represented by the participants. The experience of engaging deeply and respectfully with one another had a powerful effect on everyone because it demonstrated that diverse people really could work together effectively for the common good.

The 201 people who participated in the retreats are listed at the end of this paper.

The content of this paper

Chapter 2 describes the journey we took as we carried out these retreats and the lessons we learned along the way. Each retreat brought new insights into how to help people engage one another with openness and respect and provided new understandings of our historical moment and the challenges ahead. We then incorporated those lessons into subsequent retreats, so that the series became, for us, a cumulative learning process.

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For many participants, the State of the Possible retreat was their first experience in a group with such a great degree of diversity.

By the sixth retreat, held in May 2002, we had arrived at a design that worked well, which we then used for the next three retreats. Chapter 3 provides a detailed account of the May 2002 retreat to show how the design worked in practice.

Chapter 4 presents five essential strategies embedded in our design that infused the retreats with their special power. The strategies created sacred space and inspiration and enabled people to know one another before embarking on conceptual discussions. They encouraged people to speak from the heart about themselves and their work, and they brought to the surface and helped develop the participants' wisdom about social change. They also promoted understanding and respect among the diverse participants. Combined, these strategies provided a setting in which new friendships could flourish, new insights could take hold, and exciting ideas and partnerships could germinate.

Chapter 5 reports on the impacts of the retreats based on interviews with 56 participants in early 2003. Participants describe the effect the retreats had on their perception of being part of a large, inclusive community working for the common good, on their ability to integrate their spirituality and their social change activism, and on their perspectives on their own identities and on race. They also tell of the many friendships and collaborations that emerged based on connections made at the retreats.

In Chapter 6 we encourage readers to apply the lessons from our retreat series in their own settings — in staff meetings, conferences, community events, and even within their own families.

Under Resources, we list the articles published in *YES!* magazine that capture key insights from the retreats. We also list a video entitled "We the People: Conversations on Being American" that portrays some of the intense conversations that took place at the October 2002 retreat. We now have a Speakers Bureau composed of over 100 of the retreat

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participants. All of these resources are available on the *YES!* magazine website, www.yes-magazine.org.

Finally, we list the 201 extraordinary people who participated in the retreats.

The friendships and collaborations generated at the State of the Possible retreats live on. So too, do the lessons about bringing diverse leaders together for connection and vision. With this paper, we hope to pass on those lessons so that others may use them to advance a world of justice, sustainability, and compassion.

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Seeing and hearing from activists and thinkers from all corners of relevant change work gave me a lot of heart — lifted my spirits. Even to this day it carries me, knowing that this kind of work is being done everywhere.

Nobuko Miyamoto

The origins of the State of the Possible retreats lay in three simple questions. If we brought together individual leaders, each connected with a different major social change network, could we produce a greater sense of the whole of which each person's work is a part? Could such a gathering identify breakthrough areas for change? And could it generate new and productive connections among the participants?

Trying out the idea

The staff and board of the Positive Futures Network drew on their extensive networks of friends and colleagues to issue invitations to the first retreat and formed a staff/board "Convening Committee" to design the four-day gathering. Our intent was to have participants identify "breakthrough" areas ripe for creating the major shifts required in our society. We wanted to create an egalitarian atmosphere that would maximize the time that participants

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had to interact with one another and minimize the time spent passively listening to a single person. We also sought a structure that would spark new ideas and enable friendships to develop. We were eager to see if this kind of gathering made sense to the kind of people we wanted to invite. Would busy social change leaders take time out of their overloaded schedules to discuss large social change opportunities without any expectation of creating an action agenda?

In May 1999 we held our first State of the Possible retreat with 41 social change leaders drawn from many different movements and networks. We met at Fort Worden, a secluded state park on Washington's coast. By the end of that retreat, we had a clear answer to the question of whether busy social change leaders would find such an event worthwhile. They reported that the retreat was extremely stimulating and valuable. They made friendships and created collaborations that last to this day. They explored exciting, important ideas. They had fun. And they left recharged for the work ahead.

Sarah van Gelder, editor of *YES!*, wrote about the lessons from that retreat in the Fall 1999 issue of *YES!*. She noted that a key underlying principle that seemed to fit many people's work and perspective is that "We are working toward a shift from a society centered on the love of money to one centered on the love of life."

Applying the early lessons

The experience of the first retreat inspired us to continue the series. That intent was reinforced in November 1999 when the protests against the World Trade Organization occurred in Seattle. There we saw with even greater clarity the potentials for convergence among the

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Mixing people who were leaders in distinct movements and networks created exactly the energy and networking opportunities we had hoped for.

movements for change. We also envisioned the important role that networks of friendship and trust could play in moving from protest to creative and constructive collaboration. We believed that our retreats could help to serve that need. We asked the Fetzer Institute for support, and they graciously agreed.

As we contemplated our second retreat, the PFN Convening Committee sought to build on the best aspects of our first retreat and correct its shortcomings. A clear strength of the first retreat was the remarkable people who attended. Mixing people from very different backgrounds who were leaders in distinct movements and networks had created exactly the kind of energy and networking opportunities we had hoped for. Participants came out of that retreat seeing their work as part of a larger effort at social transformation.

Another strength of the first retreat was the egalitarian atmosphere we had achieved. We offered no keynote speeches or expert panels that would leave most participants passive. Instead, in order to bring stimulating material into the group's conversation, we asked participants to volunteer to give a "short hit" — a five-minute presentation on what might be a potential breakthrough area for deep social change. On the afternoon of the third day, we used the "Open Space" methodology, in which any participant could convene a group to discuss a topic of interest. We were also responsive to the spontaneous ideas of the group. For example, when Native American Rebecca Adamson offered to lead a sage-burning ceremony, we immediately picked up on that opportunity. We found that by the end of the retreat most participants had played a leadership role at some time. We carried these methods over in subsequent retreats.

One shortcoming was that the first retreat had ended without synthesizing the ideas participants had put forth. To solve that problem we called on Herman Gyr, a consultant skilled

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at bringing together ideas in dynamic graphic representations. We invited him to facilitate our second retreat, and he continued as one of our facilitators for a total of seven retreats. At the end of each, he created a beautiful mural that put the work of the participants and their insights into the historical context of where we, as a society, are coming from and what we are trying to actualize for the future.

Another shortcoming of our first retreat was that we had packed in too many events and asked participants to shift too frequently from one activity to another. It was clear that the social change leaders we invited didn't need any help getting their conversations going! What they needed was time to develop those conversations. We needed to make sure our process didn't get in the way. We also needed to balance our conceptual work with more artistic and spiritual elements by introducing more ceremony, song, and movement. So we designed the second retreat to be much more fluid, with fewer separate events, and added ceremony to the beginning and end of each day.

Finally, we noted that at the first retreat only 20 per cent of the participants were people of color. We knew that ratio underrepresented the dynamic leadership coming from many communities of color. For the second retreat, a third of the participants were people of color and in subsequent retreats generally about half the participants were people of color.

These changes had a substantial impact on the character of the second retreat, held in May 2000 at the Sleeping Lady Conference center in the Cascade Mountains of central Washington. Our topic was "How do big shifts in societies happen?". We found, however, that before we could engage in a good discussion of our main topic, we needed to work through the painful subject of racism in our society and in our movements.

As Carol Estes and Robert Jeffrey describe in their articles in the Fall 2000 issue of *YES!*,

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the people of color at the retreat rebelled against our planned structure and insisted on opportunities to speak from the heart about their experiences. We entered into what turned out to be a 10-hour talking circle, with each person speaking of the painful parts of their lives and their efforts to work across the boundaries of race. The heartfelt nature of the sharing deeply affected everyone in the room. For many of us of European heritage, the circle brought a profound new understanding of a problem most thought we had moved beyond.

Once we had a deeper collective understanding of one another, we were able to return to our original topic of how big shifts happen in a society. We examined the civil rights movement, the labor movement, and the Protestant Reformation for lessons applicable to our work today. We spoke of the momentous nature of our time and the parts we are all playing to bring about another big shift. We were able to have that rich dialogue in a deep and joyful way because of what we had shared together earlier in our talking circle.

Herman's synthesis at the second retreat more than fulfilled our expectations. He drew on Joanna Macy's concept of The Great Turning as the basic story line that captured the essence of our conversations. The Great Turning is the "big shift" of our current historical period — the dying of an era based on the exploitation of people and nature and the potential emergence of a new era based on respect for the dignity of all people and the living Earth. Herman's drawing placed the work of each participant in that context. The graphic of The Great Turning at the center of the mural became the symbol of the retreat series that is on the cover of this booklet. And the idea of The Great Turning became the epic story that underlay the conversations in all of our subsequent retreats.

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Continuing our learning process

Our third retreat, held in November 2000 at the Fetzer Institute, was on “Bridging the divides of race and class.” The retreat, especially helped by the leadership of participants Mel Hoover, Rachel Bagby, and Alli Starr, produced rich insights, great friendships, and enormous fun. Fran Korten wrote about this retreat in the Spring 2001 issue of *YES!*, noting the group’s reflections that as we tackle the problems of race and class we come up against an even bigger problem — the dominator model that presupposes that some people in a society must be at the top while others are at the bottom. We collectively explored the possibility that the global nature of our environmental and social crises might spur humanity to create systems that truly embody the growing realization that we are all interconnected. Once again, Herman’s final synthesis mural graphically expressed these ideas as part of the flow of history we called The Great Turning.

By May 2001 we were ready for our Reunion Retreat, held in the Cascade Mountains at the Sleeping Lady Conference Center. We gathered 65 people who had attended the earlier retreats. Here, we fostered deeper collaborations among the participants and further developed our sense of the historical moment and our place in it. Dave Korten opened the retreat with a speech on “The Great Work Ahead,” subsequently published in the Fall 2001 issue of *YES!*. He picked up the previous retreat’s conversations about our struggles against the dominator system and the potential for momentous change. Grace Boggs later reflected on the retreat in her *YES!* article “On Common Ground,” noting the inspiration she received from several workshops on the possibility of moving to a post-industrial world based on the principle of partnership.

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We found that before we could engage in a good discussion of our main topic, we needed to work through the painful subject of racism.

A shortcoming of our retreat series was that our facilitation team lacked the diversity needed to move the conversations about race and class to an even deeper level. During a discussion at the Reunion Retreat, a participant made a comment that was misunderstood and taken by participants of color to be an example of “white people not getting it.” We worked through the issues and emerged with even greater understanding of how the wounds of racism must be addressed as we seek to work together. But the incident signaled that it was time to bring in a facilitator of color skilled at enabling us all to integrate racism and oppression directly into our discussions of all aspects of social change.

Deepening our ability to honor all cultures and discuss the pain of oppression

With the encouragement of our friends Tom Callanan and Eric Nelson at the Fetzer Institute, when we renewed our contract to continue the retreats, we recruited Roberto Vargas to be a co-facilitator with Herman Gyr. Roberto joined us at the fifth retreat, held in October 2001, and continued to co-facilitate the retreats through the tenth and final retreat in 2004. Roberto brought a commitment to connecting personal growth and social change within a spirit-filled context. His inclusive spirituality infused each gathering, helping many participants to deepen their connection to the spiritual source that serves as the energy for their life and work. He also brought several key practices that became part of the standard format of our retreats.

One such practice was the inspiration table ([see photo on page 62](#)). From the beginning of the retreat series, we had encouraged participants to bring a meaningful object to place in the center of the room and to tell briefly what that object meant to them. Roberto moved

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this simple idea to a more mindful practice of inviting inspiration, sharing painful moments, and honoring all the cultures present in the room.

Drawing from his Chicano tradition, he decorated the table with a brilliantly colored Mexican blanket, candles for each of the four directions, and some of his own objects of inspiration. He encouraged participants to bring more than one inspiration object, so that by the time everyone had placed their objects on the table, we had a gorgeous centerpiece of photos of loved ones, books, stones, feathers, and objects of all manner that held deep meaning for those at the gathering and represented many cultural traditions. Instead of having each person speak in a single session about the objects they had brought — which we learned can become tedious — Roberto invited a few individuals to share at moments throughout the retreat.

Another practice Roberto introduced was “gifting” as a closing ceremony. Participants gave one other person a necklace that they had made from materials provided. When they presented the necklace, they used the opportunity to express appreciation for what the person had meant to them and to the retreat as a whole.

Roberto also worked with participants at the beginning of the retreat on ceremonies that they might want to lead. This approach turned out to be especially valuable at the October 2001 retreat, held just one month after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Everyone was experiencing strong emotions associated with the attacks and the government’s response. They needed a creative outlet for those feelings. Fortunately, Nobuko Miyamoto was among our participants. She encouraged us to turn our initial talking circles into a time of movement and creative expression. That switch worked magically — enabling each person to shout, cry, leap, wail, and speak from the heart in powerful ways. It laid the groundwork for deep

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sharing at this moment that everyone felt to be a turning point in U.S. and world history.

With the 9/11 attacks on our minds, the discussion turned to what it means to be an American, a topic that Sarah van Gelder led as an open space session. She later edited an issue of *YES!* on that question (Spring 2002, "What does it mean to be an American, now?"). Among our participants were Vincent and Rosemarie Harding, Grace Boggs, and Jim Embry, all of whom were ignited by the discussion and eager to see it continue. They formed a steering committee for the May 2002 retreat, which we entitled "We the People of the 21st Century."

Settling on a design that worked

By the time of the sixth retreat, we had settled on the key elements of our design. We had learned how to enable diverse participants to share deeply with one another and discuss practical possibilities for social transformation. The details of that design are discussed in Chapter 3, which tells of the May 2002 retreat. The same design was also used in the retreats held in October 2002, June 2003, and October 2003.

For the retreat held in October 2002 we invited two videographers, Mark Dworkin and Melissa Young to tape the discussions. We later turned those tapes into a 26-minute video entitled "We the People: Conversations on Being American." Narrated by Danny Glover and accompanied by a discussion guide, the video is designed to act as a springboard for the viewers to reflect on their own experiences and feelings about being a citizen of the United States. ([See the Resources section for details on the video and how to order.](#))

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Applying our design to planning a major event

Through the experience of nine retreats, we had learned to create a space that brought inspiration and courage to diverse leaders. The retreats did not focus on specific outcomes — they allowed ideas, actions, and collaborations to emerge naturally from participants' interactions. But would our design work if applied to a situation demanding clear outcomes and action plans?

The organizing work of the Northwest Social Forum provided an opportunity to answer that question. The Northwest Social Forum was conceived of as a spin-off of the World Social Forum, which, every January since 2001, had brought together many thousands of activist leaders from around the world. Several people from Washington State who had attended one or more of the World Social Forums felt it was time to apply that model to a region of the U.S. to strengthen the regional networks of progressive social change leaders. They had begun to meet in December 2002, and by late 2003 had formed initial plans for a Northwest Social Forum.

In late 2003, we at the Positive Futures Network had just completed our ninth retreat. We still had funds from the Fetzer Institute for one more, so Fran asked the planning committee of the Northwest Social Forum if they would like us to devote that last retreat to gathering people who wanted to organize the Northwest Social Forum. The planning committee enthusiastically embraced the idea, and formed a liaison committee to guide the development of the retreat. The committee recommended candidates to be invited who had expressed interest in the Northwest Social Forum and advised on desirable outcomes.

The retreat, held in April 2004, brought together 40 activist leaders from Alaska, British Columbia, Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon. Half of the participants were people

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of color and half were women. Our facilitators were Roberto and Akaya Windwood. Akaya was a skilled African-American facilitator who had co-facilitated with Roberto at our October 2003 retreat.

At the retreat we maintained many of the elements we had learned were essential to creating an atmosphere where all are comfortable and feel they can participate fully. The first two days were very much like previous retreats, featuring ceremony, an inspiration table, initial small talking circles, and a few brief presentations on the afternoon of the second day.

It was the third and fourth days of the retreat that were different from previous retreats. Rather than having a “fishbowl” discussion, open space, and a closing synthesis, we designed this time for work on the specific agreements that were needed to move the Forum forward. We remained highly responsive to the wishes of the group, adjusting the design to accommodate the need to come to consensus on important issues.

Building on work that had been done prior to the retreat, participants collectively agreed that the dates of the Forum would be October 15-17, 2004 in Seattle. They agreed on a charter of principles for the Forum, the eight themes around which the Forum would be organized, an organizational governance structure, a set of operating principles, and an initial sketch of the program design. They agreed that they would honor the Native American peoples on whose traditional lands the Forum would be held. They signed up for work teams and liaison positions and authorized the planning committee of the Forum to guide its remaining development. It was a prodigious amount of work — and many worked late into the night.

On the fourth day, we ended with the gifting ceremony of a necklace, which provided a valuable time of individual appreciation before everyone headed home. Participants felt

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inspired and energized. They had come to know each other in ways that laid a promising foundation for the work ahead.

Once the retreat was over, participants returned to their busy lives. The Northwest Social Forum had no funding at that time so was not able to hire staff until July, just three months before the scheduled event. The planning committee and the staff worked valiantly to keep things moving. But sadly, the groundwork laid at the retreat was not enough to overcome the long distances, lack of resources, and cross-cultural misunderstandings that later emerged. Despite much hard work and the good intentions of a great many people, conflicts arose with no adequate way to resolve them. In early October the Forum was cancelled. Many of the personal connections formed in the process of organizing the Forum, however, have continued to flourish, partially accomplishing the goal of strengthening the interconnections among the social change networks in the Northwest.

This brief review of the lessons of five years of retreats tells how we arrived at the key elements to the retreat design. Now let us move to a description of how those elements worked in a specific retreat.

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It takes such courage and vision and tenacity to gather people knowing that there is a not knowing and still that profound change will take place during those days and for all days to come. I feel enriched and grateful and still hungry!

Kathy Engel

By the May 2002 retreat, we had developed a retreat design that met our objectives. The design helped participants form meaningful relationships, call forth a vision for the times we are in, believe in the potential for transformation, and connect their inner spiritual lives with their outer lives of social engagement. We will use this retreat to provide a detailed view of how a retreat actually worked.

The theme of the May 2002 retreat was “We the People of the 21st Century,” a theme that grew out of our post 9/11 discussions at the October 2001 retreat. We sought to help participants connect with the profundity of this historical moment, and the needs and opportunities it presents. We sought to honor the great pain in our history and bring out the best of what it means to be an American — especially recognizing the leadership of those who have most directly experienced oppression. We hoped the retreat would create new levels of trust, enabling important new collaborations.

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Our facilitation team, composed of Fran, Roberto, Herman Gyr, Rod Arakaki, and a PFN intern, Katie Bedor, designed this retreat. By the time of the retreat, we had brought on Nicole Pearson as retreat coordinator, who assisted the team. We had 30 participants at the retreat, which was held at the Sequoia Seminars, a secluded site among the towering redwoods of northern California. Herman and Roberto served as the facilitators.

The day before the retreat, many of the participants had joined us for a field trip to Barrios Unidos in Santa Cruz, which works to prevent and curtail violence amongst youth within Santa Cruz County by providing them with life-enhancing alternatives. We visited the juvenile detention center and talked with young people detained there — a visit that deepened our appreciation for the depth of pain in many people’s lives and the valiant work being done to bring out the best in each person. We then moved on to the retreat itself.

Here is the basic layout of the retreat:

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Day 1

Setting the scene

- *Afternoon* Arrivals. Development of the inspiration table. Informal reception.
- *Dinner*
- *Evening* Introductory remarks. Welcoming ceremony. Introductory circle. Agenda. Closing ceremony.

Day 2

Deepening connections & exploring the theme

- *Morning* Opening ceremony. Small talking circles. Full group reflections on the talking circles.
- *Lunch*
- *Afternoon* Three brief presentations on the retreat theme. Reflections by the full group on those presentations.
- *Dinner*
- *Evening* Singing. Theatrics. Story telling.

Day 3

Bringing forth collective wisdom

- *Morning* Opening ceremony. Fishbowl discussion. Follow-up discussion to the fishbowl by the full group. Introduction to open space.
- *Lunch*
- *Afternoon* Open space sessions — two rounds. Group reflections on the open space sessions. Closing ceremony.
- *Dinner*
- *Evening* Free time. Opportunity to prepare gifts.

Day 4

Synthesis & closing

- *Morning* Opening ceremony. Presentation of the synthesis mural and discussion. Talking circle on what we take and what we offer.
- *Lunch*
- *Afternoon* Instructions on how to keep in contact. Evaluations. Gifting. Closing ceremony. Departures.

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Day 1 – Setting the scene

Before the participants arrived, the facilitation team prepared the meeting room. We arranged chairs in a circle to serve as a symbolic and practical tool to create the inclusive culture we desired for the gathering. The inspiration table was set in the center of the circle and we hung posters and fabrics on the wall to convey the history and progressive spirit of the gathering.

The inspiration table became a symbol of the role of spirit and vision in our lives.

Participants began arriving in the late afternoon. Once settled into their rooms, they were invited to place their inspirational objects on the table in the meeting room. Quickly, the table became a symbol of the role of spirit and vision in our lives and of the richness of the diverse cultural and spiritual traditions represented in our group.

Roberto drew from his cultural tradition to convene the opening session by using a drum to call people to the meeting room. In many indigenous cultures, the drum beat means time to come to council. As part of the welcome, Roberto conducted a brief sage-burning ceremony. He noted that sage invites our ancestors and spirit to be present and invites us all to bring our courage, wisdom, and heart to the work we do for ourselves and the next seven generations.

Fran, as head of the Positive Futures Network, welcomed the group, and honored the participants for the work each person is doing in the world and for taking time to come to this retreat. She explained the purpose and the history of the State of the Possible retreats. Each participant was then invited to take two minutes to answer three questions:

- What is my name and my organization?
- What is the work that I'm passionate about right now?
- What did I give up to be here at this retreat?

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The first two questions gave everyone in the group a quick glimpse of the work of each person. The third question generally brought in personal elements (for example, “coming here meant I didn’t go hiking with my 10-year old son”), and helped each person let go of any regret about what they had given up and thereby become fully present at the retreat.

We then reviewed the retreat agenda. We discussed some simple agreements about working together designed to set an egalitarian tone and ensure that all participants found this a safe environment in which to speak their truth. We closed with a circle in which all stood, held hands, and one by one shared a word of feeling about the moment. By this time, many participants were beginning to sense the powerful potential of this circle of people. We took pains to close by 9:30 to give those tired from traveling — especially those coming from the East Coast — a chance to be well-rested for the remaining days.

Roberto had earlier invited participants to consider volunteering to do a ceremony for the subsequent retreat days, and met with those interested. These offerings enabled us to weave together ritual, song, dance, and poetry from different religious and cultural traditions. Each ceremony was offered by a person for whom that ceremony was deeply meaningful, which strengthened the atmosphere of multicultural respect and participants’ commitment to make their time together sacred and worthy of the group’s pursuit of personal and social transformation.

Morning of Day 2 — Deepening connections

After breakfast and a brief opening ceremony, we moved into talking circles of about six people each. In this 90-minute session, we posed several questions for the groups that helped participants connect their personal experience to the theme of the retreat.

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For the first round of the talking circle, we asked participants to tell:

- With what community do I feel my strongest identity?
- Do I feel like I'm an American?
- What part of me says "yes," and what part says "no"?

For the second round, we asked participants to tell:

- When I exercise leadership, whom am I leading and whom am I not leading?
- Do I feel I lead on behalf of the whole society?
- What makes that hard?

The small talking circles transformed the atmosphere of the gathering.

To ensure deep listening, each group was presented a talking stick with instructions that whoever held the stick had the authority to speak and all others would listen. The participants were instructed that when holding the talking stick they were to speak from the heart. Each person was allotted about five minutes to answer each round of questions. The remaining time was for open discussion. The small groups were not asked to prepare to report back to the group as a whole, but were simply asked to share individual insights.

We had learned from previous experience to allow at least 90 minutes for these circles, and to have only six or seven people in a circle, so each person could share deeply. At an earlier retreat, we had had about nine people per circle and had allowed only an hour. We heard lots of complaints that the circles had ended just as the discussions were becoming deeply meaningful.

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These small talking circles transformed the atmosphere of the gathering. Participants were able to share the truth of their life experience with others who listened with openness and understanding. Invariably, there was learning, healing, and affirmation. Participants finished the talking circle feeling more connected to each other and to the gathering as a whole. The process developed trust, respect, and mutual understanding that set the tone for the rest of the retreat.

To complete the morning, we asked participants to share the insights from their small groups in a plenary session. This was a session full of the pain and joy of people's life experiences. The discussion set the stage for common understandings upon which the group could build in the remaining days.

Lunch was abuzz with people carrying on conversations they had begun in the morning.

Afternoon of Day 2 – Exploring the theme

After lunch, we gathered in the full group to listen to three 15-minute presentations. Prior to the retreat, the facilitation team had invited three participants to draw from their personal experiences to talk about "Leading in Service of the Collective We."

We used the presentations to move from the emotional and personal realm of the morning's circles to the cognitive and visionary realm of the afternoon's discussions. The presentations developed the theme of the retreat and lifted our sense of possibilities. Carl Anthony spoke of his personal struggle to take on a perspective of leadership of the whole, and how he had been profoundly helped by the insight that no matter what race we may be, we are all the exquisite products of 4 billion years of evolution. Joanna Macy spoke of the change in the "psychosphere" that had occurred in war-torn Sri Lanka when over 650,000 people sat

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together in silent meditation as witnesses to the possibility for peace in that country. Anita Rios spoke of the leadership she was exercising to help the Green Party attract more diverse people and honor their contributions.

We then discussed the individual presentations as a full group. At this retreat (and in others as well) we had some fairly heated exchanges that deepened our collective understanding of the tensions and opportunities for working across our differences for social transformation. For example, Rev. Sekou, an African-American participant, voiced his frustration, challenging Dennis Kucinich, a European-American participant, saying “when you start talking about a big ‘we’, I figure I’m not in it. This color-blind stuff doesn’t work.” Sarah van Gelder noted that being color-blind is a privilege of white people that people of color cannot share. It was clear to all of us that we have much work to do on the “journey toward we.” (Sekou and Dennis continued to discuss this issue, emerged as friends, and later worked together on Dennis’s 2004 presidential campaign.)

Vincent Harding, a veteran of the civil rights movement and eloquent spokesperson about the long march to freedom, closed our afternoon discussion by saying that beyond all our hyphenated identities, we are citizens of the United States and our sacred task is to create “a more perfect union.” He recalled a filmmaker asking a young Chinese person at Tiananmen Square whether there was anything the Chinese could learn from America. She had answered that what we want to learn is “advanced ideas about democracy.” He said it was time for us all to move beyond the Sunday school version of democracy to practice “advanced democracy.”

In measured and eloquent tones, Vincent Harding laid out a vision of America as an unfinished project — born of great democratic ideals, yet mired in hypocrisy.

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Evening of Day 2 — Connecting through song, story, and laughter

After dinner it was time to move from the seriousness of the day's discussions to a playful mood of fun. Francisco Herrera, a talented song leader, organized the evening — introducing it by leading us all in singing "*Caminando Hacia El Sol*" (Walking toward the Sun) and then conducting an open "talent show," for which he had earlier recruited some volunteers. Danny Glover recited a very funny version of a passage from Shakespeare; Joanna Macy told a moving story of the Shambhala Warriors; Tim Iistowanahpataakiiwa told comical, insightful Native American tales; one participant let us know of his "secret talent" as an opera singer; and others offered song, story, and poetry.

In the meantime, the facilitation team prepared for the fishbowl discussion to be held the next morning. We developed a question that built on Vincent Harding's point that we need to practice advanced democracy. We chose five people to be in the fishbowl. We then asked each individual if he or she would be willing to be in the fishbowl the next day and to open by making a five-minute statement.

Day 3 — Bringing forth collective wisdom

We started the day with ceremony and sharing from the inspiration table, then moved into the fishbowl discussion. The question we posed was: "What does it mean to practice advanced democracy within our consciousness, our communities, and our society?" Each of the five fishbowl participants spoke for five minutes, after which the fishbowl group discussed their statements while the rest of the participants listened. After a half-hour discussion, the conversation was opened to all.

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At the end of the discussion, we asked Vincent Harding to talk about his views of the “journey toward we.” In measured and eloquent tones, Vincent laid out a vision of America as an unfinished project — born of great democratic ideals, yet mired in hypocrisy. He spoke of how the meaning of “we the people” had gradually expanded to include black men, women, and Native Americans. He ended his comments with the words “Democracy must either expand and develop or shrivel up and die off. The only way to protect democracy is to advance it.” His phrase “America — an unfinished project” later found its way into Dennis Kucinich’s presidential campaign and inspired David Korten to write papers and speeches on “Renewing the American Experiment.”

With Vincent’s inspiring words ringing in our ears, we moved into creating the “open space” sessions. Our facilitators provided a stack of blank notebook paper and asked participants to write a topic they would like to discuss. They hung the paper with their topics on a wall in one of the two time slots and explained to the group what they wanted to discuss. When all topics were posted, everyone signed up for groups they were interested in. Sometimes groups were combined (though we learned to caution group leaders that combining groups can result in a loss of clarity of the convener’s original intent). We ended up with five groups for each of two time slots for a total of 10 groups. Each open space session was scheduled to last 75 minutes.

Once the topics and the groups were determined, we explained the rules of open space, as developed by Harrison Owen (*Open Space Technology: A Users’ Guide*, Berrett Koehler, San Francisco, 1997). These include:

- The law of two feet: You can come and go as you wish. If people leave, it’s not a rejection of the convener or the topic.

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- The four principles:

Whoever shows up are the right people;

Whatever happens is the only thing that could have;

Whenever it starts is the right time;

When it's over, it's over.

The topics that emerged were as varied as the participants. Belvie Rooks convened a group on "A New Cosmology on Race: Learning from Nature." Dennis Kucinich convened a group on "Becoming the New Majority: Advancing Social Change in America." Francisco Herrera and Kathy Engel called one on "Art and Imagination as Seduction-Courtship: Manifestations of Social Change." Jim Embry and Pamela Chiang held a group on "The Greening of Detroit: Environmentalism and Social Justice." Dan Spinner and Bookda Gheisar formed one on "A New Paradigm for Fundraising."

We ended the afternoon by coming together to share the insights of the open space sessions. We had learned to keep these reports short and focused on insights that individuals had experienced, rather than try to summarize the discussion. We found that summaries were inevitably a weak distillation of the intense conversations that had occurred in the sessions, while short individual insights could be quite meaningful. We closed the afternoon with a song and a prayer by one of the elders.

By this time in the retreat, valuable connections were being made and many ideas were cooking in people's minds. For the evening, we planned no activities. We simply arranged different spaces where people could meet informally. We made sure there were drinks and snacks available, and let people gather in whatever ways made sense to them. We knew that

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what happened “off line” in these settings was often the most important part of the retreat. We also laid out leather cord and beads so people could make a necklace for the person they would honor as part of the gifting ceremony the next day.

Throughout the retreat, our co-facilitator Herman Gyr recorded insights, questions, and themes. Then, on the evening of Day 3, he began to sketch a storyline of the conversation of the retreat. He used the idea of The Great Turning as the frame that provides a sense of the flow of history and the meaning of our current moment as it relates to where we may be headed and what our work is a part of. A number of participants gathered around as Herman made sketches, helping him post key ideas that had emerged from our retreat conversations. Herman then took all this material to synthesize it. Working into the wee hours of the morning, he created a large, colorful mural.

Day 4 — Synthesis and closing

On the fourth day, after an opening ceremony, Herman unfurled his synthesis mural (to many “ooh’s” and “aah’s” from the participants) — [see photo page 60](#). Key ideas that found their way onto Herman’s mural included “America — the unfinished project,” “the journey toward we,” “the sacred work,” “toward a more perfect union,” “America, you’ve never been America to me, but I swear this oath, you will be!” (from Langston Hughes), “this is an historic moment — The Great Turning,” “a partnership society,” “we must be the loving society we envision.” Herman described the story that the mural represented, naming the various insights and then inviting participants to change or add to them. As each person spoke, Herman integrated the ideas directly into the mural so that, by the end, it was not Herman’s mural, but everyone’s.

Summaries were inevitably a weak distillation of the intense conversations that had occurred in the sessions.

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The mural pulled together our conversations into the story of “The Great Turning” — the dying of one era and the struggle to birth a new one.

The mural pulled together our conversations into the story of “The Great Turning” — the dying of one era and the struggle to birth a new one. It gave a mythic quality to our diverse aspirations and struggles and a compelling vision for the work ahead. Participants could feel the underlying unity and synergy of our work together.

As we approached the close of the retreat, we shifted to a reflective mood. We formed a circle and asked participants to say what they were taking from this gathering and what they were offering. Many told of the personal insights and friendships that they were taking and offered help and hospitality to others in the group. We then gave participants information about how to stay in contact.

We did two evaluative exercises. We gave participants written forms and asked them to give us feedback on the retreat. We learned that to get everyone to fill out our one page form, we needed to provide 15 minutes during the retreat itself, rather than asking people to fill out the form once they returned to their busy lives back home. Roberto also led a brief “praxis” session to identify key reflections on the process of the retreat — what had worked well, and what could be improved.

We then moved to the time of appreciations and gifting — an important part of our closing. We felt that too often the culture of progressive or non-profit organizations is so demanding that there is no time for celebrating accomplishments or giving each other positive feedback. On Day 2 of the retreat, each participant had drawn the name of a person from a basket to whom they would give a gift at the closing. They were asked to be mindful of that person throughout the retreat so they could use their gift to honor that person’s contributions to the retreat and to transformational change.

As we began the gifting, participants were asked to find the person whose name they had drawn. Then, on behalf of us all, they presented that person with their necklace, explained

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the meaning of the gift, and expressed appreciation for the individual's contributions. This was a time of lots of hugging, some tears, and the sense of the gratitude of both giving and receiving.

We closed at 3:00 with a circle in which everyone was invited to share a final word or phrase. Then there were more hugs, goodbyes, and promises to stay in touch.

Each person took away their own insights. For Fran, the discussions about the long and difficult "journey toward we" were deeply moving. One insight she had was that we only use hyphenated American names for people of color (African-American, Native-American, etc.). Yet she realized that she too is actually a hyphenated American — a European-American. She wrote about her insights in an article in *YES!* — and Sarah agreed that henceforth in *YES!* we would use European-American to refer to those we had previously referred to as "white." Grace Boggs wrote up the inspirations she took from this retreat in an article "Journey to a New America," published in *YES!* (Fall 2002). At this time of extreme patriotism, Grace put out a call to love America enough to change it.

Roberto, like others, was inspired by the stories of people different from himself. He realized in the discussions of leadership for the whole that he had tended to exercise leadership on behalf of the Chicano community. Now he saw that as a self-limiting framework that he could go beyond. He wrote about that insight in an article in *YES!* (Spring 2003), "Reclaiming America."

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For me, a battle weary soldier in this struggle, it renewed my spirits to know there are many people out there on a spiritual journey fighting for social justice. It continues to give me hope.

Zoharah Simmons

The example of the May 2002 retreat in Chapter 3 conveys the way one specific retreat unfolded. This section reviews five underlying strategies used in many of the retreats that led to the deep sense of connection among participants, the personal renewal, and the insights about social transformation.

Creating sacred space and inspiration

Our intent for each retreat was to create a sacred space in the minds and hearts of participants in which they could explore ideas and allow themselves to be vulnerable and thereby open to change.

The inspiration table and our use of ceremony were two important tools to achieve this end. By the time each participant had placed on the table their photos of loved ones, mementos, and pieces of nature, the table became a centerpiece that radiated the power of our collective inspiration ([see photo page 62](#)). At times throughout the retreat — usually at the beginning or end of a session — we invited two or three people to tell about the objects they had brought. Participants honored the life of a deceased relative, told of the struggles of

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Opening and closing each day with ceremony was crucial to creating sacred space and inspiration.

their justice work, or described a turning point in their lives. Participants generally spoke of deeply felt experiences, infusing the gathering with spirit and emotion and inspiring us all.

Opening and closing each day with ceremony was a crucial part of creating sacred space and inspiration. In some retreats, Roberto opened with a sage burning ceremony to mark the beginning of sacred time and invited all participants to be present with their heart and courage. We made salutations to each of the four directions and invited everyone to use this gathering to share heartfelt words and truth that would help us bring forth the world of our vision. This ceremony helped create a spirit-filled environment and a shared commitment to the quality of our time together.

The remaining ceremonies came from the participants sharing their own traditions. Among the ceremonies were a Native American drumming, a song from the African-American tradition, a Chinese-American meditative practice, a chant from the Muslim tradition, a poem from a European-American author. The diversity of the ceremonies mirrored and honored the diversity of the participants and helped imbue the space with a powerful sense of our common humanity.

The gifting, a tradition borrowed from indigenous peoples, also added to the sense of the sacred. This was especially true when we used talking sticks as gifts, which we did in three different retreats. Roberto harvested the sticks months before the gathering so they could be brought to the retreat already blessed, cut, shaved, and drilled to incorporate a decorated leather loop. He made sure the necessary tools, leather cord, and beads were available so each participant could decorate their gift in a unique way ([see photo page 61](#)). And he helped everyone understand and respect the sacred nature of the talking stick tradition. We choose this as an item that people could bring home, so the transformative experience at the retreat could infuse their own work and community.

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Building relationships before doing tasks (*Conocimiento*)

Effective gatherings require that participants feel rapport and trust with one another so they can work well together. Too often we assume that, given participants' similarities and commitments, they will be able to work together easily. We ignore what has been identified by Chicano activists as the *Conocimiento* Principle — the need to build relationships before embarking on tasks. In Spanish, *conocimiento* means “sharing of self to get to know each other” (*Razalogia: Community Learning for a New Society*, Vargas & Martinez, 1984). By encouraging group members to share knowledge of each other, we can develop the trust that enables powerful work to come out of the gathering.

At the State of the Possible retreats we employed the *Conocimiento* Principle in a variety of ways. Prior to the retreat, we sent all participants photos and biographical sketches for all the people coming to the retreat, so everyone had some sense of their fellow participants. Once they arrived, facilitators and staff actively introduced themselves and began connecting people. Immediately after the welcome and opening ceremony, participants were invited to share something about their work and what they had sacrificed in order to take the four days to come to the retreat. People often told something personal in this initial introduction — an outing with a child or a spouse that they were missing, a visit with an elderly relative, a favorite sporting event. The next morning we continued the personal sharing by putting people in groups of six or seven to tell more about the path that had led them to the work they now do, some of their triumphs and frustrations, their fears and their hopes.

In these various ways, participants came to know one another and began to develop trust and a sense of community. This *conocimiento* enabled the participants to engage in courageous dialogues about vision, differences, strategies, and racism that embodied high levels of honesty and integrity and produced many new collaborations and lasting friendships.

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Speaking from the heart

We used the small group talking circles on the morning of Day 2 to move people directly into the practice of speaking from the heart. The questions posed for those talking circles were personal and encouraged people to speak from their feelings and not just from their minds. The questions used in the May 2002 retreat are cited in Chapter 3. Questions at other retreats included:

- “What in my life has led me to do the work I am now doing?”
- “What of my accomplishments am I the most proud of?”
- “What are my hopes and fears for this country?”
- “Who has been most important in forming the person I am today?”

Each group had a convener, chosen ahead of time by the facilitation team, whose responsibility was to open the session, remind the group of the instructions, and suggest a method by which each speaker would be aware of the time limits, to make sure that everyone in the group had a chance to speak. Some did not like the idea of time limits and did not use them, but most found creative ways to gently signal that a person’s time was drawing to an end.

Roberto presented to each convener a talking stick, wrapped in a woven wool cloth. In introducing the talking stick, Roberto noted that many of our ancestral cultures used a talking circle and a special object to facilitate group dialogue and ensure that every voice was heard. He explained that whoever holds the talking stick has the “word” and the responsibility to speak their truth. Everyone else listens without interrupting. When the speaker finishes, the talking stick is offered to the next person.

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Whoever holds the talking stick has the “word” and the responsibility to speak their truth.

The combination of the personal questions we selected and the talking stick ritual enabled the participants in the small groups to bring to the surface memories, joys, pains, and uncertainties. Merely holding the stick made some feel more courageous about sharing deeply held feelings or thoughts. The members of the group came to understand each other with more depth than is usually possible at a conference. This sharing laid the groundwork for trust, learning, and the practice of respect for people of diverse cultures. Later, many expressed that this was the first time they had felt the courage to speak from their heart in a group as diverse as this one. They said they felt honored by the deep listening they received. The talking stick became a valuable tool in the larger plenary sessions, helping participants to listen more deeply and to speak more from a place of love and respect when the discussions touched on painful subjects.

Sharing and evolving wisdom

Each retreat focused on a different theme for surfacing wisdom about social transformation. For example, the theme of the May 2000 retreat was “How do big shifts in society happen?,” the May 2002 retreat’s theme was “We the people in the 21st century,” the October 2002 retreat was “Stimulating the dialogue on the America that can be,” and the October 2003 retreat was “The language and ways of transformative power.” The facilitation team that prepared each retreat informed participants of the theme at the time they were invited and provided background readings to stimulate their thinking on the topic.

The structure of each retreat was based on the idea that every participant brought wisdom to the topic; hence we did not rely on speeches from experts. Our goal was to bring to the surface the wisdom that retreat participants already had and then evolve and distill

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that wisdom through the collective discussions. We accomplished this primarily through the questions we posed at different points in the retreat.

The questions posed for the talking circles held on the morning of Day 2 provided an early opportunity to develop the theme of the retreat. While the fundamental intent of the circles was to initiate the practice of speaking from the heart and to enable authentic connection, we used the content of the questions to link the circles to the theme of the retreat. So when the theme was about power, we asked them to speak about times they personally felt empowered or disempowered; when it was about “the America that can be,” we asked them to speak of their own fears and hopes for this country; when it was about “We the People,” we asked about their personal experience in leadership in their own community and for the whole society. ([See Chapter 3 for the specific questions posed at the May 2002 retreat.](#))

Our second opportunity to surface wisdom was during the brief presentations in the afternoon of Day 2. The facilitation team invited three people who we thought had a valuable perspective to offer on our theme to each give a 15-minute presentation. The idea here was that these presenters would provide a springboard for other participants to share their own experiences and wisdom relevant to the theme.

The third key opportunity was in shaping the question for the fishbowl discussion held on the morning of Day 3. We learned not to choose this question prior to the retreat, but rather to let it emerge from the discussion on Day 2. The facilitation team would meet on the evening of Day 2 to examine the ideas that had emerged during the day that needed further exploration and then develop a question for the fishbowl that would deepen that exploration.

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By the time we got to the open space sessions on the afternoon of Day 3, participants had plenty of ideas of what they wanted to talk about. Our role was to enable them to find their common themes and organize discussions that moved their thinking to a new stage.

The synthesis session on the morning of Day 4 provided a final opportunity for advancing and distilling the wisdom we had surfaced during the previous days. Through Herman's mural, we put the ideas and work discussed at the retreat in the epic context of The Great Turning — a time when one era is dying and a new one is struggling to be born. Each retreat had its own special context for thinking about The Great Turning, as our external conditions changed (such as with the attacks of 9/11 and the war in Iraq) and the work and ideas people discussed at each retreat changed with them. We came to see more clearly the turbulent and stressful nature of being in the center of a major transition — with its marvelous and terrible possibilities. And we came away with an even more urgent sense of the importance of both our individual and collective work.

Fostering multicultural understanding and respect

To foster a deep level of multicultural respect, we made sure that we had the right mix of participants and that everyone felt that their presence was welcome.

Ensuring a diverse mix of participants

- We issued invitations in waves to ensure we would achieve the diversity we desired. We learned to issue invitations to people of color first to make sure that by the time we reached our quota of about 30 participants, people of color would comprise one-third to one-half of the participants.

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- Whenever possible we included elders. Grace Boggs, a Chinese-American woman in her 80s at the time of the retreats who has been involved in many social change movements, attended five retreats and spoke passionately about the important leadership role that people of color must play for the whole of society. Grace encouraged her good friends Vincent and Rosemarie Harding, African-American elders from the civil rights movement, to attend the Fall 2001 and Spring 2002 retreats.
- We also included people of European-American descent who were especially sensitive to issues of multicultural respect. People such as Linda Stout, Alli Starr, Drew Dellinger, and Kathy Engel added their wisdom at different retreats to help assure a welcoming atmosphere for all.

Ensuring that everyone's voice was heard and every culture honored

- The introductory welcome circle, the small talking circles, the personal sharing about objects of inspiration, and the gifting ceremony represented times when each participant had a chance to fully engage. No one could be sidelined by a few dominant people. The fishbowl, open space sessions, and the ceremonies provided opportunities for participants to exercise leadership.
- We recognized that different people offer their gifts in different ways. We had time for analytic and conceptual discussions, and time for song, prayer, and ritual. We had time for storytelling and for intimate conversations. We had discussions in large groups and in small groups, making sure that everyone had chances to offer their greatest gifts.

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- Our ceremonies were led by people of different ages and cultural backgrounds, each drawing on their own traditions, which signaled that every person and every culture was valued equally.
- By the Fall 2001 retreat, one of our facilitators (Roberto) was a person of color, and for the October 2003 and April 2004 retreats, when we added Akaya Windwood as a facilitator, both our facilitators were people of color. Roberto (and later Akaya's) presence provided a welcoming signal to participants of color that their voices would be heard.

Even with all these supports, some still found it difficult to trust sufficiently to express their true feelings. The small talking circles provided a crucial venue for such sharing, but in the larger session, some would still hold back. Roberto found that one of his "off-line" responsibilities was to listen to those who felt frustrated and to encourage their sharing in the larger group. He also spoke with European-American participants who wanted to know why people of color couldn't realize that "we get it and it's time to move on." In response to these challenges, Roberto would encourage direct sharing and listening to these concerns and questions. Sometimes he stepped out of his facilitator role to speak as a Chicano participant about his own struggles and the expectations he had of allies.

The five strategies outlined above are powerful, mutually supportive components that enabled participants, regardless of their background, to feel respected and at home. They created a context in which people were able to share their wisdom, open their hearts, and gain courage and inspiration for the work ahead.

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Probably one of the most moving things in my life was the involvement with the retreats.

Don Kegley

Our intent in holding the retreats was to advance the social transformation needed in our society by fostering connections among movement and network leaders and inspiring them in their work. To more systematically understand to what degree we were achieving those ends, we conducted a survey in early 2003. At that time, we had held seven retreats in which 144 social change leaders had participated.

We interviewed 56 people who had attended one or more retreats. Fran, Nicole Pearson, Rod Arakaki, and Carol Estes conducted the interviews using a standard set of open-ended questions about the impact that the retreat or retreats had had on participants' perspectives and work.

Four striking themes emerged from the interviews:

- Participants came away with strong feelings of being part of a large inclusive movement and found the experience profoundly hopeful and energizing.

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- They experienced an unusual level of integration between their personal spirituality and their work for change in the world.
- They gained new perspectives on the racism ingrained in our society and how they could help to overcome it.
- They made connections with others that, after the retreat, often turned into friendships and active collaborations.

Nearly every participant we interviewed mentioned all four of these themes when we asked about the impact of the retreats. Below we elaborate on these findings and provide a few sample quotes to convey the impacts in the participants' own words.

Feeling part of a large, inclusive movement

The combination of the participants' diversity — particularly in terms of race and age — and their spirit of dedication to the common good had a powerful effect on nearly every person we interviewed. The retreat made people feel part of a huge extended community. That feeling gave them greater courage in carrying out their own work and a sense of the potential for real change.

Here are a few quotes that give the flavor of these comments:

I could see great potential for positive change. To have these different folks — with the diversity that was represented — committing to a discipline of the possible and trying to articulate that increased my perception of what is possible.... Before, I felt I had to kind of hold as a secret this yearning for the positive. And I was able to share some things that are pretty deep for me with people who are really interested. That felt liberating. (Carl Anthony)

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The retreat had the quality of understanding the oneness, the interconnectedness — the fact that we create the world and have the responsibility to care for and empower one another. In microcosm we were able to do that at the retreat — and that’s my vision of how the world should be. Sometimes it’s important to experience the possible so you can keep striving for it. (Mel Hoover)

Connecting spirituality and activism

Most participants said that the retreats reinforced the connection of the inner world of their personal spirituality to the outer world of their work for change. For some this connection came naturally. Others noted that they had struggled to make this connection and that the retreats helped them bring spirituality more directly into their work. Many commented that they liked the way the retreats integrated spirituality throughout the whole retreat, so that it didn’t feel like something just laid on as a veneer. They appreciated the way in which we drew on the many different traditions that were represented in the group.

Here are some of the comments:

I think spirituality has always been a part of my work, but because of the context of my work, I didn’t have a clear sense of how this was possible in a multicultural setting. It shored up my confidence in being able to encourage others to bring spirituality to their work. (Malika Sanders)

Before the retreats I didn’t really have a sense of spirituality in what I was doing. I had a long commitment, because I was a third generation steelworker, to helping the struggle of working people. But the retreats helped me feel that spiritual connection. (Don Kegley)

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Roberto had a very powerful spiritual presence in his facilitating. It was a real experiential hit for me on how we can integrate spirituality into our work. It's often left out of progressive gatherings, and I understand why, but it was really nice to see it integrated so appropriately. (Drew Dellinger)

My understanding of spiritual foundations as an integral part of political work is there now and it wasn't before [the retreat]. It's been a process for me to become more open to these ideas. Having it presented by my elders [at the retreat] made it more difficult for me to dismiss — as opposed to younger folks who I could dismiss as California New Age types. (Jee Kim)

Experiencing breakthroughs in perspectives on race

Many participants mentioned specific breakthroughs in their perspectives on race. Those of European heritage said they saw more clearly the pain and oppression that people of color experience, and many cited ways in which they had acted on that insight. Some mentioned feeling sobered by the experience, realizing how far we have to go in resolving those issues. Many people of color saw new possibilities for finding genuine allies among European-Americans.

The racial conversation really stands out and has really stayed with me. It tuned me in much deeper to the issues. One participant noted that people of color can't be the only ones to bring up racism. To be an ally, you have to be willing to sniff it out and prevent it or name it. That has really affected my work. (Shivon Robinsong)

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I've seen the value of coalition building with the non-Native community. My experience in the circles has validated my sense of the need for dialogue with many different people. (Tom Goldtooth)

The last retreat gave me some bones to chew on — and I've been chewing on them ever since. The main one concerned race and what it is about the way the progressive community deals with race that leaves me feeling so troubled and chagrined and as though it's not being entirely honest....I don't feel hopeful on that score, for the most part. I do feel hopeful in small ways, about the ability of people one-on-one to work on this issue. Maybe that's what we build on. (Jon Rowe)

It made me realize how much more work has to be done and the necessity of being actively involved in the greater progressive community. I became involved with an organization focused on racial equity in the legal system that I wasn't involved with until after I had attended the retreat. (Yelena Boxer)

Generating connections and collaborations

Participants made lasting connections with others they met at a retreat. They felt able to call on those people for help, advice, support, and collaboration. Some participants carried out substantial activities together as a result of becoming acquainted through the retreats.

Here are two comments that reflect the sense of connection that many felt with other retreat participants:

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The people that were there at the retreats just keep showing up in my life in different places. They are like these sparks of transformative energy, meeting and greeting and whirling through these different events. (Alice Slater)

I have friends all over the country now that I never knew before — they're just a call away. That instant connection is such a great feeling. It's something that continues to support me in this work. (Ellison Horne)

Participants jumped into each other's lives in a great many ways as a result of connections they made at the retreats. Here is a small sampling of new collaborations that emerged:

- Several participants included other participants' writings in books they were editing (for example, Bill Moyer invited Juliette Beck to write a chapter for his book *Doing Democracy*).
- The connection between Judy Wicks and David Korten, made at the May 2000 retreat, helped ignite a whole new national network, the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies.
- After the May 2002 retreat, three participants (Herman Gyr, Dan Spinner, and Sekou) joined Dennis Kucinich's presidential campaign.
- Many participants invited people they met to speak at their events (for example, Kenny Ausubel and Nina Simmons invited many retreat participants to speak at their annual Bioneers conferences).
- At *YES!* magazine, we published articles on the work of many of the participants (for example, Nane Alejandrez's work with Barrios Unidos in California and Malika Sanders' work in Alabama).

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- Several participants asked other participants to become staff of their organizations. For example, Tom Goldtooth invited Clay Thomas to become a staff member of the Indigenous Environmental Network.
- Some participants invited their new contacts to serve on their advisory boards. For example Tanya Dawkins invited Dan Swinney to advise on her series of retreats called “Globalization from the Inside Out.”
- Several sets of participants joined in collaborative radio work for interviews and for joint productions. For example, Mark Sommers teamed up with Mark Ritchie on a series of radio programs about rural development.
- David Korten took Joanna Macy’s term, *The Great Turning*, that had undergirded the retreats, as the framing idea for his book, entitled *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*.

It was clear that even though the retreats were not designed to produce an action agenda, action nonetheless flowed from the friendships people made through the retreats. The retreats did not seek to load additional work onto participants’ already busy agendas, but rather encouraged participants to use their new connections to generate collaborations that developed naturally from the work in which they were already engaged.

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What came through in the beauty of faces and stories and words — along with a renewed realization that the Possible is already here — fills my sails like a fresh, strong wind.

Joanna Macy

Building a movement for transformational change requires that leaders from our diverse social change networks develop relationships of trust, understanding, and common vision. Our retreat experience affirmed the synergistic potential of gatherings explicitly designed to facilitate such relationships. We believe the retreat design and facilitation methods developed in the State of the Possible retreats provide important tools for convening gatherings that can evolve wisdom, nurture inspiration, and deepen respect required to advance a more just, sustainable, and compassionate society.

It is in the spirit of this vision that we have shared the lessons from our retreats. While our lessons are especially relevant to those who want to bring together people from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, they can be applied to any gathering that seeks to encourage people to speak from the heart, respect one another, connect with the sacred, and bring forth the wisdom found within the group. These lessons and strategies can be applied in an organizational staff retreat, a community meeting, a national conference, even within a family.

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Every gathering is unique. We do not expect that you will replicate exactly what we did in this retreat series. We have spelled out the details of our retreats — not so they can be reproduced in their entirety, but so that you can apply the lessons selectively in whatever way is relevant.

You may want to draw on a simple technique — such as gifting at the end of a gathering to create an appreciative and joyful closing. You may want to use the talking stick in a circle to make sure that every voice is heard and to encourage people to speak from the heart and listen deeply to one another. You may want to draw more elaborately from our design, integrating ceremony, talking circles, fishbowl discussions, open space sessions, and synthesis murals. You may find The Great Turning a fitting frame for participants to think about the historical context of their work.

In whatever way you draw on our experience, we encourage you to use the lessons and methods that fit most naturally with the flow and purpose of your own gathering. Any technique or concept that is simply inserted without being integral to the entire event will generate frustration among the participants. If you are the organizer or facilitator of an event, you must feel sufficiently comfortable with the approaches that you can carry them out with integrity. The intent behind the use of any method is always far more important than the method itself. A facilitation team that includes the event organizers as well as a trained facilitator can be of great help in ensuring a natural flow of one part of the meeting to the next and in ensuring everyone's full participation.

We all have much to do to inspire, build relationships, and evoke common vision as we travel the path of personal and social transformation. We, the authors of this paper, offer these lessons and resources in the hope that they will assist your own work of creating a more just, sustainable, and compassionate world.

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Any technique or concept that is simply inserted without being integral to the entire event will generate frustration among the participants.

A variety of resources have flowed from the State of the Possible retreats. In this booklet we have focused primarily on the design elements of our retreats. For the content of the retreat discussions, we recommend that you turn to the articles published in *YES!* magazine that capture some of the key ideas discussed. For one retreat, held in October 2002, we produced a video. The articles and the video provide additional ways to understand what can be achieved in bringing together diverse leaders for connection and vision.

All of the articles are available on the *YES!* magazine website. Just go to www.yesmagazine.org and click on "About" on the home page, then go to "retreats." The video "We the People: Conversations on Being American" and its accompanying study guide can also be ordered through the website or by calling *YES!* at 800/937-4451.

The following are the materials you can find on the retreats:

The Love of Life by Sarah Ruth van Gelder & Jan Roberts ([YES!, Fall 1999](#)) summarizes insights from the first retreat. Participants worked to identify an organizing principle that underlies everyone's work. The one that resonated most among the participants was "We are working toward a shift from a society centered on the love of money to one centered on the love of life."

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White on Black by Carol Estes and **Black on White** by Robert Jeffrey ([YES!, Fall 2000](#)) tells of the 10-hour talking circle in the May 2000 retreat in which we shared our perceptions and pain in ways that indelibly changed our understanding of racism and the potential for overcoming it.

State of the Possible by Fran Korten ([YES!, Spring 2001](#)) describes the October 2000 retreat, and how the phrase “The Great Turning,” suggested by Joanna Macy, captured a sense of the time we are in, conveying the turmoil and the possibility of an old era dying as a new era struggles to be born. For some, the phrase “The Great Remembering” felt right, with its implication of awakening to older wisdom.

The Great Work Ahead by David Korten ([YES!, Fall 2001](#)) was the opening presentation at the May 2001 retreat. In it he summarizes key ideas from the previous three retreats and notes that our struggle has much in common with many previous struggles against the injustice of a dominator system. In many ways the spiritual awakening underlying our movements is a reawakening to perennial spiritual truths.

On Common Ground by Grace Lee Boggs ([YES!, Fall 2001](#)) tells of discussions at the May 2001 retreat that expanded Grace’s sense of the new world that is struggling to be born. She notes: “Once we stop viewing these movements as separate, single-issue movements and reframe them as facets of an evolving cultural revolution, their members and supporters can be recognized as a social force embodying the more democratic, self-reliant, and life-affirming values of a new post-industrial civil society.”

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We're All Hyphenated Americans by Fran Korten ([YES!, Fall 2002](#)) brings out Fran's insight, after the May 2002 retreat, about how language shapes consciousness. She notes that many groups have chosen to identify themselves in ways that claim their heritage, such as the shift from black to African-American. She claims her own heritage by shifting the term for herself from white to European-American.

Journey to a New America by Grace Lee Boggs ([YES!, Fall 2002](#)) tells of the May 2002 retreat. She asks who are "we the people" at a time when democracy is under assault? How can all Americans, of all races, help build a country that, to quote Langston Hughes, "has never been and yet must be?"

Reclaiming America by Roberto Vargas ([YES!, Summer 2003](#)) was written after Roberto attended and facilitated the October 2001 and May 2002 retreats. Roberto reflects on the effects of the retreats on his own identity: "While my purpose has been to advance justice for my own community, I now see that it is time to also claim my stake in our nation's evolution. It's time for me to reclaim America."

We the People: Conversations on Being American (released November 2003) invites the viewer to eavesdrop on the candid conversations among the participants at the October 2002 retreat. It conveys their sometimes painful experiences of being American and their deepest hopes for how, together, we might create "a more perfect union." The 26-minute video, made by Mark Dworkin and Melissa Young (www.movingimages.org), is designed to stimulate discussion on the question of being American. A 32-page study guide accompanies the video. Ordering information is on the *YES!* website: www.yesmagazine.org or call *YES!* at 800/937-4451.

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YES! Speakers Bureau features over 100 of the retreat participants. The Speakers Bureau is on the *YES!* website — www.yesmagazine.org — where it can be used to request anyone listed to speak at an event.

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**Frances F. Korten**

Since 1998 Fran has served as Executive Director of the Positive Futures Network, publisher of *YES!* magazine. She has chaired PFN's Convening Committee, a staff/board committee that guided the development of the State of the Possible retreat series. Fran and her husband David spent many years living overseas in Africa, Central America, and South East Asia. In each of those settings, and in the U.S., Fran has found ways to pursue her passion for creating communities in which people participate as equals and work together to promote a common long-term prosperity that respects and enhances the richness of the natural world. Fran served for 20 years as a grantmaker in the Ford Foundation's offices in Manila, Jakarta, and New York. She has a Ph.D. in Social Psychology from Stanford University and has taught at the national university of Ethiopia and at Harvard University. She currently lives with her husband on Bainbridge Island, Washington, in biking distance of the PFN offices. She and David have two daughters, Diana and Alicia, and two granddaughters, April and Allegra. The *YES!* magazine website is: www.yesmagazine.org.

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**Roberto Vargas**

Motivational speaker, organizational psychologist, activist, and ceremony leader, Roberto provides leadership development and team-building workshops to organizations and groups throughout the United States. Since 1980, his consultation practice has supported diverse agencies and organizations to create proactive cultures and achieve their goals. During the 1970s, Roberto co-founded and directed several mental health centers committed to personal and family empowerment. In the context of these programs, he collaborated with Francisco Hernandez to elaborate the community learning approach known as Razalogia (meaning “learning of and for the people”), which is presently used by many Latino activists as a facilitation approach for optimizing people empowerment and community building. Subsequently, Roberto elaborated a leadership philosophy and practice called Porvida™ which means “for life, love and justice.” This Porvida orientation guides his family, community, and spiritual life, and provides the basis for his approach to organizational development and ceremony facilitation. Roberto received his Doctorate in Public Health and Masters in Social Work from the University of California, Berkeley, where he also taught for several years. He currently resides in Castro Valley, California with his wife, Rebeca, and their adult daughters. The family often collaborates on projects. His website is: www.robertovargas.com.

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Fishbowl Discussion. A few people held a discussion of a key question in a “fishbowl,” while other participants listened. Their conversation deepened the exploration subsequently developed by the full group. Pictured here are Pamela Chiang, David Korten, and Anita Rios at the May 2002 retreat.

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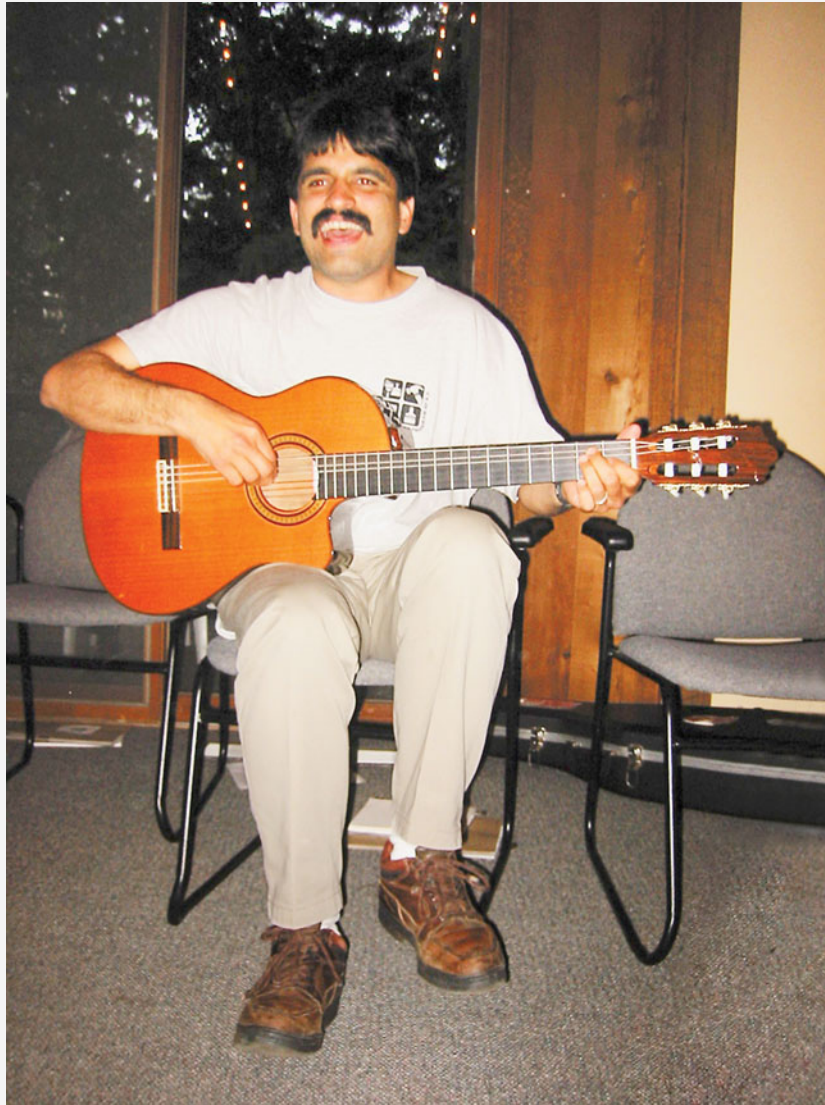
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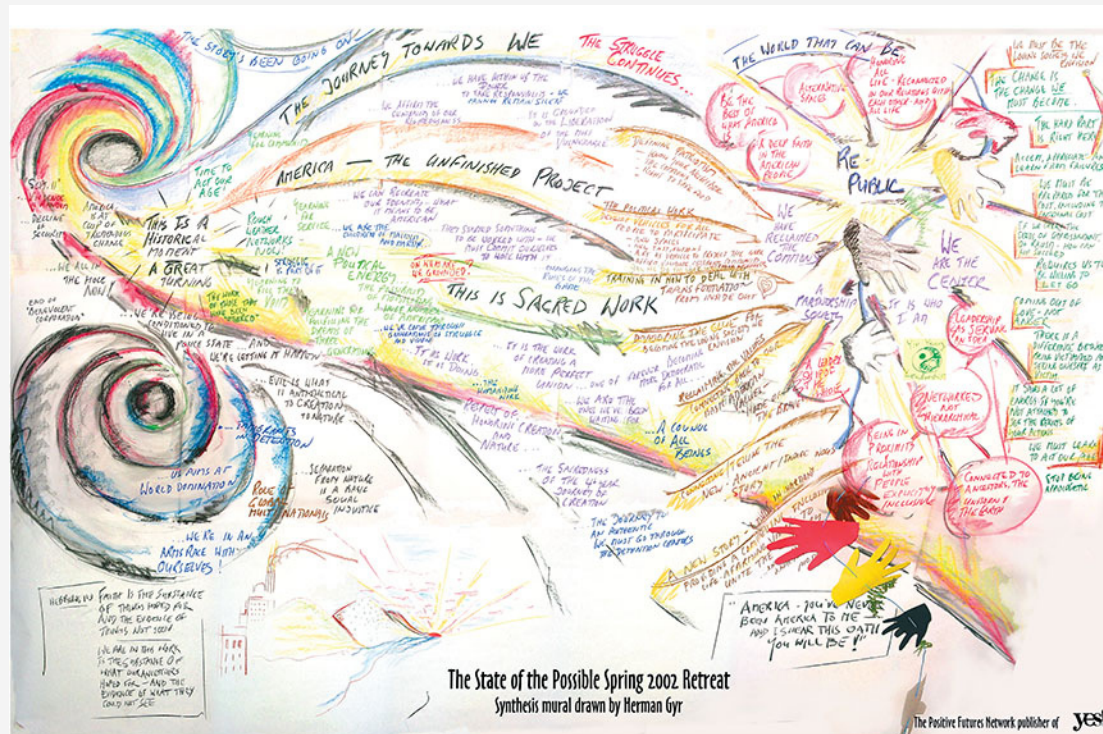
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**Evening Singing.**

Singing and laughing together helped everyone relax and enjoy each others' company. Pictured here is Francisco Herrera, who led singing and organized an evening talent show at the May 2002 retreat.

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Synthesis Mural. A mural drawn just before the final day of the retreat pulled our words and ideas into the story of the Great Turning — a time when one era is dying and another struggling to be born. Pictured here is the mural drawn by Herman Gyr at the State of the Possible retreat held in May 2002.

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Talking Stick. Decorated to reflect its special function, the talking stick served as a reminder that the person holding the stick was to speak truth from the heart and that others were to listen with full attention and respect.

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Inspiration Table. Each participant placed on the table several objects that were meaningful in their lives. The table, in the center of the circle, served as a source of inspiration throughout the retreat's discussions. Pictured here is the inspiration table at the October 2002 retreat.

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