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## A Finn in Denmark: *Initiation Stories of Collective Intelligence*

(Excerpt from an edited  
conversation of  
Finn Voldtofte with  
Sheryl Erickson.)

“The difference between the intuitive and intellectual approaches to the science of nature is illustrated metaphorically by Edwin Abbott’s story, *Flatland*. This concerns a society of creatures who inhabit a two-dimensional surface, and what happens when a sphere appears to one of them. Of course, he is unable to perceive a sphere. All that his sensory experience tells him, as the sphere passes through the plane of his existence, is that a point appears, grows into a circle of expanding diameter until this becomes a maximum size, and then shrinks back to a point again and vanishes. Evidently, what his senses tell him is an abstraction. The sphere tells him that he must go upward.

Not having any experience of ‘upward,’ he tries to interpret it at first in terms of his familiar experience with a compass as ‘northward.’ After struggling for some time with the paradox, to him, of how to go ‘upward, yet not northward,’ the sphere casts him out of Flatland into the three-dimensional world. Now he sees directly what he had previously only been able to infer by association based on his familiar experience in the two-dimensional surface. This is a transformation of his consciousness.... This can be taken as a metaphor for the restructuring of consciousness into the holistic, intuitive mode that is necessary...to make the phenomenon visible.” —Henri Bortoft

**F**inn Voldtofte: I use the metaphor of the relationship between the ant and the anthill and the neuron and the brain. As individuals we are like ants or like neurons—both an ant and a neuron are intelligent entities, but we are more interested in the thinking of the anthill or in the thinking of the brain. So if you are willing to participate as ants or neurons, then should we engage in the process of getting to know what the anthill thinks?

The café seminar format establishes a situation where we can have access to a flow of collective intelligence of the group. To many people this is a new reality and it takes courage to stay connected to the flow. It’s an initiation, and like many initiations, it can be scary.

I think that initiation is a situation where you are in one world and you think that this is the world and then a door opens, and you realize, oh, there’s another world there. You see the door and you are maybe a little scared or you may have resistance to go through the door, but then if you enter somehow, go through the door...you enter the new room, then you suddenly realize that actually the new room contains the old room. But now also it’s a new room. That’s an initiation.... And an initiator is one who stands in the doorway and maybe makes you feel confident that you can actually [pass through] the door. And an initiator is one with a foot in both worlds, so to speak. He can speak the language of the old world and he can speak the language of the new world....

One example that comes to mind was when I was working with disabled people, or rather an organization of disabled people. I was to arrange for a café seminar with representatives of the organizations of disabled people, and architects and city planners and people working with training architects and with buildings and things like that. The issues were about accessibility to public spaces.

# Principle

## Element of the Experience

### Storytelling

People share their stories—the stories that have deep meaning to them personally, and are also directly reflective of the issues they have come together to address. This storytelling occurs in many forms and has many names: “stringing the beads” in Native American tradition, or *cognosiniento* in the Spanish tradition—to create knowledge and awareness. In the telling of what is true for them, in the sharing of what is most deeply authentic, there begins a kind of softening and release—a collective sigh of recognition that though the stories are very different, the feelings are the same. This sharing of experience begins to remove many of the obstacles to collective forward movement.



“We begin by developing knowledge of each other, by doing *cognosiniento*.  
More *cognosiniento*, more trust.  
More trust, more unity. More unity,  
more shared power.”

—Roberto Vargas

“Social change occurs often because of a small group of people who come together and start talking about the things they really care about. And suddenly because of the passion that’s involved, there’s a shared purpose and they get more people involved, and it becomes a movement. For example, solidarity in Poland grew in just a few weeks from less than a dozen concerned people to over nine million people organizing together.”

—Tenneson Woolf

The seminar was in Copenhagen. And in the planning of the whole thing, the atmosphere was hostile. There was no need for two groups of people to talk with each other, but to argue with each other. [They] were not able to take each other’s point of view and perspectives and understand each other. And definitely not able to work together....

The invitation was from the Minister of City and Environment. She personally invited everyone and was there in the room welcoming people [as they came in]. She stayed there together with another Minister, and they took part in the dialogue. So, by their presence they signaled that this was to be taken seriously.

The café dialogue evolved around having a chance, through conversation [to ask], “How does the question of accessibility touch on our lives and our professions?” They were speaking completely out of “this is how I see the world” from personal experience. Having the conversations around these experiences enabled the people—there were 100 in the room, including some politicians and ministers and secretaries of state—to overcome their past patterns of behavior in the way they talked with each other. And as a side effect, they agreed to have another kind of meeting to coordinate activities and agree on budgets and finances and things like that. Even though it was not the intention, they made actions. They made agreements about how they wanted to act and cooperate in the future.... They shared the knowledge of each other’s perspective—“I know that you know that this is my perspective....”

This was one and half years ago and it has turned out that they actually did what they said they wanted to do. They did change their behavior.

### Commentary on A Finn in Denmark:

Finn uses the metaphor of the relationship of the ant to the anthill and the neuron to the brain. Both the ant and the neuron have intelligence in their own way, but the collective intelligence of the anthill or the thinking of the brain has greater complexity and greater capacity for action. Finn compares the personal experience to the awareness of a mind screen in which one can see the whole projected. The shift in consciousness is an orientation to the whole, to a curiosity about what the whole looks like, which is tremendously compelling once we become aware of this holistic, intuitive mode. The ant does not know that it is part of the anthill, the neuron does not have free will, but human beings have some flicker of capacity to see the whole, understand they are influenced by it, and act in ways that make them participants, co-creators of its form. When “you get that feeling [of experiencing and relating] to the collective intelligence, that you’re right now taking part in creating it, then that keeps you in that flow. You want to stay there.” This description of a flow, an interior experience of creativity, an awareness of expanded scope, parallels what we heard time and again from those we listened to. The initiation has the quality of shifting our perspective into something as practical as seeing through another’s eyes, and as significant as the restructuring of a consciousness capable of glimpsing the whole. The café makes the phenomenon more visible.

What Finn emphasizes, and what makes this such an important pattern story, is the need and practicality of this vantage point to public life. No one had to testify to transformed consciousness to become a vital part of the process. In this and other stories of engaging the collective intelligence, participants had access to richer data, could seek “very practical and doable advice, useful within the context of a political framework, with its budgets and its special planning procedures and decision procedures...to help the city government.” In other words, the larger framework of synergy and magic in groups that we explore in this book does not have to be shared at a theoretical level for the experience to be relevant and valuable.

# Metaphor Cluster

## Doorways

portal • the in-between world • opening the door • threshold experience • suspension bridges of thought • crossing thresholds into ideas • gateways to capacities • having a foot in both worlds • dialogue as a key to being in the world • co-portalling • walking into a jungle naked • shuffling and side-stepping • vibrating open • hitting the wall of a system • a roof getting ready to open up a wall in thought • blocked meridian • eye of the needle • secret door • sticky wicket • key practices • catapult into a new realm • coming to the end of our time keys • willingness to enter the mystery • veil separating us from oneness • ramp into experience • cusp of touching • recoiling in horror while reveling in curiosity • chasm between people • a person serving as a catalyzing gate • opening to the sensuous • separateness stretched as far as we could stretch it • bombproof field • stepping into the sacred • burning sage to open a window into time • blackballed • making music as a window into behavior • pushing the boundary • when the outside and inside match, a person is supported • using symbols as doorways to understanding •

In Finn's tale of the potentially hostile meeting, invitation and initiation are both vital. The personal invitation extended by the Minister of City and Environment was critical, as were her physically welcoming people and participating fully. Another form of invitation was the framework of the meeting: a dialogue whose purpose was understanding—to build on each other's experience without an assumption of agreement, to listen without the necessity of action.

The personal nature of the question, "From out of your own life experience, what do you know about accessibility to buildings and public spaces?" created a third type of invitation. The question helped create a field of allurements, magnetizing random events and personal reactions into a common inquiry: How might 100 separate stories demonstrate both diversity and coherence associated with the question? What themes, dilemmas, paradoxes do we confront together? By attending to the personal first, the group became a setting for receptivity to the multi-dimensional nature of their task, a shift from the two-dimensional plane of advocacy or debate to something three-dimensional, downward toward interior experience, upward into what might be the common good. The fact that the event catalyzed a group to sustained effort suggests a shift in consciousness among some or many of the participants.

Beyond the invitation then is the initiation. Finn suggests the café setting is about form and logistics—what kinds of tables and chairs are needed, what question is put forward, who is invited—but beyond that is an induction into a "field of consciousness...that informs the process of the people in it." The field is brought into existence, it emerges, often beginning in small ways and then intensifying. In other words, the field comes into being from the intent of the conveners and the participation of the members, as much as it is created from form or logistics. Collective intelligence, like the sphere in Abbott's story of the movement from two dimensions to three, has multi-dimensionality and scope.

What may need also to be understood is that this initiation, like most initiations, comes with resistance and fear—it's scary. Finn noted that the resistance can come in any form—to the room, to the question, to leadership. We should be cautious, therefore, because the shift can be unsettling, unfamiliar, raise personal questions of competence, and collective fears about direction. Collective intelligence is not a solution or a "thing" but a process of unfoldment, a faith that wisdom can emerge if courage and commitment to a higher good is sustained.

Through this unfoldment, both conscious and unconscious aspects of collective intelligence emerge. The collective conscious aspect concerns the diversity of experience articulated by participants and the emergence of the collective thinking of the group—patterns and themes become more apparent and visible. They are by nature about what individuals and groups can consciously address.

The collective unconscious aspect of collective intelligence manifests through the symbolic and mythic nature of groups, the archetypal patterns and universal themes explored in some of the earlier stories. These too can become conscious and visible, but must be addressed through more indirect paths, the labyrinth being one example, but also including reflection and activities that invite mystery. The capacity of a group to reflect deeply on the assumptions held by group members is one vehicle for this kind of inquiry, and the subject of our next story. ■