LEARNING COMMUNITIES
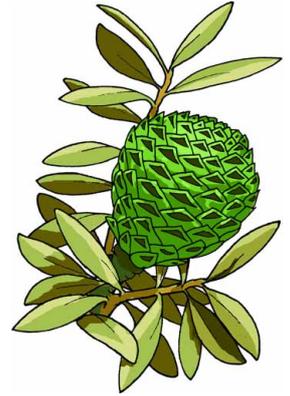
*"Where many people gather
from need or friendship
Truth begins to awaken
as eels rise in the dark river."*
— James K. Baxter, "Winter in Jerusalem"

Social entrepreneurs are learners. They are constantly looking at their work through the lens of what they are exploring and discovering. And because they are trying to give birth to genuine innovations, entrepreneurs are in the business of *creating* the knowledge they need to take their projects forward.

Entrepreneurs are not usually the sort of people who will go off and do a year-long course of study before they start a project. The formal education that could inform their enterprise may not exist yet. The entrepreneur may well do a university course, sign up for a workshop, order a book, or download a study guide from the internet … but don't be surprised if they do these things just before they need to get on with putting that learning into practice.

Entrepreneurs are *action-learners.* They act-and-learn at the same time. They are constantly foraging their activities for the nuggets of insight into future practice — noticing the more subtle changes around them, listening for feedback from everyone involved — and then continuously adapting their ideas, actions and programmes to fit the changing realities.

This isn't to say that formal education is useless to an entrepreneur. It just needs to be appreciated that, because these people are as much *generative* of the knowledge they are looking for, the learning styles need to go well beyond treating them simply as learning consumers.

Sometimes the entrepreneur is still unconscious about the amount of knowledge they have already generated from their activities. This is why meeting with other entrepreneurs is such a fruitful experience for them.

They get to stop. They get to tell their stories. They get to listen and reflect on the lessons that have emerged from their exploration and incubation. And they get to notice *the eels rising in the dark river.*

•   The New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship has been a *learning community.* The purpose of a learning community is to "... help generate new knowledge, craft new norms of practice, and sustain one another's efforts to reflect, examine, experiment, and change".

Learning communities have always been with us, and they come in all shapes and sizes. The concept has been recently influenced by the work of the business management guru Peter Senge, who has written several books on systemic change within organisations, including his modern classic *The Fifth Discipline.* In his books, Senge points out that a learning community happens best in an environment that encourages dialogue, feedback, contemplation and empowerment. These qualities have been the basis of shaping the design of the Social Entrepreneur Fellowship retreats.

These retreats have involved a variety of learning strategies. There have been presentations from the entrepreneurs, workshops on the skills of social enterprise, and peer mentoring sessions where each fellowship member outlines the current story of their projects and gets feedback from the other members. The programme has also included full-group social innovation dialogues.

The purpose of the workshops is for fellowship members to explain and share what they know, and what they are discovering. In the dialogues, we all get to extend that knowledge in ways we haven't yet imagined.

It has been important that this learning community has been a very *diverse* group. One of the intentions is to have enough diversity in the room so people are forced to think outside of "the silos" that most of us operate within. This is a significant point for those entrepreneurs who often find themselves as solitary leaders in their own fields. Fellowship members have often found that, while listening to a particular story about a completely different field of activity, they recognise a nugget of insight and experience that they can apply to their own work.

It has also been important for the Social Entrepreneur Fellowship to be a genuinely *peer* learning experience. There have been no external facilitators, learning professionals, researchers or observers on these retreats. Everyone at these retreats is a peer participant and knows from personal experience the special risks and demands a social entrepreneur has to face and endure. This has led to a level of frankness and trust which is an important component of growing a real sense of *fellowship*.

•   I have been involved in several learning communities over the past 30 years, and each has played a significant role in fostering the social innovations I have been able to bring to my work.

*Vaughan Park
Anglican Retreat
Centre,
Long Bay, Auckland*

In the 1980s I was a member of a group that called itself the *Rainbow Catalyst.* This was a collection of community activists from around New Zealand who were also working on economic development initiatives. We were motivated by the rise in unemployment in our communities, and by concern at the effects of the neo-conservative economic policies of both the Labour and National governments over the following decade.

The *Rainbow Catalyst* group helped to incubate and generate the *Skills of Enterprise* business courses for unemployed people, and the *action-learning* methodology that under-pinned them. It inspired the setting up of a network of Employment Resource Centres around New Zealand which kept each other in touch with a whole range of innovations that were emerging in the community economic development field. We were also involved in support-ing the development of worker co-operatives.

In 1989, I co-founded the *Heart Politics* gatherings which became another learning com-munity fostering a whole range of activities — in social justice and peace issues, environmental sustainability, and personal growth and spiritual fulfilment. These gatherings have been held, every six months, at the Tauhara Conference and Retreat Centre in Taupo. One of the early spin-offs from these Heart Politics gatherings was the establishment of the Jobs Research Trust, and *The Jobs Letter.*

In 2002, I was involved in creating another group called the *Stewardship Learning Community.* This group explored *dialogue* processes, and was heavily influenced by the social change thinking of the physicist David Bohm. The eight-day retreats of the Stewardship Learning Community (also held at the Tauhara Centre) have been a way to foster the practice of stewardship and servant leadership amongst active citizens, public servants, and commu-nity organisations.

There's nothing too special about these particular examples of learning communities. If you were to interview many other community activists and social entrepreneurs you will hear them describe a great diversity of learning groups that have contributed to their work. Some of these groups have been hosted within our more formal learning institutions, but, more often than not, they have been organised very informally.

All these groups have served and informed a wider movement for social change by creating the spaces where *action-learners* can reflect for a while, and have the deeper conversations that just might make a practical difference to their work.

•   In learning communities, we get to remember that conversation is the way the world is remade. Conversation is *the work.*

It is a strange thing that in a media-saturated consumer culture we find our world is still hungry for the good places where we can have a decent conversation. We are hungry to get beyond the constant broadcast-mode of talk-back hosts, the columnists and commentators, the "exclusive" interviews and politically managed "talking points" … and find a place where we can simply speak with and learn from one another. We are hungry for the sort of dialogue that goes a whole lot deeper, that is not afraid of complexity, and can speak to the heart of our most pressing problems.

This sort of dialogue is nothing new to human beings. To gather and to find ways of talking more deeply with one another is probably stitched right into our DNA. Human beings already know how to talk about extremely complex issues … in ways that tap into the intelligence of a diverse group of people … in ways which spark new possibilities … and in ways which profoundly reveal what each individual needs to do personally. Yet most of us have been living in a majority culture has had little current experience of how to tap into this deep inner knowing. We need to create the spaces where we can remember it.

•   In learning communities, conversation is *a healer.* One of the important aspects of the fellowship retreats is that they have developed a level of trust where we could feel safe enough to share some of our harder stories, and the lessons we have learned from our mistakes.

Again, it is a strange thing that, in today's majority culture, we have had so few authentic places where we are able to talk about these things. And there are too few places where we can also share the grief that has also come with doing this work in our communities — the grief that comes when our hopes have collapsed, when initiatives have been betrayed, when creative and innovative schemes have been closed down, and when much-loved colleagues have disappeared into despair.

During the 1980s, many New Zealand community activists met up regularly at a series of meetings on community economic development initiatives. In the North Island, these gatherings were called *Jobs Gatherings,* and in the South Island they were known as *Te Mahi Tangata,* and they were essentially also learning communities.

At many of these meetings there was a workshop session held called *"Great Mistakes I Have Made".* We all sat around trying to top each other with stories of the more spectacular cock-ups we had made over the previous year. We laughed until it hurt and there were tears of embarrassment and relief. It was very therapeutic to remember that despite our obvious mistakes, we were all trying to work for a common good.

It takes both trust and courage to have this sort of conversation. Yet the stories of our mistakes, and what we have learned from them, are just as important and useful as the breakthrough innovations and "good news" stories that we also bring to share.

| Debate	Dialogue
is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.	is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding.
winning is the goal.	finding common ground is the goal.
participants tend to speak representing a group with a specific opinion.	participants speak as individuals about their own unique experiences and uncertainties.
one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments.	one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning and find agreement.
atmosphere is often threatening, confrontations and interruptions are expected.	atmosphere is one of safety, and promotes a respectful exchange.
affirms a participant's own point of view.	enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.
defends assumptions as truth.	reveals assumptions for re-evaluation.
causes critique of the other position.	causes introspection on one's own position.
participants listen to refute other ideas, and questions are often rhetorical challenges or disguised statements.	participants listen to understand, and questions are to gain insight into the understandings of others.
defends one's own position as the best solution and excludes other solutions.	opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.
creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right.	creates an open-minded attitude, an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.
submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.	submits one's best thinking, knowing that other people's reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.
calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.	calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.
searches for glaring differences, and flaws and weaknesses in the other position.	searches for basic agreements, and strengths in the other positions.
counters other viewpoints without focusing on feelings or relationship and often belittling or deprecating the other person.	involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.
statements are often predictable and reveal little new information.	new information and insight emerges.
success requires simple impassionate statements.	success requires exploration of the complexities of the issue being discussed.
assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.	assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.

- In learning communities, conversation is *the incubator of innovation.* And this incubation process involves a different type of conversation to most meeting styles that are based on discussion or debate *(see chart).*

The concept of *social innovation dialogue* has evolved from the need to create a space where this process of incubation to occur. The shape of this dialogue has been strongly influenced by the work of the South African social innovator Adam Kahane, author of the book *Solving Tough Problems.*

Kahane has consulted on conflict resolution and systemic social change in communities around the world, and many New Zealand social activists attended his training workshops in Wellington in 2008. At these workshops, he introduced the concept of the "U" process which offers many insights into "... talking, listening and creating new realities".

The "U" of a *social innovation dialogue (see chart)* is simply an allegory for a conversation journey that any group can take together. It puts what might otherwise look like a free-ranging discussion into a commonly held framework.
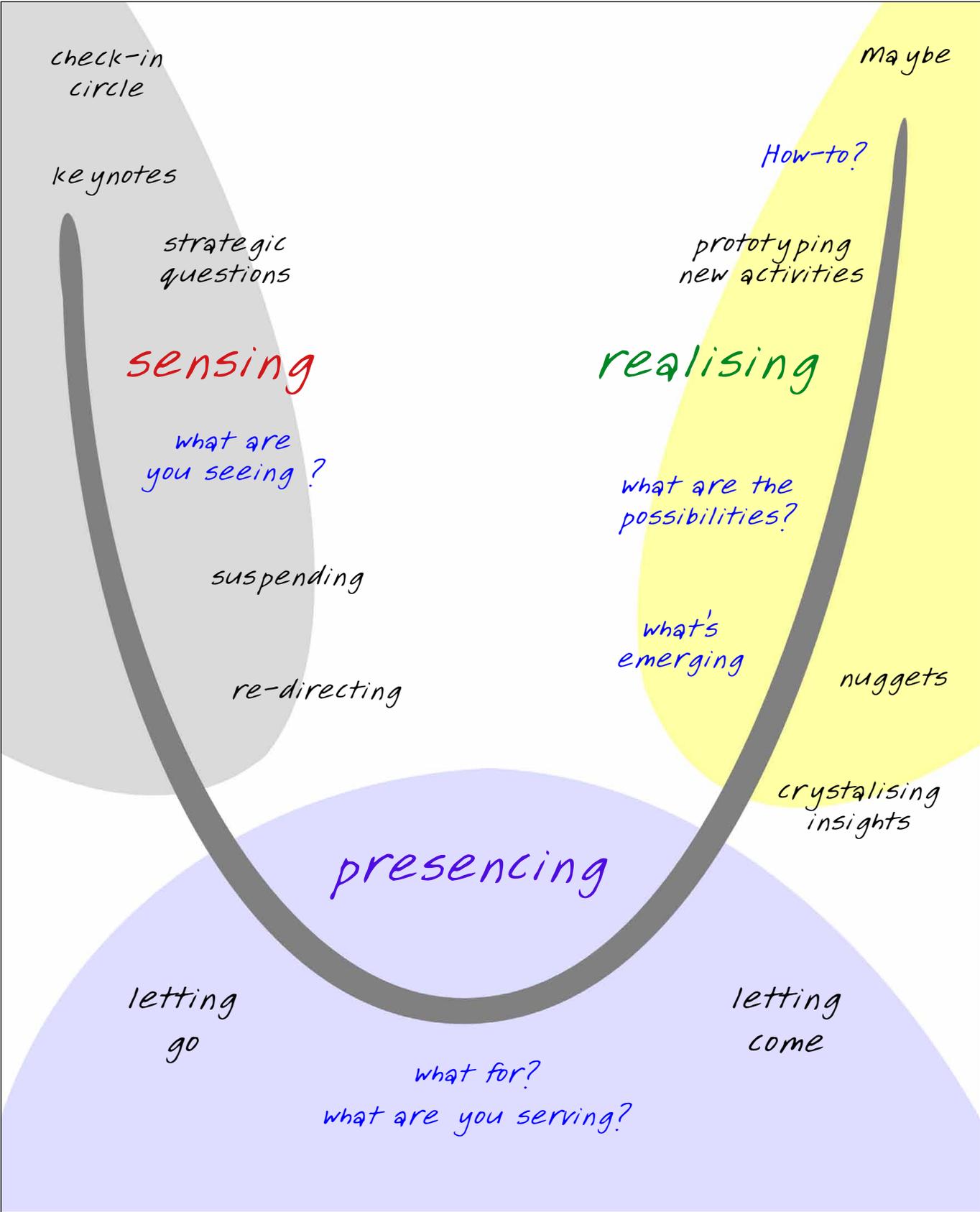
It helps us go to the heart of our issues, and reveal the opportunities that exist for change. The social innovation dialogue then invites new possibilities to emerge, and encourages us to start imagining and prototyping fresh solutions.
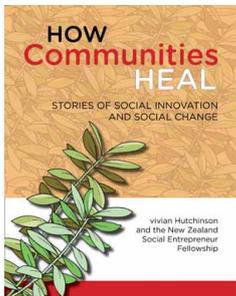
Notes and Links

- This article by vivian Hutchinson is part of the HOW COMMUNITIES HEAL project — stories of social innovation and social change featuring members of the New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship. It is available at tinyurl.com/hchlearning

- *James K. Baxter quotation ...* is from *Winter in Jerusalem* (1974) part of his "*Five Sestinas*" (published in *The Labyrinth,* Oxford University Press)

- *purpose of learning community* ... this definition draws from Milbrey W. McLaughlin and Joan E. Talbert *Contexts That Matter for Teaching and Learning* (Stanford 1993)

- *learning communities and Peter Senge ...* see *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (1990) by Peter Senge at http://astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/0385260954 and *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization* (1994) at http://astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/0385472560

- *The Jobs Research Trust and The Jobs Letter* .... the archive of this work (1994-2006) can be found at www.jobsletter.org.nz.

- *Heart Politics Gatherings and the Tauhara Centre* ... see www.tauharacentre.org.nz

- *Stewardship Learning Community ...* see *The Dialogue Reader* at www.scribd.com/doc/17127225

- *stewardship* ... see also "Stewardship and Public Service" a paper prepared for The Public Service Commission of Canada by Jim Armstrong (1997) available on the internet at tinyurl.com/2gxfs3w

- *servant leadership* ... a concept popularised by Robert K Greenleaf in his powerful essay "*The Servant as Leader*" (1970) See http://astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/0809105543

Social Innovation Dialogue

check-in
circle

keynotes

strategic
questions

sensing

what are
you seeing?

suspending

re-directing

maybe

How-to?

prototyping
new activities

realising

what are the
possibilities?

what's
emerging

nuggets

crystalising
insights

presencing

letting
go

letting
come

what for?
what are you serving?

- *strategic questioning* ... see *"Strategic Questioning — an Approach to Creating Personal and Social Change"* (1997) a paper by Fran Peavey and vivian Hutchinson at http://tinyurl.com/stratq97

- *David Bohm —* David Bohm (1917-1994) was one of the foremost theoretical physicists of his generation and one of the most influential theorists of dialogue processes. In his later life, Bohm wrote and spoke of a worldview that places more focus on wholeness than on the analysis of separate parts. See http://astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/0415149126

- *dialogue* ... see also *Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation* (1998) by Linda Ellinor and Glenna Gerard at http://astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/0471174661; *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life* (1999) by William Isaacs, introduction by Peter Senge at http://astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/0385479999; and *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (2002) by Margaret J. Wheatley at http://astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/1576751457.

- *Adam Kahane* ... gave a series of training workshops in Wellington in March 2008, organised by Thought Partners and the Leadership Development Centre (LDC). See *Solving Tough Problems — An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities* (2004) by Adam Kahane at http://astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/1576754642; and *Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change* (2010) by Adam Kahane at http://astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/1605093041.

- Theory "U" ... see *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges* (2009) by C. Otto Scharmer at http://astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/0974239054 and *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society* (2004) by Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers at http://astore.amazon.com/nzsef-20/detail/038551624X

- *debate and dialogue* ... this chart by vivian Hutchinson builds upon earlier work by the Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility.

- *Social Innovation Dialogue* ... this concept and chart by vivian Hutchinson builds upon the work of Adam Kahane, Otto Scharmer, Peter Block and the dialogues of the Stewardship Learning Community. NZSEF Social entrepreneur Ngahau Davis has also dubbed this process "*The Bell Korero*".

- More articles in this series, and further information on the HOW COMMUNITIES HEAL project can be found at www.nzsef.org.nz/howcommunitiesheal

- If you want to be notified of future releases of articles in this series, you can sign-up for our mailing list at tinyurl.com/HCHsign-up

- Comments and conversations on this project are encouraged on our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/howcommunitiesheal

- This project is on Twitter at @HowCommHeal using the tags #HowCH and #socent

- The online publication of the HOW COMMUNITIES HEAL project has been made possible by the Bishop's Action Foundation.