

South African Treasure

Reflections on a week of amazing conversations

Though South Africa is rich in mineral deposits, and the modern-day city of Johannesburg was established in 1886 with the discovery of gold, its greatest wealth, its most valuable natural resource, is its people and its culture.

A week in Johannesburg provided an opportunity to meet with more than 30 women in small “Conversation Circles.” This amazing experience – inspiring, humbling, exciting, is a gift of leadership to all of us. The insight of these women into the current issues in their country engaged me in confronting the depth of those issues – crime, corruption, deep, deep poverty

AND, their vision, passion and energy for making a difference literally “charged” the atmosphere in the room as they spoke about their work, their projects, their vision, parenting their children, living their daily lives. These women are quite literally creating a new future.

Most of these women have experienced unbelievable challenges, and yet are convinced that, as Karabo expressed it, “Nothing that has happened to me has broken me. It has only made me stronger.”

Several of you asked that I share my reflections and I am happy to do so. Clearly, I experienced these Conversations through my own lens, my own experience. And the Reflections are my own memories and my own interpretations. I hope I captured the essence of what you shared and apologize, if I misrepresented anyone. If I did misinterpret anything that you shared, please let me know.

May the positive energy and grounded optimism reflected here nourish each of you.

Wednesday morning

The key theme of the week emerged in the Wednesday morning conversation as Barbara described her appreciation for “*ubuntu*,” which reflects our “interconnectedness, our common humanity, and the responsibility to each other that flows from our connection.” (Nussbaum, 2003). The Western world is called to acknowledge this reality as quantum physics points to the interconnectedness of all life, but this insight is more an intellectual concept than lived experience. South Africans, on the other hand, embody this concept - in their individual lives and in their culture. The people of South Africa are incredibly grounded in the reality of our interdependence, our connection to the whole, and to one another. They have a cultural language competence for

Barbara Spraker
July, 2008

nourishing being together. Their ontology is that when we are talking we are one person. They demonstrate strong competence for conversation, for talking together, for listening, for discussing the undiscussables. There is appreciation for process that stands in stark contrast to our Western focus on conclusion, results, decisiveness.

In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela describes one of his early memories of village leadership. Chief Jongintaba Dalindyebo, acting regent of the Thembu people, called tribal meetings as needed to discuss national matters, such as drought, the culling of cattle, or new laws decreed by the government.

All Thembu *men* (italics are mine) were free to come. They gathered in the courtyard in front of the regent's house and he opened the meeting by thanking all who came and explaining why he had summoned them. "From that point on, he would not utter another word until the meeting was nearing its end." (1994, p. 21)

Everyone was welcome to speak – warrior, medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and labourer. Each spoke without interruption, and meetings lasted many hours. "The meetings would continue until some kind of consensus was reached. They ended in unanimity or not at all." (Ibid.)



While each of our conversations emerged in its own way based on the interests and awareness of those participating, always there was some reflection of this notion that we are all connected, and that in conversation we discern that oneness.

Barbara Spraker
July, 2008

In the Wednesday morning conversation, Barbara and Gerda spoke of their pain in the juxtaposition of the tradition of *ubuntu* and the lack of it that is currently reflected in the country's politics. And they spoke of their commitment to honor this value in their work. Currently Gerda works as an executive coach, certainly an opportunity to create a space for individuals to reflect on their relationship to the whole. She is also engaged in World Leadership Day, an international project to explore what leadership traits are valued in various cultures and to celebrate local leadership. Barbara continues her consulting and writing and is currently engaged in a project to "Celebrate Africa!" She integrates her life-long engagement with dance and music into all that she does - the way she lives her life, her coaching practice, her teaching, her work with individuals and groups around the process of transition.

A second theme surfaced as this conversation drew to a close. And that was reference to the essence of personal transformation as part of social transformation. Both Barbara and Gerda are coaches, creating space and opportunity for individuals and groups to grow in self-awareness and personal development that enables authentic presence and leadership.

Thursday morning

In the second Conversation Circle, I was privileged to hear the daily experiences of six young women as they seek to live out their passion and sense of purpose. "Ever since I was a little girl my purpose has been to have a positive impact on at least one person every day." Believing deeply that children's early life experiences have a huge impact on their future, Phethile is now a psychology student who intends to work with parents and children.

With eyes shining and sweeping hand gestures, Boitumelo, another student, described how much she loved her research and her projects in gender studies. A current project in which she is engaged, in Soweto, is exploring women's relationship to water.

Mmanoko, a Spiritual Healer struggles that she has to charge people for her counsel, in order to pay her bills. My life is a journey, says Mmanoko, a self-proclaimed rebel, and she is creating her own path as she walks two worlds, dressing, for example, in western clothes when she feel the situation requires it and in traditional dress when she can. Women are spiritual beings, she says; We experience Spirit through our emotions. We have big issues in South Africa and I have deep passion for creating communities. What is failing us now is competitiveness. We need to embrace the idea that "When you shine, I shine."

Barbara Spraker
July, 2008

“Every decision should be an emotional decision!” asserts Karabo. We need to think – “Who will be affected by my decision?” “How will it affect others?” “The world?” When we are centered in ourselves we can trust our intuition and know that universal wisdom is accessible to us. As a high school senior last year, Karabo won a prize for the best investment strategy. “I think I am meant to be something big,” she says. (No doubt in my mind that she will do just that!)

“Talk is cheap,” says Rejoice, whose African name means “embrace” – as you would cradle a child. Enjoying the double meaning this phrase suggests, she speaks of the value of talking. It is a free resource. We do not have to pay for it. It is available for us to use wisely. AND, without action, just talking may lead nowhere. Rejoice expresses the paradox experienced by many passionate people around the world, “I feel so challenged. I have to have a job to pay the bills; there are so many things that I want to do, that need to be done, but they don’t bring in the money.”

Landu describes herself as a social entrepreneur. I always think of interconnection. We believe that if you are a woman and you have a daughter that you should give her your mother’s name. This is a way we keep the connection from one generation to another. “I am very wise.” I seek to help people build their lives on their own spiritual base.



This group, as well as one that met later in the day, were convened by Joyce, a wise and gifted human being who stands fully in her power and through whom the universe manifests. A visionary, she clearly grasps the big issues of her country and the global community, and creates ways individuals and small groups can contribute their talent to addressing those issues. She sees possibilities, makes things happen, achieves results. She has worked in both

Barbara Spraker
July, 2008

corporate and entrepreneurial ventures and in 2006 founded the NGO, South Africa Association of Investors, because she believed that even those with small amounts of disposable income should be able to invest wisely. Clearly she is a mentor and role model for many of these young women.

The notion of *ubuntu* was discussed again, in terms of how the world needs each of them, and, how together they are more powerful - both in their individual efforts and collectively. As we closed this session I shared Angeles Arrien's description of four archetypes of leadership by referring to the warrior, the visionary, the teacher and the healer, as they had described themselves, seated around the table. And Mmanoko offered us this challenge: "If we really want to make a difference, we need to think mentorship, and adoption. Everyone of us can make a huge difference by acting on our awareness of our interconnection. Choose an individual, or several, to mentor or adopt - a child, a school, a family, or an NGO."

Thursday afternoon

A lunchtime gathering (12:00 – 2:00), arranged by Joyce, included 15 women, most of whom worked for the same bank. The theme of *ubuntu*, though present, was more muted here, as the primary topic articulated by these women was the experience of feeling discounted, devalued and not heard by the corporation in which they worked.

Several spoke with enthusiasm about how much they loved their work, BUT they vividly described their experience of feeling like second class citizens. Working in the field of Organizational Psychology, this was a familiar theme to me. Asked to describe their personal strengths, the women responded with statements such as: "I defend myself;" "My assertiveness;" " My good social skills, I can make people feel comfortable working together;" "Nobody pushes me around."

"Uncompromising." What became obvious was:

- the power represented at the table
- the diversity and how they needed each other, both to leverage their individual strengths, and the power of their collective
- no one has it all

As women described their lives and their intentions, the conversation was vibrant and moving. "I teach my son to respect women." "I married this big British guy, and I bully him; he seems to be fine with it." ☺ "I married a Portuguese and then a British man, and divorced each of them because they didn't treat me well. " One young woman shared that her family was pressuring her to get married and asked the group, "What is the role of a wife?" Immediately another woman spoke up, "You are NOT taking on a role as a wife; you are a woman in relationship!" Bingo! Enthusiastic agreement expressed around the table.



Quite a few of the women referred to their age.

- “As I’ve grown older I’ve learned that I am really more dependent on others than I realized when I was younger. I’m finding ways to work together with others.”
- “I began working at the bank when I was 15. Even though I’m 40, I feel like I’m 25. But the way women are treated has not changed.”
- “I remember how I dreaded turning 30. But then when I became 30 I felt like ‘Hey, world, bring it on!’ I used to be such a negotiator, thoroughly exploring both points of view. Now I cut to the chase!”

This group concluded with a discussion about continuing to meet together, a visit back to *ubuntu*. They expressed amazement that some companies actually support women’s groups, certain that their organization would not do that, and further, that there were be repercussions to them even if they met after work or during their lunch hour. However, their expressions of inspiration, humility, empowerment, at the close of this conversation, suggest that this “seed” of continuing to meet as a collective may well germinate.

Barbara Spraker
July, 2008

Friday morning

On Friday morning, the group energy was palpable, exciting, edgy. These are women living out their passion.



Nicole is so clear that her place of being and working is in nature. She is deeply aware of the need of humans for healing and is seeking her place to help that healing with people, with nature, and in nature. The birth of her baby daughter heightened her concern about the world in which she will grow up. "I feel like I'm pregnant again," she says, as she talks about exploring what lies ahead for her.

Barbara Spraker
July, 2008

Lesley tells an amazing story of “discovering” her own power and leadership, which is grounded in her being fully present to her vulnerability as a child, and as a student. “ I found that the more I would speak up, the more my conditions would improve,” she says. She literally grew into her own power as a leader. Now, she wears that well, as she follows her vision for engaging South Africans living abroad in actively engaging with their homeland.

As Busi describes her experience, we see such a clear example of the power of living from the inside out., the power of leadership arising from self-awareness and authenticity. As she tells about a compelling facilitator training experience in which she participated (through Pioneers of Change), we can see the vulnerability and the confidence that seem to be flip sides of this life lesson that we all experience in some way. She is deeply appreciative of indigenous wisdom and the power of conversation as she builds community through helping local groups organize, meet on a weekly basis and achieve the results they want. “Here are these folks with no resources, and no formal training,” she says, “taking charge of their collective life.” People self-select to participate in these groups, and also Busi identifies those who need to be a part, because they can help execute the goal, and/or harness the wisdom of the group.

Elaine has worked as a teacher, a researcher, has been a part of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, and whatever she is doing, she is Warrior. Amazingly articulate, she is deeply appreciative of the power and spirit of women and of the indigenous approach to dialogue and conflict resolution. She is now head of HIV Strategy at Discovery Health. She envisions a Center for Innovation which will bring together Dialogue and Action. Within each of five sectors (including mining, health care, education), models for innovation will be developed. She is seeking partnerships and \$20 million US in each sector, for financing to scale up these programs. There is now a gel available she tells us, that women can insert in the vagina. Through this kind of innovation women can become responsible for their own bodies. Elaine shared this wisdom with us: “Our power comes from contributing in our small way, to a bigger movement. “

Dorah, as a child in a small village who had friends who were privileged, and who later saw people chased from the land, has a bone-deep clarity that “This cycle of poverty has to stop! ! ! This inequity has to stop! ! !” “I’m meant to do something! I cannot stop! I was always shy, and what I was seeing was so wrong it gave me the courage to speak out. I’m a candle-holder to my family and friends. I pave the way. My parents didn’t want me to speak out to the chief, but I felt I had to.”

In 1992 Dorah became an activist in an environmental group. She participated in, and led, pro-active group workshops, traveled to other centers around the world to learn what relationships and resources were needed to set up a demonstration project.. In 1996 the Danish government provided basic

Barbara Spraker
July, 2008

resources to the group, as well as a 35 year lease on a piece of property in downtown Johannesburg. By the time the Environmental Summit was held in Johannesburg in 2002, the GreenHouse Project was opened. Dorah is Executive Director of the Project which takes a holistic approach to integrating green building and design, efficient and renewable energy, recycling and organic farming into the mindset of this city. The Project also supports small, local entrepreneurial projects – such as a group of women who collect and recycle cans and glass. One night in March of this year, the security guard at the Greenhouse Project was overcome, windows were smashed and computers and anything of resale value was stolen. The following day members of city government came to “take over” the Greenhouse Project. “You will NOT order us to close down or consult with me by barging in this way!” exclaimed Dorah. If you want to talk with me, you make an appointment and you address me with respect!” The group has not been heard from again.

Tuesday evening

Continuing the conversation leading from deep understanding of the self, and the ability to be fully present with others. embodying our connection with each other - - - these deep competencies are honored and taught through the Dialogue projects of the Nelson Mandela Foundation. In linear time, this was our first conversation in Johannesburg. However, it seems to be a story to be told at this point in this narrative, because it captures the practical carrying forward of the South African competence for deep conversation as a way of living and being together.



Barbara Spraker
July, 2008

During our first evening in Johannesburg, Heather, Mothomang, and Cheryl told us the story of the Foundation. The organic growth of this organization is a lesson in itself. Heather, one of the managers of the Foundation, described the initial need to respond to the mountains of mail and phone messages arriving for Nelson Mandela as he completed his presidency, and the gradual emergence of the Foundation as the people who gathered to do this work soon also recognized the importance of collecting and archiving his life and work.

This led, later, to a public dialogue, the Transition Memories Program, and after a period of time, to teaching and using the dialogue process with various groups - resolving real problems and creating real change. The Foundation continues the dialogue process as a way of supporting groups in accessing and acting on deeply rooted organic wisdom.

Stories of how the Foundation trains facilitators illustrated the theme of personal transformation that also emerged throughout the week as women told their stories. "The ten day intense training of facilitators," Mothomang explained, "begins with three days focused on the self who is the facilitator. Without deep knowledge, acceptance and healing of self, one is not able to be present to others without judgment, or to support the group as its own issues and processes emerge."

Sunday morning

Lisa's commonalities with the other women were clear: she doesn't see constraints. She sees opportunities. She sees what needs to be done – and helps make it happen. From early involvement in drafting legislation putting Affirmative Action into place following apartheid, she next moved to a more active role in private enterprise. As head of Corporate Social Investment at Investec she established several program areas, including education, entrepreneurship, investment in NGOs and HIV/AIDs. She also created a Development Trust, which she now manages; a percentage of the bank's profits goes into this trust each year



Barbara Spraker
July, 2008

A results oriented visionary, Lisa currently is pursuing the implementation of a proposal to create a Leadership Center at Liliesleaf Farm, the place where Nelson Mandela, posing as a caretaker, and other leaders of the African National Party, strategized ways to put pressure on the white government to end apartheid. The Center she envisions will provide leadership development opportunities for senior public officials and will be a place for high level conversation and dialogue on topics of national and international interest. Honored by the World Economic Forum as one of the “Young Global Leaders” in 2008, there is no doubt Lisa will bring this vision into being.

Yes, these are my reflections of our conversations. They are most meaningful to me. They nurture hope and reveal the power of vision, purpose, passion – and determination! I am most grateful for the lessons of *ubuntu*. My greatest wish is that as you see yourself as part of this “community” of powerful women you experience your gifts to one another, “As you shine, I shine.”

I expect your reflections about our conversations are a bit different, and I’d love to hear them.

With deep appreciation to each of you who participated in the Conversation Circles. Thank you for sharing your stories. May they inspire us to live out our own stories with creativity and courage.

Barbara

References

Mandela, N. (1994). *Long walk to freedom*. New York, NY: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company,

Nussbaum, B. (2003). *Reflections*, Vol. 4, No. 4. “Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African on our common humanity.”