



CHAPTER 1

A New Era of Empowerment

Cairo, Egypt, January 25, 2011. A chanting crowd marches into Tahrir Square in the center of Cairo to challenge the power of the dictator Mubarak, who has held power for decades. A few days before, a similar groundswell of popular outrage toppled the autocratic regime that ruled Tunisia. Inspired by that success, the Egyptian activists determine to stay in the square, violating long-standing prohibitions against protest. Days go by, and in spite of intimidation, arrests and attacks, they remain until finally Mubarak is forced to step down. Their success inspires similar uprisings in Bahrain, Yemen, Morocco and Libya, transforming in a few weeks the power structure of the Middle East.

At the same time, in the US, protestors flood the state Capitol of Wisconsin where governor Scott Walker is attempting to push through a law that would gut the power of unions. From the Mideast to the Midwest, ordinary people are taking action to challenge coercive power.

These uprisings are different in structure than revolutions of the past. No charismatic leaders take control. Organization exists within the mass, and groups at the center provide inspiration, direction and momentum, but there is no command structure to issue orders to the protestors, no head for the opposition to cut off, no leader to assassinate. As one commentator put it, “The swarm defeats the hierarchy.”

This way of organizing may seem to be very new, facilitated by all the tools of the Internet, from Facebook to Twitter. The Internet itself is a distributed network with no central control or center of command, and it favors similar structures.

But decentralized collaboration is actually very old, perhaps the oldest way that human beings have come together to pursue common goals. It harkens back to the clan, the council around the fire, the village elders meeting underneath the sacred tree. Long before kings, generals, armies that marched in formation and codified classes of nobles and peons, people came together more or less as equals to make the decisions that affected their lives.

Collaborative groups are everywhere. They might be a group of neighbors coming together to plan how their town can make a transition to a more energy efficient economy or a church group planning a bake sale. They could be a group of anarchist forest defenders organizing a tree sit or a group of friends planning a surprise birthday party for a workmate. Pagans planning a May Eve ritual, permaculture students starting a community garden, a cohousing community deciding on its ground rules or a group of preschoolers playing Monster all operate without centralized structures of command and control.

When we set out to change the world, when we organize to bring about greater freedom, justice, peace and equality, we most often create such groups. Collaborative groups embody some of our most cherished values: equality, freedom and the value of each individual.

And they can be enormously effective. In the 1970s, the Second Wave of the feminist movement was carried forward by consciousness-raising groups, small circles that met each week to share stories and experiences. Out of those discussions arose the issues, actions and campaigns that drove the movement. Alcoholics Anonymous and all its offshoots provide the most effective treatment for alcoholism and other addictions. They are structured around groups of peers who offer each other support with no experts or authorities taking control.

And there are thousands of other examples, from grassroots relief efforts after Hurricane Katrina to the collaborative art event/festival of Burning Man that draws tens of thousands to the Nevada desert every September.

Today, networks, collaboration, decentralization and the wisdom of crowds are hot buzzwords. Co-created projects like open source software and Wikipedia have not only been enormously successful; they are being touted as the business models of the future. Many corporations are opening up to forms of co-creation — from the Learning Organization discussed by Margaret Wheatley to Japanese-influenced consensus models to the hundreds of thousands of volunteer organizations working for social change and environmental balance.

COLLABORATIVE GROUPS AND HIERARCHIES

As different as these groups and activities might seem, they have something in common. If you were to diagram their structure, your picture would look more like a circle than a pyramid or a traditional chain of command. These groups may include individuals who exhibit leadership, but they are not dependent on leaders. They may include bossy people, but they have no bosses, no one in control, no one who holds authority over the others. They are groups of peers, working together for common goals, collaborating and co-creating. Such groups are at the root of democracy, and participating in them can be a liberating, empowering, life-changing experience.

My first immersion in a culture of egalitarian collaboration came at an extended blockade of a nuclear power plant at Diablo Canyon in central California in 1981. For nearly a month, we organized blockades of the power plant, did our share of the work to keep our encampment clean, fed and safe, got arrested, made decisions together in jail about how to respond to threats and hold solidarity and changed the course of energy policy in California for decades to come. When the blockade ended, I went back to graduate school in a feminist program in an alternative university. But I felt deeply uncomfortable. Sitting at a desk, listening to lectures and complying with assignments I'd had no hand in designing seemed constricting and irksome after three weeks of sitting in circles, participating in every decision that the group made, living immersed in a structure that affirmed my core worth and the value of my voice.

Hierarchies are appropriate and necessary for some endeavors. When the house is burning, we don't want the fire department to sit down and decide in a long-drawn-out meeting who will go in and who will hold the hose. In families, adults must exercise control over children if they want their offspring to survive. In emergencies, and where true differences of skill, training and knowledge exist, command and control structures may be needed.

But hierarchies also have their drawbacks. In a hierarchy, power differentials expand, so that those who issue orders also receive the greatest status and rewards, and the bottom rungs are not pleasant places to be. The workers who do the nastiest jobs receive the lowest pay and wield the least power.

No one enjoys being a peon or a slave. Many of us submit to hierarchies for work, school or other ends because we often don't have other options. To make a living, we need to work in situations where others have control over us. But when

we do have a choice — in our leisure time, our volunteer efforts, our work to better the world — we gravitate to groups of peers. In a group where we have an equal voice, we feel a sense of ownership, pride and investment. We feel empowered: affirmed and supported in developing our own abilities, skills and talents, in pursuing our own goals and standing up for our own values.

Empowered people stand for something in their lives. They take action, sometimes even facing great danger, because they know that they have the right and the responsibility to act in service of what they believe and care for. A young woman faces the cameras in Tahrir Square, smiles and says, “Today we Egyptians have lost our fear.”

Empowerment comes from within — but the structures around us can evoke that inner strength and support it or deny and suppress it. Collaborative groups, when they are working well, create fertile ground where empowerment can flourish.

THE CHALLENGES OF COLLABORATION

Collaborative groups, however, face their own challenges, especially when they exist over time and strive for permanence and sustainability. It is a joy to be part of a team that works well together. But a team that spins its wheels in fruitless discussions or becomes a vicious battleground can be frustrating, enraging and deeply wounding.

Diana Leafe Christian, who studied successful ecovillages and intentional communities, found that “No matter how visionary and inspired the founders, only about one out of ten new communities actually get built. The other 90 per cent seemed to go nowhere, occasionally because of lack of money or not finding the right land, but mostly because of conflict. And usually, conflict accompanied by heartbreak. And sometimes, conflict, heartbreak and lawsuits.”¹

Diana describes a common pattern. A group of kind, compassionate idealistic people set out to form a community or change the world. For the first few months, everyone loves one another, high on that heady drug of working together toward important goals. And then a year later it has all dissolved into bitter fights and recriminations.

For there is one overriding problem with collaborative groups — they are groups of people, and people are damn difficult to get along with. Were it not for that fact, we would have already saved the world many times over. Instead, we’re left down here in the muck, struggling with the irritating, irresponsible,

pig-headed, stubborn, annoying, judgmental, egotistical and petty people who are supposed to be our allies.

I'm writing this book to offer what I've learned in over four decades of organizing and working collaboratively. I believe that we can become far more skillful at co-creation. When we do, our inner empowerment will flourish, our relationships will thrive and we will become far more effective at all the important work our groups undertake.

HOW COLLABORATIVE GROUPS ARE DIFFERENT

Collaborative is the term I've chosen to describe groups that are based on shared power and the inherent worth and value of each member. Brafman and Beckstrom, in *The Starfish and the Spider*, characterize what they call starfish groups as very amorphous and fluid. Because power and knowledge are distributed, individual units quickly respond to a multitude of internal and external forces — they are constantly spreading, growing, shrinking, mutating, dying off and reemerging. This quality makes them very flexible.² How do I define a *collaborative group*? It's a group that has most if not all of the following characteristics:

- Structured as circles, webs or networks, not pyramids or trees
- Groups of peers, with a horizontal structure, working together to create something and to make decisions
- Groups without formal authority, no bosses that can hire or fire you. (In some hybrid groups, that authority might exist but be rarely and reluctantly imposed.)
- Businesses that run collectively or cooperatively
- Groups where the major reward may not be money, but something else — creative fulfillment, impact on the world, spiritual development, personal growth, or friendship
- Often formed around strong, altruistic values — from saving the world to sharing knowledge to religious observation or community celebration
- Groups of humans — which means that motives of gain, status and power do come into play, if not overtly, then covertly
- Groups that often have few or no overt rules, but many norms
- Often ephemeral, for better or worse

When we understand these differences, we can use them to our advantage. We can structure our groups to encourage the behaviors that foster cooperation,

efficacy and friendship — and discourage those annoying traits that undermine our aims. There are thousands of books, courses and leadership seminars that will teach you how to manage a hierarchy. There's much less support for co-creative groups. Throughout this book I have drawn on all the literature and research I can find, but the primary source is ultimately my own experience.

My academic background is modest — an MA from Antioch University West in psychology in 1982. But my experience of co-creative groups is broad and deep. For more than 40 years, I've been working and living in collaborative groups. In the early 1980s, I cofounded Reclaiming, a spiritual network of Goddess-centered Pagans who practice a co-creative tradition that values personal healing, deep spiritual practice and political action. I've lived collectively both in the 1960s and continuously since the early 1980s and worked collectively on hundreds of projects, including books and films. I've helped to organize political groups that work collaboratively, from small collectives to major mobilizations involving thousands of people. I've trained thousands of people in consensus decision-making and facilitated countless meetings. I've mediated conflicts for social change groups and presided over strategy meetings of protestors in jail. As a writer, organizer, activist and spiritual teacher, I've struggled many times with the contradictions of being a leader in groups that define themselves as leaderless.

I've had many wonderful, empowering and healing experiences in groups — and my fair share of painful disasters. Those disasters, my own mistakes and hard lessons are probably the most valuable experience I have to offer. Very few people have experience of how co-creative groups change over time. Many of the new experiments are still in their honeymoon phase. When an emergent group needs to undergo a phase shift, to dissolve and re-form, who can recognize the need and help to orchestrate the change? When conflicts erupt, when unexpected pitfalls open up beneath our feet, where is the experience to guide us?

It comes from the edges and the margins, where these experiments have been going on for decades. We can learn a lot from those who have pushed the boundaries, from both the successes and the failures, from the long-lived and the short-lived.

Most hippie communes of the 1960s failed — but a few survived to thrive and grow. The Quakers have survived for three and a half centuries. Reclaiming, my own network, is entering its third decade. There are other intentional communities that have also endured for decades.

In a redwood forest, there are lichens that only begin to grow on a tree when it is over 150 years old. In collaborative groups, there are patterns and structures that also only emerge over time. If we identify and learn from them, we can help groups sustain themselves for the long haul when that is appropriate or recognize when there is strength in flexibility and power in the ephemeral.

HOW THIS BOOK IS STRUCTURED

In *The Empowerment Manual*, we'll look at the factors that enable collaborative groups to thrive, and we'll also examine failures and bad examples. Successful groups form, articulate and maintain a common vision. Power and authority are balanced with responsibility. Trust is balanced with accountability. Group norms are made visible and conscious, and beneficial norms are fostered.

"Equal" does not mean "identical," and egalitarian groups contain many distinct roles, both formal and informal. Finally, we'll look at how to lead a leaderless group, how to embrace conflict and deal with difficult people.

Throughout the book, I'll bring in real examples and case studies. Most will have names and details changed to protect the privacy of all involved — and to keep me from spending my golden years dealing with hurt feelings and bitter attacks from those I might offend. And I have synthesized many of those examples into an ongoing story about a fictional community that will weave through the book.

I've also provided many experiential exercises, sets of questions and ways of working the material that go deeper than the intellectual. I encourage people to use this material in working with your own groups and with others. The more effective our groups become, the more valuable work they will achieve in the world.

EXERCISES AND MEDITATIONS

I come to this work from many decades of teaching and practicing earth-based spirituality, and many of my previous books, audio tapes and other resources are heavily weighted to the spiritual. I've also suggested rituals, meditations, experiential exercises and guided imagery in this book. Ritual and meditation may or may not be appropriate for your group — that's up to you to decide. If a group is deeply uncomfortable with anything they consider too woo-woo, it's better not to force a process on them. You can easily take the same material and present it in a different form, for example:

I'm going to ask us each to take ten minutes and write out something of your vision of an ideal world. Or — you could draw it if you prefer that mode of expression — on the table are colored pens and paper. I'm going to read a list of questions — you don't have to answer them all but let them jog your imagination.

I've often presented exercises and guided meditations in the form of scripts. They can be read aloud, but this is probably the least effective way to lead them. A far better practice is to learn the structure of the exercise or meditation, commit the bones to memory and then speak it in your own words. A guided meditation is an inner journey, so learn the landmarks and then feel free to improvise. Remember, though, that there is an art to creating a meditation that leads people into their own imagination. It needs to be just specific enough — but not too detailed. You aren't trying to get them to experience your own inner landscape, but rather to travel on their own imaginary journey. Use sensory imagery — but keep it generalized. For example, “You are walking down a path, and you smell the air around you and feel the ground under your feet and how the weight of your body shifts from foot to foot ...” NOT “You are walking on a hot desert, and you feel sharp stones under your feet and hot sun on your skin.” You may be in a desert; someone else may be in a forest or on a seashore and too-specific imagery will throw them out of their journey. Keep it open, so that peoples' imagination becomes engaged.

Beginning a Session

Find a place for the meeting where people can sit in a rough circle and feel comfortable. Welcome people as they arrive, and introduce everyone. An introduction might simply involve asking people to say their name and where they are from. It could include a short statement about what drew them to the group — but beware, as you continue around the circle, those

statements will get longer and longer until people are telling their entire life stories. Here are some suggestions for quick rounds of introductions.

Quick Intro

Tell us your name and something that's happened this week that gives you hope.

Weather Report

Tell us your name, and if your mood right now were a state of the weather, what would it be? Sunny? Cloudy? Stormy?

Partner Intro

Find a person in this circle you don't know, and introduce yourself and what drew you to this group. Then the other person takes a turn. You will each have five minutes to talk without being interrupted or questioned. After you've both spoken, you'll have a few minutes to talk freely about what might be common or different in your experience.

Leader: Keep time and announce each five minutes with a bell, chime, drum or your voice. After the exercise is done, call the group back together and say:

Now I'm going to ask each of you to introduce your partner, and tell us in just a sentence or two what drew your partner to the group.

Pride Intro

(For an ongoing group) Say your name and tell us what you've done since we last met that you're proud of toward furthering the work of this group.

After introductions, review the plan for the meeting and its purpose and intentions. Ask the group, "Can we agree to this plan?" DON'T say "Are there any objections, concerns or suggestions about the agenda?" unless you want

to spend a long time hearing them and revising the plan on the spot.

If it is appropriate in your group, you might also begin with a short grounding or meditation to bring the group together. There are hundreds of suggestions in my other books that I won't repeat now.³

Group Grounding

This is a very simple and general grounding.

Let's all stand in a circle. Take a moment and stretch, and feel your body. Where are you holding tension? What needs to be released? Take a deep breath, let it go and bring yourself to a nice, easy, balanced stance, with your knees slightly bent. Take some deep breaths, down into your belly.

Close your eyes. Feel your feet on the ground. Allow yourself to feel the weight of gravity and how your feet push down against the earth. Let yourself think for just a moment about what you stand for. What drew you to this group? To its work and values?

Imagine you have roots, like a tree, extending down from your feet into the earth. As you breathe, let them push down through the soil and rock and water under the earth, thinking about what feeds and supports the work of this group and your own work within it.

As you reach the mantle of living fire beneath the earth, take a breath and release anything you don't want to bring into this meeting. Just let it go, on your breath, and feel the fire transform it.

Now take a breath and draw up a spark of that fire — a spark of the inspiration and passion you feel for the work at hand. Draw it up through your roots, through the rocks and the water and the soil, up into your feet and legs, up through the base of your spine, and feel your spine expand and grow like the flexible trunk of a living tree. Draw some of that warm fire into your heart, and feel the heart connections you are making. Draw it up into your shoulders and down into your hands, and honor the work of your hands. Draw it up into your head and out the top of your head like branches that reach up to the sky and then sweep back down to touch the earth. Feel the circuit of energy that this creates.

Now feel the sunlight (or moonlight, or starlight) on your leaves and branches. Take a deep breath, and draw some of that down, into your leaves and down through the top of your head, through your heart and hands and belly, down through your feet into the earth. Draw in some of the energy you need to realize the vision and do the work.

And just stand for a moment, breathing, feeling yourself as a conduit between earth and sky. Now become aware that under the earth, all of our roots are intertwined. And above our heads, our branches are intertwined. We stand together, a sacred grove, sharing our vision and our work to make it real.

Let's take some deep breaths together, in and out ... our breath becoming one breath, in

and out ... letting your breath become a sound, a tone that you give to the circle.

(When the tone dies away) And now let's just take in some of that energy, the energy we each need for the work tonight. And look around, and acknowledge everyone in the circle. Thank you! And now let's begin.

Anchor to Core Self

This exercise is probably the most basic and useful spiritual practice I know. I learned a version of it originally from bodywork teacher Suzette Rochat, and another version can be found in *The Twelve Wild Swans*.⁴ I use it every day, as a basic wake-up meditation, under stress, when I need to make an important decision. I've taught it to activists preparing to go into dangerous situations, to permaculturalists wanting to learn how to better observe what's going on in the garden and to spiritual circles wanting to meditate in the woods.

Begin with the grounding above. Now, as you stand grounded and centered, notice how your body feels. Think of a time, place or situation in which you feel at home and comfortable, when you can just be yourself, without any masks or pretense or face to keep up. A grounded but neutral state, when you can be in touch with your deepest, creative power, without having to use it. Say your own name to yourself, and notice where in your body you feel it reverberate.

Can you find a place on your body that resonates with this state? Take a deep breath, and

touch that place. Or perhaps it's a stance or a gesture, but find something physical you can create as an anchor to this core, grounded, neutral state.

Now, can you think of an image or a symbol for this state? Perhaps it's something from this scene you are remembering or imagining. It could be a color or a shape. Find something visual, and as you touch your physical place, hold it in your mind and tell yourself that by visualizing this image you can bring yourself into this core, grounded, neutral state.

Now, can you think of a word or phrase you can say, your magic word or affirmation that you can associate with this core, grounded, neutral state? Take a breath, and say the word or phrase to yourself, as you visualize your image and touch your physical place. Tell yourself that by using these three things together — your physical touch, your image and your word or phrase — you can quickly and instantly bring yourself into this core, grounded, neutral state.

Take a breath, and open your eyes. Look around you, and notice how the world looks when you are in this core, grounded and neutral state. How do other people look, when they are anchored to their core self?

Now, you can let go of the physical gesture, the image and the phrase, and still stay grounded and centered. We will practice with this anchor, and I encourage you to practice also at home. The more you use it, the more it will become ingrained, until it becomes your natural, default state in response to stress.

Really Simple Grounding

For groups with less tolerance for ritual, here's a really simple, secular grounding

Let's stand together in a circle, just for a moment. Take a moment to stretch and release any knots and kinks.

Now, let's all take a deep breath, and let go of any tension or distress you might be carrying with you from the day. Take a deep breath in, and out, and release anything you don't want to bring into this meeting.

Now, feel your feet on the ground. Feel the pull of gravity, and the solid contact you make with the earth. Think about what you stand for, and what we stand for together — those things we care about, the reasons why we do this work. Feel the solidity and the strength we have when we stand together. Know that any time you feel off-balance, physically or emotionally, you can bring yourself back to this solid, grounded stance simply by feeling your feet on the ground and taking a breath.

Look around now, and see your allies. Acknowledge them with your eyes, and let's begin.

Thanksgiving

The Iroquois nations begin every meeting with a Thanksgiving Address — a prayer of thanks to honor all of the cosmos. You might begin with a simplified version — asking people to share something they are thankful for and giving gratitude to all who have contributed to the work of the group that week.

Cultural Sharing

Groups that might feel uncomfortable with meditation or imposed prayer might still be open to starting with some form of cultural sharing. Musicians or poets can share their work, or any member can read a favorite poem or lead a group song. Artists get a chance to perform to a supportive audience and the group has an enriching experience that adds another dimension to the work.

Clap In/Clap Out

A leader holds her hands apart, and everyone follows suit. She counts one ... two ... three ... and claps, and everyone attempts to clap together as one. This is a very simple way to build unity, either to begin a meeting, to end one, or both. An alternate version is a group “Yes!” either accompanying the clap or with a fist-punch up to the air.

Ending a Session

Leave some time at the end of every session for evaluation and closing.

Short Evaluation

Allow time either for free discussion or go around the circle asking:

What worked for you in this session? What could have worked better? What would you like to see in the next one?

Make sure someone takes notes that can be given to the facilitator for the next session.

Thank You Circle

Go quickly around the circle and thank each person for their contribution and for the work they've done for the group. Beware: when you thank people individually, you always run the risk of missing someone or slighting some accomplishment they feel is important. So don't be sloppy.

Or: keep the gratitude general: “Thanks to those who organized the meeting, to everyone who brought food, to those who sent out the announcement and called people to remind them, to all of you who have done so much in this last period to further the work of this group.”

Cultural Closing

A poem, song or short dance jam can also close a meeting. Be aware, however, that when timing gets tight sometimes the closing gets postponed or foreclosed. It's disrespectful to singers or poets to shove them off the agenda at the last meeting. So if that's likely to happen, have the cultural offering first, rather than last.

Closing Meditation

For groups who are open to it, closing with a meditation, a grounding or a short empowerment ritual can be a lovely send-off.

Clap Out

A group clap can be used to end the meeting.

When to Have the Potluck***Before***

“We gather at six for the potluck and start the

meeting at seven." This allows people with tight schedules to come just for the meeting, and others who have the time and inclination to socialize.

After

A daytime meeting can end with a potluck. This allows people in the group to release the tension of formal work and relax, and also to informally carry on the discussion started earlier.

During

A meeting can be held over brunch, lunch or dinner. This works well for building trust and connection when no decisions need to be made. It's a great setting for deeper and more philosophical discussions, for tackling the big questions that tend to get shoved out of agendas. But if conflict resolution is the purpose of the meeting, hold the food or risk indigestion.

WE NEED COLLABORATIVE GROUPS

Today we face overwhelming social, economic and ecological crises, from wars to natural disasters to nuclear meltdowns. Climate change is progressing even faster than predicted. We are challenged to recreate our technologies, our energy systems, our economies, our food systems and our way of life — and to do it not over the next century but within the next few decades. We have a short window of time to either make the transformation to a world where we all can thrive or devolve into a grim future of ecological catastrophe and all the social breakdowns, war, destruction and suffering that go with it.

To choose the positive future, we need the imagination, the commitment and passion that can never be commanded but can only be unleashed in groups of equals. Those groups need to work. They need to function well, as smoothly and efficiently as the most well-oiled hierarchical machine. And some of them, at least, need to last. That's why I'm writing this book.

Let me begin by telling you a story. It's about a fictional group, and I've designed it to highlight some common patterns of conflict and confusion that plague us. So ... come with me on a visit to RootBound Ecovillage.