Preface

Many things indicate that we are going through a transitional period, when it seems that something is on the way out and something else is painfully being born. It is as if something were crumbling, decaying and exhausting itself, while something else, still indistinct, were arising from the rubble.

– Vaclav Havel (In memoriam)

At the heart of this book is the notion of convivial, caring conversation. To my mind, it's what will save the world. It's what brings us together. It's what will help us go from a culture of "You're on your own," to one of "We're all in this together."

Conversation seems like such a basic thing, but most people rate our national conversation skills as very low. What's happened? For one thing, many of us are concerned about our counterfeit connection — connection to screens instead of to people.

At the same time, if there's ever been a role for the Internet, it's now. Things are happening so fast out there that any book, frozen in time as it is, is out of date almost immediately. I'm writing the final draft of this in the spring of 2012, and I oscillate between despair and joy, reflecting Vaclav Havel's observation — despair at the possible fate of our planet and

our people, joy over the changes and new ideas emerging around the world.

Because things are moving so fast, some ideas I barely introduce and encourage you to Google to find out more. But that's OK, because my goal isn't to fill you with facts and information. I'd like to see this book as an opening to a conversation. I'd like to get you talking to the people around you, and *I'd* like to hear from you as well.

In fact, I often think that my role is to revive the oral culture. Before print took over, talking together meant thinking together. Nothing was set in stone — in print. You could keep revising, and everyone had a role in creating knowledge.

When print came in, ideas were controlled by the elite — the people who could read and own and publish books — and ideas were frozen into place. The commoner no longer had the same role in creating and generating ideas.

But with the Internet, we commoners (people who believe in the commons!) have another chance. Elites have less and less control over ideas. We now have citizen journalists, citizen researchers, citizen philosophers.

And I think the Internet can spur a lot of face-to-face conversation. I know, I know — it cuts us off from each other as well. But it has a role to play and we need to build on it.

Some books may need to play a different role these days. Maybe they will be mainly an introduction to a larger conversation. I certainly hope that's the case here.

So I hope to hear from you. Better yet, bring a group of people together to talk about the ideas in this book and let me join in for a visit via Skype or Facetime. Just send me an email at cecile@cecileandrews.com and let's talk.

A book is certainly not the last word. And hopefully, no one will ever have the last word.

Chapter 1

Joy in the Other Fellow

Democracy, in the American tradition, has been defined by a simple morality: We Americans care about our fellow citizens, we act on that care and build trust, and we do our best not just for ourselves, our families, and our friends and neighbors, but for our country, for each other, for people we have never seen and never will see.

— George Lakoff and Glenn Smith, in "Why Democracy Is Public: The American Dream Beats the Nightmare"

Yes, we pay a lot of taxes, but we don't mind because it allows us to care for each other.

— unidentified Swedish citizen

A few years ago, something happened to me that I haven't been able to forget. It was no big deal, yet it has come to seem emblematic of so many of our problems.

What happened was this: My husband and I were turning left into the parking lot of a grocery store. As we turned, we got stuck blocking traffic, and we were faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, there was a parking place close by, but we could see another driver heading for it. On the other hand, we could see another slot she could take a few spaces away. Since we were blocking traffic, we slipped into the closer place, forcing the woman to take the other spot.

We got out of the car and were walking toward the entrance when the other driver started yelling at us. "You really had a lot of nerve taking my spot!"

My husband, wiser than I, just ignored her. But I tried to explain and apologize. "We're really sorry," I said, "but we were blocking traffic and could see there was another spot you could take." (I did not add, "as evidenced by the fact that you just parked there.")

"That was just plain rude," she yelled back.

I continued to try to explain, but then we arrived at the entrance and took our grocery carts. Grabbing hers she screamed, "Get out of my way, bitch!" and rammed into my cart.

Well, there we were. The doors slid open and all the lines behind the cashiers stopped in their tracks. They could hear every word, and they were all stunned.

The manager rushed over, asking if I was OK. I, of course, burst into tears.

Now, this incident wasn't really anything big. But the more I've thought about it, the more I've come to see how it signifies much that's wrong with our culture — in particular, our cut-throat competition, our sense that we should take whatever we want, regardless. The woman thought that the parking space was hers. She was there first and she had a right to it. She couldn't stand that she lost out. She should have won and she felt justified in being violent.

This is our culture. "Every man for himself!" "Get yours before anyone else does." We compete over everything: getting a parking spot, getting the best grades, getting the most money, having the most power. We want to win, often at any cost.

And what does that lead to? Last one standing! We're destroying ourselves and our planet. I don't need to elaborate on the problems of our no-holds-barred approach to life: climate change, environmental devastation, poverty, unhappiness, and wars.

We know we must change. We must understand that we need each other — we must learn to collaborate and care for each other. We need a new culture in which we realize that "we're all in this together." (I hesitated to use this phrase because it can sound like a cliché. I've chosen, instead, to see it as a rallying cry.)

Ultimately, that's what this book is about. *Changing our culture so that we care about each other and the planet.* Doing something about our selfishness and greed. Changing our cutthroat competitiveness by building more cooperation and collaboration. Creating a culture in which people care about the common good.

Hope

Part of the problem is that, at some level, we don't think there's hope. We've pretty much concluded that human beings are a failed species, that we're essentially selfish, and that there's nothing we can do about it. Certainly the things I've heard all my life make it difficult to feel hope — things like "survival of the fittest." Competing to win is what life is all about and always has been.

But in the past few years, a lot of scientists have been arguing that history shows that evolution favors cultures that trust and cooperate. Noted biologist E. O. Wilson, in his book *Social Conquest of Earth* (2012), says that evolution shows that groups that are cooperative are the groups that survive. Wilson bolsters his case by referring to Darwin's *Ascent of Man*, published 12 years after *The Origin of Species*, which argues that cooperation was the key to human evolution.

But wait — I thought Darwin talked about "survival of the fittest," which we have interpreted to mean that we can do anything, no matter the consequences, to get what we want. Actually, Darwin *didn't* use that phrase; apparently it was Herbert Spencer who coined it. Our early capitalists picked it up, with John D. Rockefeller referring to the conduct of business as "survival of the fittest." Rockefeller called it the law of

nature and a law of God. Andrew Carnegie, in an 1889 essay "The Gospel of Wealth," saw survival of the fittest as best for the human race.

So, it's in our American blood.

But Darwin said that evolution favored cooperation because "selfish and contentious people will not cohere, and without coherence nothing can be effected."

This is surprising, isn't it? It gives us hope that human beings *can* be cooperative and collaborative. In fact, there is a lot of evidence that supports this.

History

The most dramatic evidence comes from history. Apparently, when faced with disasters we turn to each other. We take care of each other. We saw it in England during World War II, in the US during the Great Depression, even during earthquakes and snowstorms. In her book, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* (2009), Rebecca Solnit tells the stories of disasters — from the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco to Hurricane Katrina and 9/11. Many of the stories come from people's own words, and in describing their experiences and emotions people used words like *euphoric* and *ecstatic* and *transformative*. What people felt in the disaster — more than fear and anxiety — was an astonishing caring and connection with others. She says that this capacity for community is an essential part of our nature kept buried by conventional society, and that disaster can allow something to emerge that has been there all the time.

As Solnit quotes one young woman in the San Francisco earthquake saying,

> Most of us since then have run the whole gamut of human emotions from glad to sad and back again, but underneath it all a new note is struck, a quiet bubbling joy is felt. It is that note that makes all our loss worth the while. It is the note of a millennial

> good fellowship.... In all the grand exodus ... everybody was your friend and you in turn everybody's friend. The individual, the isolated self was dead. The social self was regnant. Never even when the four walls of one's own room in a new city shall close around us again shall we sense the old lonesomeness shutting us off from our neighbors. Never again shall we feel singled out by fate for the hardships and ill luck that's going. And that is the sweetness and the gladness of the earthquake and the fire. Not of bravery, nor of strength, nor of a new city, but of a new inclusiveness ... the joy in the other fellow.

Institutional Change

That's it! How do we get people to feel "joy in the other fellow"? How can we turn to the cultivation of caring as one of the most important things we must do? A lot of recent research suggests that the institutions and policies we create can influence people to be more collaborative, cooperative, and caring.

For instance, Harvard law professor Yochai Benkler, in his book *The Penguin and the Leviathan: How Cooperation Triumphs over Self-Interest* (2011), even has some percentages. According to him, about 30 percent of the population behave as if they really are selfish. "Fully half of all people systematically, significantly, and predictably behave cooperatively." Most of us, he says, could go either way, depending on our surroundings. Some people are kind only when others are kind, and selfish when others are selfish. Some are committed "cooperators or altruists."

Benkler concludes that there has been practically no society in which the majority of people have been consistently selfish. Given the right conditions, people will cooperate and collaborate — of their own free will — to serve the collective good. We need to figure out the "levers" or "triggers" that will evoke cooperation and collaboration.

Essentially, it depends on the cultural norms and institutions. Do they encourage selfishness or caring? In the US we design our systems with the assumption that people are selfish, and that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Our institutions, from businesses to schools, are controlled from the top, with the assumption that the main reason people act is to get rewarded, usually by money. But research shows that systems that are hierarchical, punitive, and incentive-based are not as effective.

What we need, according to Benkler, is systems that focus on *connecting people and creating a sense of common purpose and identity*. We must bring people together in ways that evoke empathy, solidarity, fairness, and trust. The more people get a chance to cooperate, the more they believe in it and the more they do it. They begin to see themselves as cooperative people, and they break the self-fulfilling prophecy of greed and selfishness.

Benkler gives us real-life situations that illustrate this. For instance, apparently people are less likely to give blood when they are paid for it. Feeling that you are contributing is a greater reward than money. (In fact, there's long been evidence that shows that giving people extrinsic rewards for intrinsically motivated behavior can discourage the behavior.)

Benkler also tells the story of a Toyota plant that took over a failing GM car plant and turned it around because they went from an assembly line with every move scripted to a system where people worked in cooperative, democratic small groups.

So there are strong arguments that if you want change, you change the institutions.

And there's more support for this approach. Harvard professor of psychology Steven Pinker, in his book *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2011), argues that we live in the least violent time in human history. According to his research, we are increasingly less likely to die in war or in personal violence. In particular, he shows how things have changed in our life time. For instance, it is no longer acceptable

to lynch a Black man; it's no longer acceptable for a husband to beat his wife; it's no longer acceptable, for most of us, to spank our kids.

But why? He argues that it has to do with certain changes: First, a state monopoly on force made a difference. (By and large, we don't seek our own revenge, but use our courts.) In addition, the spread of commerce reduced wars. (Why kill off people who might buy your product?) Further, he thinks the invention of printing affected us because it spread progressive ideas, and novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Oliver Twist* evoked empathy about the plight of others. (I've often thought my social conscience was born in reading *Little Women*.) Finally, we've learned through the ages to use *reason*, and therefore we can think through the consequences of our behaviors and see that shooting the other person would not really benefit us in the long run.

I am particularly interested in the last two because these are two strategies we all can easily build on: evoking empathy and using reason. This is what I'll explore in this book: how to create opportunities for empathy and reason through conversation, community, sharing, education, and more. But with a difference — we don't have to wait for the experts, the elite, the most competitive. It's us. We can create new ways of carrying out these age-old traditions. Ways that are more participatory, inclusive, egalitarian, and enjoyable. We, the People! Not in our own backyards, but in our own living rooms.

So, there we have it — a biologist, a law professor, and a psychology professor arguing that our true nature is not based on competitive greed. But economists, the most traditional of the bunch, are weighing in as well, arguing that *a selfish, winner-take-all approach to life doesn't work as well as concern for the common good.*

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) economist Daron Acemoglu and Harvard political scientist James Robinson, in their book *Why Nations Fail* (2012), argue that throughout history nations *that were not economically and*

politically inclusive failed. If a small group of people at the top controls everything, both economically and politically, no one else has a reason for even trying. For instance, if the small farmer works harder and the increased wealth all goes to his boss, why should he do more work? If the citizen speaks up and is ignored, why should he keep trying? Countries that become too unequal will fail.

Authors Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, in their book *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger* (2009), develop this idea further. They show that in unequal societies there's more violence, mental illness, incarceration, obesity, unwed pregnancy — and, ultimately, shorter life expectancy. Even the rich person in the US doesn't live as long as the poorer person in Denmark. This is because inequality undermines social cohesion. In unequal societies people are less trusting and caring, more competitive and fearful. People become more isolated, stressed, and depressed — and unhappiness is catching.

So ultimately we must work for more wealth equality. But that's a long-term project, so in the meantime, we need to work at creating institutions that give people a taste of equality. We need to give people experiences of cooperation and collaboration. It's something that we can all do. All of us can join in to create community in our lives. In community people learn to cooperate, collaborate, and care. We need to remember the words the young woman wrote about the San Francisco earthquake. We need to work for a "new inclusiveness ... the joy in the other fellow."

A New Vision

So maybe things are more hopeful than most of us have come to believe. Yes, we believe that people are essentially selfish — that if you don't look out for yourself, nobody else will, that it's "every man for himself." This is certainly the philosophy that dominates our lives. But accepting this view is certain doom. It's a philosophy that benefits the wealthy and the powerful.

Why? Because it diminishes the hope that people have — the belief that we can come together and work with each other for change. If you believe that selfishness and greed are inevitable, why try to change things?

But there is hope because there is much evidence to show that human beings are not basically selfish and greedy. If we reward people only for competing, they will compete. But if we give them a chance to cooperate, they will cooperate. When they see that things get better when they collaborate, they'll collaborate more.

When they see that people care about each other, they'll change their belief system and become more hopeful. When people are hopeful, they're more likely to act for the common good. So a positive circle of change begins.

We need to change the way we think and at the same time change the institutions that make us think that way. We must create experiences that evoke empathy, solidarity, fairness, and trust, as Benkler suggests — experiences that also give us the opportunity to reflect and reason in a new, participatory way.

Let's explore how we can do this.