

2015 October Adam's summary of the conference

The end of the day before the conference, the Nature Center staff realized their only computer projector was broken. Julie Brandlen, the director of the center, drove to a different nature sanctuary and brought back a working projector, making the computer part of our conference much easier. Thank you, Julie, for helping us at the last minute.

Kathleen, Lillia and I set up the computer and the food. We used “Bullock”, a Dell Optiplex desktop tower to attach to the projector, and learned how to use the switch on the wall by the door to let down the screen—looks like a light switch, but the screen comes down when you push it. I opened all the upper shades with their smoothly-operating control chains, revealing changing leaves and a blue sky. I played with the projector distance from the screen to get the right size, did some focusing, and then connected the computer to the public Mass Audubon wireless network. Since it is a public network, I chose not to share any resources as a homegroup.

Kathleen figured out how to make coffee in the kitchen while I wrote a sign on a big whiteboard announcing the conference to people coming into the lobby. Jay soon joined us, and then Kati, Bill, and Trisha, and Orion. Marguerite and Ed joined us by telephone.

I'd like to improve our microphone situation for next year, and have some way that people can be heard well from their regular seats, and not have to have a “microphone seat”.

Orion spoke about the Boston Food Forest organization he has helped create. He took us out to the spot at the Nature Center where he and other volunteers have created a food forest, which is a carefully planned ecosystem where different food plants grow well together with little human tending required. He explained that his organization helps create food forests in a variety of venues, including abandoned lots owned by the city, spaces owned by religious organizations, and back yards in residences.

Each forest is managed by a stewardship council, and is created on workdays which double as forest gardening workshops. The goal is to create many of these forests and make them available as sources of fresh food for all who want it, and also be gathering places. He recounted how, when a terrible

event occurred near on of the food forests, residents gathered in the forest to mourn and heal.

Orion's organization is actively recruiting members and volunteers, who will have a wide variety of responsibilities, including bookkeeping, outreach, and volunteering in the gardens. He hopes the organization, funded by grants and membership fees, will grow into a permanent system that fosters food forests throughout Greater Boston. You can join, volunteer and learn more at BostonFoodForest.org.

Orion noted that his earlier work was as a policy analyst for Telus and the Institute for Policy Studies, and is a founder of JP NET, which has fostered many community projects, including the Egleston Square farmer's market. He notes that the food forest project gives him a chance to be involved close to the ground, while still keeping his eyes on the larger systemic issues.

Orion had to go, but invited us to get involved in his project, and expressed hope he could spend more time at next year's Waterlow conference.

Brad and Yehuda joined us, along with Wayne and Marlene.

Our next speaker was Ed Chancy, who spoke about how his parents helped him become an educated man, and avoid the pitfalls of resignation and rage. Born with cerebral palsy, which affected Ed's movement and speech since birth, Ed went to a special school. There he learned about a "cleavage" in people's attitudes toward people with disabilities—people born with a disability were treated differently than those who acquired one later. He noted that when teaching disabled kids, teachers often were "too soft" and "too hard"—being too permissive on one hand, and too harsh and unreasonably demanding on the other. His mother pushed his teachers to do a better job.

Ed found that his father's stories created in him a deep love of stories. Ed has come to believe in the vital importance of stories in making sense of one's life. Ed has met many teachers and co-workers in his life, and some were so hard to get along with that strategic retreat often made the most sense. But some teachers were lovely to him, including Jamie, who moved his class to a downstairs classroom so that Ed wouldn't have to make the perilous trip up the stairs with his crutches.

In his training as a reading teacher, Ed encountered Marianne Hall, who introduced him to the language experience method, which has the teacher elicit stories from kids, and then helping the kids edit them to improve their language and writing skills. Once again, he found stories a valuable tool for his growth and his students' growth.

Ed noted that supervising someone with a disability is challenging, and we talked about the difficulties and Ed and I have had working together. I noted Ed's extraordinary perseverance in dealing with the many obstacles we've had, particularly the poor internet service in his rural area.

Marlene talked about how she helped her business partner learn how capable kids with autism can be, by insisting that her students learn the full range of computer repair.

Brad pointed out the vital importance of thanking our teachers when they do a good job. Flowers are always a good idea.

Ed said school is often a bad place for kids, but you can sometimes make them "school-proof". Ed said the best thing you can possibly do for a kid is to find something that interests him.

Marguerite talked about her background, and noted that she grew up in workers co-op housing with many artists, and still keeps a connection to them. She always wanted to be an academic, and managed to navigate through a social work career to become a professor at Salem State.

Marguerite talked about the "so-called criminal justice system", noting that after years of struggle, the legislature is finally making some movements in the direction of badly needed reform. She noted that the exclusion of people with criminal records from housing projects and higher education was Bill Clinton and Joe Biden's work. She said we need to change this terrible policy.

Lillia pointed out the vital importance of having a place, besides prison, for troubled young people to live as they sort out their lives. I talked about the National Institute of Health (NIH) project described in Mad in America, a history of the treatment of schizophrenia in the United States. A young NIH researcher rented an apartment building, and hired friendly laymen to staff it. The staff had no mental health training. He then moved many patients

diagnosed with schizophrenia into this building, and the cure rate was amazing—these patients were getting well enough to go home. The project was cancelled because it did not use enough medication in its protocols.

Creating a safe place for people in trouble would help our society enormously. The positive side of the Boston State Hospital—the site where we are now meeting—echoes this: it offered a refuge, an asylum, for people with troubled minds. Lillia talked about how costly homelessness is to our society, and how desperately we need to solve the problem of insufficient housing and support for people going through rough times.

Marguerite talked about her work with the Mass. Bail Fund, and Kathleen noted that she and Kati volunteered for one of its precursors, the Women's Bail Fund. I talked about the gross injustice of the Baltimore City Jail—the intentional degradation of people who were innocent under American law. Marguerite says the Mass. justice system is antiquated and bad for people, but there is some movement now for pre-trial diversion, which might reduce our prison population. But she noted how interconnected the problems are in the system, and how people perceive efforts to fix the system as attacks on their livelihood.

I took this opportunity to introduce the life and work of Charlotte Waterlow, after whom the conference is named. Charlotte was a pioneer in teaching and writing about “global problems”—thinking of the difficulties we face as part of an interconnected “problematique”, as the Club of Rome termed it in the seventies. Her answer to the problem, fundamentally, was love—learning to love each other and work with each other. I pointed out that many people made the mistake of thinking Charlotte was dotty or naive—in fact, she was well-informed, a tough, hard thinker who knew perfectly well how evil people can be. Her optimism and cheerfulness was grounded deeply in her own experience as someone who grew from a confused and unhappy adolescent and young woman into a helpful and radiant adult.

I said that Charlotte attributed a lot of the problem to the hierarchical society based on male gender dominance. I noted that we are primates, and pecking order behavior is hard wired into us. Wayne disagreed, and said we have the capacity to co-operate, and that is deep in our nature.

Brad Baker and Yehuda talked about the Middle East, with Brad sharing a vision of water co-operatively managed among the Israelis and Palestinians.

Bill expressed skepticism at this manifestly preposterous idea—the Israelis would never work co-operatively with the Palestinians, whom they hate and mistrust—and the group talked about how preposterous visions can be transformed into mundane, satisfying reality. Yehuda pointed out that there is a great deal of co-operation among people, but rarely among politicians. I expressed my odd sense of delight at having to deal with bad leaders, and work with other people to confront them. Wayne wants to jail them.

Yehuda said how scare he is of the explosions he has witnessed close-hand in Israel. He said politicians are playing games, and this is why things don't get better. We wondered if the new generation might change things.

Brad said that what people want is safety, food and water. Being able to move water around can make new safe places, like the Dead Sea. The salt and people's waste can be used for fertilizer.

Brad then moved to the second part of his talk, about community gardening. He told the story of a Brandeis student who put a huge amount of work into organizing a housing project to do community gardening and got 0% response. Brad asked us for feedback. Kathleen suggested doing outreach by asking residents to TEACH gardening. Wayne suggested getting the children involved first, and then the grown ups will follow. Brad wants to get rid of the expensive useless lawns and replace with low-maintenance gardens, and points out that this will lead to a loss of \$100 billion to the lawn industry.

But in the spirit of “never say no unless you can say yes” (my shibboleth for parenting and politics), Brad wants to re-direct all those \$7/hour landscape workers to become urban forest gardeners.

Marlene pointed out that the key to community organizing is finding the “central person”—the person who knows everybody, and ally with her. I gave an example of this from William Whyte's Street Corner Society, his book about guys who hang out on the street corners in Boston's North End.

Brad said one of the most powerful things you can do is give someone something and say, you have to give this to someone. He gave us urban-grown radishes, and pointed out that broccoli greens taste delicious the first day after picking. Trisha told us about the “Buddha bums” in San Diego, and their efforts to evade the law and feed hungry people. We noted that

showing kids where the delicious food is will lead to lots of urban harvesting.

Our group then read aloud, person by person, each of the articles of the children's edition of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Liz Anker shared with us her work as a music educator for adults. She notes that our brains are plastic and capable of changing, and so she doesn't hesitate to push her students to change and learn. She led us through some stretches, some hisses and some shushes, and got us to notice how when we finish breathing out, it makes a vacuum and makes us breathe in. We do different kinds of breaths, in different parts of our body. Some breaths are in our belly, and with others, we raise our shoulders.

Liz told us about her training in Creative Aging. It wasn't, as she feared, a course in Oil of Olay, but an introduction to community arts engagement—helping community members get involved in all kinds of arts. We suggested some—storytelling, memoir writing, theatre, singing, watercolors, computer repair. Studies show that elders engaged in art have better health, need less medication, live longer, are less lonely, have fewer falls, have better morale and are happier.

Liz took this training and found work at the Harriet Tubman Settlement House, which provides a wide variety of activities for immigrants and other community members—Tai Chi, ballroom dancing, activities for kids. Liz proposed some songs to teach the elders, and the wise leaders of Harriet Tubman helped her learn that these elder didn't want “You are My Sunshine”, they wanted “You are the Sunshine of My Life”—hot Motown and show tunes, not goopy geriatric or children's songs. These people grew up dancing to jukeboxes, and they are learning the songs from new musicals from their kids.

Singing classes are portable, need little equipment, and have so many benefits for people. People new to English strengthen their language skills through singing. People in any physical condition can sing. People just out of the hospital can join a singing group and make those social connections which make such a difference for healing and support.

Wayne said that one of the really fun activities is writing new songs, or providing new words to old music. Kathleen, who is in an elder singing group with Liz, said that at her age, people tend to be less concerned about the perfection of the music, and instead throw themselves into the joy of it.

For Liz, leading elders in groups has also provided opportunities to practice skills that keep her synapses growing, including conducting and writing arrangements.

We ended the day's discussion by talking about the challenges of teaching people and learning from them. In reflecting on how difficult it would be to teach the 270,000 prison guards in California, I noted the rule of being a successful parent: don't say no (to one thing) unless you can say yes (to something else)—the energy has to go somewhere. We can say no to prisons, but we need to say yes to productive, well-paid work by the prison guards who are liberated by closing the prisons.

Marlene talked about being in a serious car accident, and wanting to communicate with the people in the other car. While we cautioned her not to make herself vulnerable to people who might take advantage of her, we affirmed her instinct to want to have a human connection with the people involved. I described the traditional society criminal justice approach described by Jared Diamond in The World Before Yesterday where regaining harmony and connection after a tragedy is far more important than placing blame and getting money.

Brad said we need to teach students how to thank their teachers. Wayne said we need to teach students the skills they need in the world—for example, how to run a meeting. I noted that John Rowse, a local teacher who teaches boatbuilding to elementary students, thinks that if each teacher were allowed to teach what they really care about, schools would be a lot better.

Wayne talked about a prison in Mexico that was run, successfully, by the prisoners.

Sunday, October 18th:

Claude Solnik joined us by telephone. Hadassah, Kati, Kathleen, Carl, Mary, Emil, Wayne and Marlene arrived, and Ben and Marilyn joined us later.

Claude told us about Victoria Woodhull, the first female candidate for president, one of the first female stockbrokers, and the woman who testified in Congress that women's right to vote was guaranteed by the due process clause of the 14th amendment. Claude, who wrote and produced a play about Victoria, which I saw and loved, talked about his growing ability to successfully stage plays and get collaborators to make the productions possible.

Kathleen and Kati told us about their volunteer work many years ago at the Boston Movement Bail Fund, and about its educational mission to teach about bail injustices, and about injustice and discrimination in the criminal justice system.

Marlene introduced us to the idea of natural burials. She had a friend whose husband was buried in South Carolina surrounded by rose petals and without a coffin or embalming. She notes that Mt. Auburn and Forest Hills are beginning to offer this options although they need to add the cement frame to prevent roll-overs, and the process can be expensive even when no funeral home is involved -- \$1000 to \$3000 and more for the land, plus burial labor fees, plus ongoing maintenance. A place in Wayland that offers natural burial is said to be quite beautiful. Marlene will learn more about the laws and costs for next year's conference.

I sang Lee Hayes's song about being composted at the end of life. Kathleen talked about her friends who built a coffin for a friend who had died and took the friend by rental van to Forest Hills cemetery for burial.

Wayne talked about burial societies and other co-operative ways of handling burial issues. Jews often have a team that washes the dead person's body and puts on the burial shroud.

I talked with the group about Caroline Bridgman-Rees and her late husband Tom. Caroline was one of the founders of the conference, but could not join us this weekend. I described Tom's transformation from a right-wing supporter of the Viet Nam war to a founding member of Veterans for Peace and a champion debater against the war. I read Caroline Bridgman-Rees' essay, "The Gifts of Charlotte Waterlow" and Charlotte Waterlow's "Grow Up or Blow Up". I think this was the first time we've read a full document of Charlotte's at the conference, and it was both impressive and disturbing how relevant in 2015 was this document from 1980, in its discussion of the

extremely dangerous nuclear arms situation, and the role of deranged masculinity in creating it.

Carl and Mary presented and demonstrated their method of attentive, non-judgmental listening and its ability to create a safe place for a person to express strong negative emotions, and thus no longer have to repress and contain them. We broke up into partners and listened without interruption to the other, and then switched roles. Carl noted how powerful this approach is, and cautioned us to use it wisely, as part of our repertoire, but only when there is strong trust and mutual respect. Carl and Mary talked about white privilege and other social pathologies, and how recognizing and thinking about them can help us improve. Mary talked about the physiology of emotions, for example, fear bringing out trembling and cold sweat, while anger brings out hot perspiration. She noted that people often interrupt people who are crying, thinking that crying is the pain, whereas crying is healing from the pain.

Hadassah asked, where does it come from that white men can't have their feelings?

Marlene quoted Eleanor Roosevelt—don't give them the power to hurt you. I noted that closing off one's emotions can give you a temporary advantage in a power struggle. Wayne said that the listener should be someone neutral, but I noted how useful it was to express my anger at a person who was distantly but definitely connected to the people who hurt me, and Mary picked up on that person's ability to take the anger and not run away from it. Mary told the story of a woman who talked about her sexuality and move towards homosexuality in front of a class that had been a haven for homophobic jokes and remarks—they listened silently and respectfully, and the jokes stopped.

Mary and Carl also told of a white woman who didn't understand why the black people in the class were angry at her. Mary helped a student in that class express his feelings to her, which helped her understand and was a step towards healing.

Wayne spoke about his work as a board member of the Harvest food co-op. He opened by pointing out that for the US, the vast military buildup during the Cold War was a deliberate strategy to bankrupt the Soviet Union. Wayne said that the US was better able to overexploit its workers because of our

economic and political culture and thus we were able to outspend and outproduce the Soviet Union, forcing it into economic ruin as it chose to compete with us on arms. Wayne compared this to the effort by commercial grocery stores to discourage member work programs in co-ops, since it is member work that gives a co-op its only advantage over a commercial store.

Wayne explained that there are two streams of thought in the co-op movement:

1. the general manager knows best. The job of the board and the members is to support the general manager and follow her decisions.
2. the members, their involvement and their wishes are at the center of the co-op.

People rarely discuss these streams, which plays into the hands of the “general manager knows best:” camp.

Harvest has followed path 1 for a long time, with feeling. Wayne says that co-ops that have followed this path usually fail. For example, the Consumer Co-op of Berkeley, California was founded in the 30’s. In the 80’s, its management decreed the opening of a store in a neighborhood where it was not welcome, and this led to the collapse of the whole co-op.

Wayne points out that it is only member involvement that allows a co-op to compete successfully against commercial stores. The vast free labor that members provide give a co-op its attractive features, its well-thought out strategies, and the camaraderie and co-ordination that a commercial outfit, serving mostly atomized shoppers, cannot match.

We noted that membership has dropped off dramatically, particularly since the co-op abolished its member work program. Wayne points out that member work need not be in the store itself—members can help with sourcing, outreach, educational programs and much more.

Brad suggested that he help the two former members of the group rejoin and vote for Wayne to be on the board of directors, and these new members would then help others to get involved.

I gave the last talk of the day, on co-worker theology. I believe that history shows there cannot be an interventionist, sane God, since no sane being would allow the rotten stuff that has gone on. Brad helped me clarify my thinking, with a simple gesture of two hands meshing like living gears: Godliness emerges from the relations between two people. Defining co-worker very broadly, I say that our relationships with our co-workers (friends, bosses, presidents, grocers etc.) give us a wonderful opportunity to practice creating and shaping Godliness. I say further that this is our special responsibility as living beings, and the universe needs us. I work hard to find joy in this practice, especially when practicing with people who weird me out or get on my nerves, at first.

We cleaned up in record time and were out by 4 pm on the dot. Ben, Marilyn and I went on a nature walk, and picked some greens from the forest garden.