

# The Role of Conversation in Evolution

by Tom Atlee

*Evolution and conversation are close cousins. Both are "process" -- and they embody each other.*

*Evolution is the ongoing process of change. If we want to consciously and intentionally change our social systems, we need to talk together about it. The more inclusive, wise and productive our conversations are, the more powerful and positive the changes will be. It is no accident that the conversational dimension of our work is usually called "process".*

*Conversation is our way of being in process and evolving together.*

*Given the many crises that are emerging today, high quality conversation is an essential evolutionary force.*

## EVOLUTION IS HAPPENING NOW

Evolution is about change. Anyone doing social change work, anyone trying to improve conditions, anyone trying to empower, succeed, innovate, heal, strengthen, renew, transform, enlighten -- or even conquer or destroy -- is engaged in evolutionary work.

Ultimately change is happening all the time -- and we're all involved -- whether we notice it or not, whether we want it or not. Some very stable-seeming things -- like mountains and stars -- are changing in ways or at speeds we cannot easily see, or are made up of a dance of smaller changes. Furthermore, evolution doesn't stop: Changes over here in my world evoke changes over there in yours. We keep striving to get to a place that is more comfortable, more enjoyable, more successful, more whole -- changing things for everyone else as we do. All the little changes in our personal lives add up to bigger changes in our shared world -- just look at climate change for a vivid example. Those big changes then influence our personal lives, which shape our neighbors, the economy, and the future of our planet....

We are on a cusp of unprecedented crises caused by the appalling obliviousness with which we use our awesome collective power. With climate change, extreme economic imbalances, the degradation of democracy, dangerous technological developments and many other dangers and collective stupidities, we're rapidly moving into a 'change or die' situation. These crises will bring changes we can barely imagine. We have brought ourselves to a brink of both calamity and transcendence at a global level. Business-as-usual -- the source of our security -- is now becoming ever more clearly The Problem. So we find ourselves blessed/cursed (both!) with a marriage of opportunity and necessity:

We can and we must transform ourselves and our social systems into a truly wise force for conscious evolution -- a whole new way of being a civilization.

That is why we are here. It is the next chapter of our evolutionary story.

The changes we need involve developing our collective intelligence, consciousness and wisdom to transform our thinking and our social systems. Dialogue, deliberation, and other powerful forms of conversation have a tremendous role to play in that. Conversation is the primary way we humans engage in conscious collective transformation -- replacing the other primary way: violence and domination. That's the road out. And the kinds of collective breakthroughs that are possible through high quality conversation look an awful lot like the raw materials for conscious evolutionary leaps.

## THE CONVERSATIONAL NATURE OF EVOLUTION

So we need conversation for human evolution. But there's a bigger picture. As science writer Connie Barlow says, "The best metaphor I have found to describe evolution, is conversation. Evolution is like a big conversation." In fact, all the complex interactions of the natural universe are like a big conversation. In a sense, the conversations we humans have are simply extensions of this far vaster conversation that has been going on for billions of years.

A basic pattern we see over and over in the history of the universe is that diverse entities - - living together in information-rich environments filled with challenge and support -- tend to interact in ways that generate new patterns over time. Often those interactions lead these entities to form novel collective entities that interact at entirely new levels. As the Great Story of evolution proceeds, this coming together and interacting in new forms becomes more inclusive, complex, and sophisticated.

This particular process started more than 10 billion years ago as vast clouds of invisible hydrogen gas coalesced into starless galaxies within which gravitational interactions gave sudden birth to stars, which lit up the void. From that point, stars were home to powerfully interactive forces that have continuously brought forth the chemicals that are the building blocks of planets and life. In the primal Earth's information-rich environments filled with challenges and supports, some of those chemicals became cells, which joined together into more complex cells (an evolutionary leap triggered by Earth's first and worst pollution crisis -- the oxidation of the atmosphere!), and soon those cells formed colonies that developed into multi-cellular organisms -- and those evolved into swarming ecosystems and wave after wave of new varieties of plants and animals. In each wave, some new, remarkable way of being together showed up.

Any careful review of the evolutionary story reveals this direction -- towards increasingly inclusive and complex cooperative arrangements in which the participating life forms live or die, succeed or fail, together. That process has continued right into the evolution of human culture, with cooperation happening first at family and clan levels, then tribes and

local empires, and then countries and global corporations, organizations, and networks. We face the challenge today of crafting increasingly inclusive, sophisticated and wise worldwide cooperative systems, because it is becoming increasingly clear that we are all going to make it or crash together as a planet.

So evolution is a form of conversation -- and conversation is a form of evolution. I mentioned the pattern of diverse entities changing because they interact in an information-rich environment filled with challenges and supports. That describes us, walking/talking our way towards becoming a branch of evolution that is -- newly and powerfully -- conscious of itself.

E-volve comes from "to roll out". Con-verse comes from "to turn together." We can rightly say that -- as we turn together in conversation, we become the evolution we've been waiting for.

## RESPONSIVENESS, FITNESS, AND INTELLIGENCE

Underlying both evolution and conversation is intelligence -- responsiveness to circumstances -- the ability to observe what's going on, sort it out usefully and, based on that, behave appropriately for the circumstances. Organisms evolve because their environment has changed: Those that don't adapt get selected out, leaving behind whoever managed to succeed in the new environment. This is a rough but extremely workable form of intelligence, of finding out what works -- at least at the collective level (it is often pretty harsh on individuals!).

Conversational evolution is more subtle and less dire: In high quality conversation, our ideas, our relationships, our feelings, our sense of possibility can all shift because we see things differently after talking with people who are different from us. If our differences reflect the diversity involved in the system or situation we are talking about, then the shifts we make reflect the complex realities we face. This enables us to create new understandings and options that actually make deeper, broader sense. Together we are able to respond to the crises we face with greater comprehension, wisdom, and shared resourcefulness.

This is exactly what is needed to address the evolutionary challenges we face as a civilization.

So conscious evolution is a conscious search for -- and adaptation of -- wiser forms of fitness in a changing environment. What is going on in that search for fitness?

## SOME DYNAMICS IN THE SEARCH FOR FITNESS

There are three modes of interacting with our environment that add up to fitness, each of which makes sense in different circumstances. These are novelty, maintenance, and

incremental improvement. I will explore them below -- and also the role of intelligence as a guide for the search, and the role of community and awareness as two vital supports for all three modes in human systems. For all six of these factors, I will offer a few processes and practices that exemplify or further them.

**NOVELTY/CREATIVITY** - Many people think this is what evolution is all about. This mode of engagement involves newness and the bringing forth of newness. It includes innovation, originality, breakthrough, emergence, and exciting stimulation of all kinds. However, it may also be associated with uncertainty, risk, unfamiliarity, disturbance, chaos, and dissonance. In extreme cases, it involves the discontinuities of crisis, catastrophe, and breakdown caused by the appearance of a challenge for which we are unprepared and thus clears the way (often painfully) for a new order.

Novel, creative dynamics are especially appropriate when the environment (including our internal environment!) changes rapidly and requires rapid changes in our own life patterns to maintain our "fit". Creative chaos laps at the shores of all systems, tossing novel developments and challenges into life whether or not it fits the needs of the systems involved. As long as a system is healthy and adaptable, it can successfully ignore these challenges -- at least for a while. But when the system starts to malfunction, the more it resists change, the more insistent and successful the creative challenges become.

Some of the processes and practices that evoke deeply creative responses to life include transformational mediation, choice creating (associated with Dynamic Facilitation), brainstorming, Presencing (pioneered by Otto Scharmer, and its companion practice of "listening into the middle"), and Appreciative Inquiry. Also processes that work with "edges" (like Arnold Mindell's Process Work) or that explicitly engage "The Other" (like diversity dialogues) or "welcome the stranger" (like Open Space) present a level of challenge that invites the emergence of new understandings, relationships, and possibilities.

**STABILITY/MAINTENANCE** - The evolutionary heart of this mode of engagement is *survival*. This mode focuses on conserving, adjusting, maintaining order or health, staying the course or getting back on course, and maintaining a level of predictability. This is the essence of sustainability, being able to maintain some kind of continuity. While at first, many people interested in change may see stability as anathema, it is crucial to a healthy, sane existence. However challenging the circumstances, knowing the sun will rise in the morning and set in the evening, for example, allows for some predictability! Maintenance provides the order that balances -- and resists -- the chaos of creativity. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" Here we also find the dynamics of balance: If a factor shifts a bit too much in one direction, shift it back. Maintenance factors are intrinsic to any system's ability to sustain its identity and structure. If it didn't resist change it would dissolve. This dynamic tension between order and chaos is a constant factor in life. Their dance moves this way and that way, depending on circumstances, with the balancing dynamics attempting to keep the dance from going too far toward either extreme.

Conservative efforts to maintain order are especially appropriate when things are going well. "Don't change anything." What's going well, however, may look different to

different people, or at different timescales. Often the effort to maintain order involves making things look better than they are, or ignoring or denying unsettling energies that are bubbling under the surface. The broader and deeper the state of wellness, the more appropriate are the stabilizing energies.

Some of the healthy processes and practices that help sustain what's working are shared purpose, trust-building, agreed-upon values, validation, training, discussion, negotiation, mediation, and deliberation. Suppression may also work, but only temporarily, and with some nasty side-effects that tend to lead to systemic breakdown if carried on too long.

**INCREMENTAL IMPROVEMENT** - Between maintaining stability and all-out breakthrough is the progressive journey of slow change, little enhancements and reforms, adding a few bells and whistles, building-on just enough improvement to keep stability fresh and the revolutionaries at bay. We all do this in our lives, and markets specialize in arguably progressive versions of it. Each slight improvement stands on the shoulders of the last.

Much of evolution actually happens through incremental change, punctuated by the extreme evolutionary leaps characterized by creative novelty. In today's society, an incredible amount of change happens -- largely initiated by novel technologies -- without constituting a revolution in the basic assumptions of the culture. However, biological and cultural evolution tells us that incremental changes in an isolated population can add up to total shift (e.g., the emergence of a new species or language) over time. As certain populations lag or surge ahead in financial wealth, in adopting new means of communication, or in recognizing emerging trends and technologies, they can become essentially isolated from each other, vastly speeding up major shifts and discontinuities in society.

Some of the processes that support incremental improvement are Quality Circles, performance rewards, deliberation, evaluation reviews, and the full range of problem-solving techniques.

**INTELLIGENCE** decides which of these three modes is appropriate at any given time. In groups, organizations, and societies, collective intelligence decides when and where creativity, problem-solving, and maintenance actions will most serve survival and success. The core of intelligence -- both individual and collective -- is the ability to respond, to learn, to do what's appropriate. After all, what we want is a productive fit with our environment; we want to respond in ways that make sense. When we respond in ways that don't make sense, we call it a mistake. If we continue to make mistakes, we call that stupidity. On the other hand, intelligence that is very broad, deep, far-seeing, nuanced, and appropriate for both current and long-term needs is called "wise".

As noted above, intelligence -- responsiveness to circumstances -- is common to both evolution and conversation. It is present in all of the above three dynamics whenever they are applied appropriately. To a certain extent, they can be applied from above and outside the situation at hand. But the more complex a situation or system is, the more

advisable it becomes to access the intelligence that is intrinsic in the situation or system itself.

Processes and practices that are good for accessing the intelligence of the system -- and therefore can be used to stimulate creativity, conservation, or incremental progress, as appropriate to the system -- include whole-system approaches like Open Space, Future Search, and World Café, as well as deep interpersonal methods like Nonviolent Communication.

To support the search for fitness in groups, organizations, and societies -- that is, to support collective intelligence -- we need awareness and community. At any given moment in any given situation both are present to some extent. With luck -- and facilitation or outside wisdom -- there will be enough collective intelligence to notice where more awareness and community are needed.

AWARENESS includes consciousness, knowledge, understanding, insight, self-awareness, systems thinking, wisdom and more. Generically, it means simply the ability to notice and be present with what is. More specifically, it can mean awareness OF particular dynamics, facts, or realities.

Evolutionarily, awareness can be said to have started with the first cells that were sensitive to light, sound and chemicals in their environments. Awareness has expanded to include very sophisticated senses, instruments that extend those senses (e.g., telescopes and computers), and minds that can process it all into meaning. In spiritual terms, awareness reaches beyond our usual senses deep into the subtle dynamics that generate thoughts, feelings, and realities. Although over evolutionary time, more diverse modes of awareness have shown up, the most important evolutionary truth about awareness is that it needs to be appropriate to our needs, helping us respond. Yet sometimes awareness can overwhelm our ability to respond. Part of our evolutionary challenge is to expand both our awareness AND our ability to respond -- including greater tolerance of chaos, uncertainty, dissonance, etc., to enable us to just BE with what is, so that appropriate responses can surface at the appropriate time.

Some of the processes and practices that can enhance different kinds of awareness include Bohm Dialogue, T-Groups, meditation, therapeutic dialogue, diversity dialogues, journaling, knowledge systems (often online), ritual, market research, and education.

COMMUNITY is the invisible web that binds us together. As our current social system has caused us to fragment into many disparate, self-interested subcultures, this web of connection has largely dissolved. Through conversation, we are beginning to consciously re-weave the web, bringing it radiantly to light. We are doing this through mindful, inclusive conversations such that the actual and perceived coherence and connectivity of human collectives consciously come together without loss of precious individuality and diversity. Community is the human form of what Peggy Holman calls "differentiated wholeness." To have conscious collective intelligence we need to both be uniquely

ourselves *and* aware of ourselves as a collective, sustaining our collective being through the aliveness of our shared bonds and purposes. Community involves the vulnerability that opens us to each other, and the safety to translate that vulnerability into trust. It also involves various forms of common ground -- shared language, culture, experience, tolerance, intentions, decision-making processes -- even as it leaves enough space for dissonance to allow for our differences and for the emergence of challenges and novelty when needed.

Among the processes and practices that serve community-building are story-sharing, diversity dialogues, council circle, ritual, and visioning.

## CONCLUSION

Now that it is obvious to many of us that today's trajectory of unconscious evolution is taking us straight towards a precipice of catastrophe and possible extinction, we might with good reason orient ourselves towards conscious evolution. That evolution will involve (and is involving) the transformation of our consciousness and our social systems -- each of which profoundly affects the other, making both good starting points for change.

Wherever we begin, conversation is an essential strategic resource, given its powerful role as a catalyst for conscious co-evolution. This fact is especially important because crises set the stage for rapid evolution -- and we will soon have an abundance of crises. Since we need a healthy dose of rapid evolution soon, our immediate future seems rich with opportunities to apply our collective consciousness and intelligence to transforming our world in high quality conversation.

We know that we need processes that help us sustain ourselves and succeed as we work to preserve and reform our lives and institutions. But in times like these, we most urgently need processes which draw out the creative initiative, collective intelligence and wisdom latent in our groups, organizations, communities, and whole societies -- to say nothing of worldwide networks and beyond. We have such processes, and are rapidly creating more.

Who needs to talk to whom about what, in what way, for breakthroughs to occur? This is a question we can use to convene strategic evolutionary conversations. Our answers to this question can guide us in making a gentle, powerful difference at every level, in every sector.

Ultimately, if we make a good habit of all this, as a worldwide culture, we can become the first consciously evolving civilization in history.

Not bad for a species that looked like it was on the way out with a bang, fire and ice.