

Wisdom Conversation, October 2017

Where can the green songs grow?

Sharing perspectives on regeneration for our broken world

By Janet Salisbury, A Chorus of Women

Our purpose

In October 2017 A Chorus of Women and the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture cohosted a day-long 'wisdom conversation' with 22 participants to share ideas about the great urgent ethical questions of our time. We explored the question of how civil society can 'grow' the sort of caring, regenerative wisdom that we know so well in our family lives but which is elusive among the noise and competing interests of politics, economics, business and organisational posturing that disastrously dominate too much day-to-day decision making.

By bringing together people with different cultural, disciplinary and generational perspectives, we were seeking a broader, more open and deeper experience than is usually possible in public forums, or when people stay in siloes – whether they be sciences, the arts, social services, business, government, or religious, cultural and other perspectives.

The theme and invitation

To set the scene, we carefully developed a theme question and invitation for the day that expressed our own sense of unknowing and urgent longing for wisdom that serves the common good. '*Where can the green songs grow? Sharing perspectives on regeneration for our broken world*' was a broad enough question to allow a diverse group to collaborate in generating new insights. Its rich imagery brought potential for sharing grief and firing creative thinking. The theme was further explained in a 1-page [invitation](#).

Invitees engaged easily with the theme. The metaphor of green songs clearly sparked the imagination, was referenced in many of the reflections (see below), and formed an anchor point for the day's dialogue as well as artistic expression. The concepts of regeneration and our broken world also resonated powerfully with participants.

Who came?

We invited 'thinkers' from a cross-section of disciplines, community interests, cultural, spiritual and political backgrounds, with varied ages and a balance of men and women. The 14 women and 8 men, aged from 30s to 80s, included scientists and social scientists of different disciplines, a psychotherapist, business people, artists, a former politician, former public servants, a farmer, a journalist, community activists, an Indigenous woman, and people with diverse religious affiliations. Some members of the group had met before and knew each other well; others were meeting for the first time. Restricting the number of people and allowing a full day for conversation both contributed to the depth of connection achieved. A full list of participants and their bios are in the [program](#).

Reflections

We invited those who accepted our invitation to write a short (approximately 500-word) reflection on the theme. All the participants submitted their reflections in time for them to be circulated and read before the day.

When Professor Will Steffen, a long-term colleague of A Chorus of Women, was unable to attend we also invited him to write a reflection. He immediately penned a challenging and personal reflection on the theme, which we sent to other invitees as an inspiring example. The participants' reflections included a diverse range

of responses. These were largely of a personal, reflective nature, rather than speaking from a place of 'expertise'. They included poetry, street art, personal stories, cultural stories, thoughts on policy, and much more. Reading them, we knew we had a very exciting day on our hands! And the group arrived with a sense of preparation and anticipation, plus a degree of already 'knowing' something of each other. This meant that from the start, we were able to drop into a deep discussion, without the usual preliminary politeness and feeling the way into the group.

Process and facilitation

The conversation was held in the ACC&C Pavilion, which is a light and airy space with pleasant internal ambience and an outlook to the Canberra landscape. Participants were seated in a single circle. The conversation was jointly facilitated by Janet Salisbury (A Chorus of Women) and Stephen Pickard (Director, ACC&C) who planned a program that shaped the day. This remained flexible, allowing participants to be involved in decisions about the ultimate flow of conversation.

Facilitated circle discussion was alternated during the morning with a deepening approach using a talking piece¹. After informal conversations over lunch there was a short session of small group (breakout) discussion before further whole group, circle discussion for the remainder of the afternoon.

The conversation

After a heartfelt acknowledgement of country² and introductions, the program was designed to facilitate a flow of emotional and intellectual energy in relation to the theme question:

- **Connecting to our shared purpose**
- **Opening and exploring**
- **Deepening**
- **Gathering**
- **Moving forward**

Connecting to our shared purpose

As the participants had all read each other's reflections and bios, we did not have a formal 'check in' for each participant. To connect the group with the day's purposes, several women performed 'The Web'.³ This song was part of *Web song*, a performance and ceremony work that A Chorus of Women developed after the 2003 Canberra bushfires. The devastating nature of the fires was a reminder of the conflagration of war and other cataclysmic scenarios that we fear might result from a broken world. But the community of Canberra responded – as healthy communities do – with an outpouring of help and love for those affected. And new green shoots quickly appeared in the burnt out bush, renewing the cycle of hope and optimism through regeneration. Elizabeth Cameron Dalman interpreted the song in dance.

*After the fire
After all the death
Sorrow's black lace
binds the grieving lovers*

*Then swell the green songs
Lovers' lays and lullabies*

¹ In this approach participants who want to speak pick up the talking piece from the centre of the circle and return it to the middle when finished talking. This has the effect of slowing the conversation down and helping people to be more thoughtful about when to make their contribution. A member of the circle also acts as 'guardian' to notice emotional shifts in the group which might need a moment of reflection (The Circle Way, see below).

² Sarah Stitt read the beautiful poem 'Acknowledgement of country' by Canberra poet Hazel Hall

³ Words & music Glenda Cloughley, 2004, rearranged for the Wisdom Conversation ensemble.

*Weaving women
singing up renewal*

(Extract – the full text is in the [program](#))

Participants reflected in small groups for a few minutes on what the presentation had raised in them.

Opening and exploring

Here we explored themes from the reflections and other emerging thoughts in an open and ideas-based way; not yet seeking solutions. We looked together at the challenge from Will Steffen and some quotes from other reflections that expressed feelings of lament, fear and longing for change:

- As an earthling I walk the boundary between fear and hope.
- We are at war with the planet and it is growing restive – a monster looking us in the eye.
- Is it fair to suggest that in our middle-classness we have become smug, complacent, self-centred or selfish?
- Our news is dominated by stories which fill us with horror, anguish and anger and rightly so. We feel impotent.
- It must hurt God to see us harm His creation. Christian thinking and theology on how we should consider the care and use of the environment has been disappointing.
- Incremental change is not fast enough: we need massive, step changes.

Participants came to this conversation knowing that others were equally concerned, so were able to express deeper feelings from the outset. This first session opened with heartfelt expressions of frustration about why we could not do more to prevent the appalling social inequality and environmental problems that concern us. This brought up memories of difficulties in past unresolved issues, feelings of disempowerment and weakness. These more negative feelings were countered by longings to nurture the positive actions happening in the community and within each other (the green shoots). It is striking from the audio recording and participants' comments that there was great trust and openness in the room from the outset. Some noted that they had not previously experienced this so early in a gathering where many of the group were strangers to each other.

Individuals noted these and other themes from the first session on a whiteboard over coffee and explored a little further before moving on to the next session.

Deepening

In this session, we invited participants to connect more consciously with the quality of wisdom and where it might be found. We used a smooth river rock from near Braidwood as the talking piece. To connect us with the theme of wisdom, Sarah Stitt read her reflection about wisdom:

I believe that wisdom abounds.

There is so much wisdom, so much – from the smallest child to our oldest grandparent, aunt and uncle.

Somewhere in between it is lost. Right now, the world appears to have lost its wisdom.

I know that we have the wisdom. Please let it be heard and allow us to act upon it.

(Extract – full text is in the [reflections document](#).)

All in our seats. Deep silence. Some tears. After a while, Sarah suggested a group hug. Someone asked for some music. Chorus sang '*Open the doors of the chambers, of your hearts, Open your minds to our song*'.⁴

Back in our seats – and the ideas began to flow.

- Research by Common Cause has shown that people with different values have more in common than we might think. We need to look for it.

⁴ *Lament*, by Glenda Cloughley and Judith Clingan; A Chorus of Women's first song, Parliament House, 18 March 2003

- There is much wisdom that comes from outside human nature: from the Earth, from nature, and from some unexpected life forms, including microbes.
- We need a closer connection to the Earth – the sort of connection that you get when you go barefoot. Barefoot farmers, barefoot dancers, ‘barefoot’ as a metaphor for open to connection. Connection to the Earth, connection to each other.
- Stories are very important to internalise wisdom. When people truly listen and become part of a story that is related to their situation, they are changed. Settler people can be changed by Aboriginal dreaming stories – but they also have their own stories from Europe and other places of origin that reveal deep truths and can help us find wisdom.
- Quiet, rest and listening are essential to building wisdom (day of rest, or Sabbath).

Being open and trusting across cultures can reveal gaps in our understanding but there was enough trust in the room for an Indigenous participant to explain that she could not pick up the rock because it was from someone else’s country. She said it was OK – she had communed with the rock. But the group felt unsettled – what to do? So we decided to change the signal for talking to touching the plant that was on the central table – and then again when finished.

Gathering

After lunch, Chorus women sang again, with more urgency about ‘Where can the green songs grow’⁵:

THE ORACLE

*Black dread will bloom in heart’s red blood
Till green songs grow in the gaze of love*

CHORUS OF CITIZENS

*Why? Why? Why? Why?
Why don’t our leaders fix the problem?
Why don’t scientists and engineers?
Why won’t the politicians listen to our worries?
How could green songs stop the climate changing?
There’s not enough power in kindly hands
Not enough care for mothers and Earth
The climate is changing O Earth! Our children!
Where can we plant the seed of our love?*
(Extract – full text is in the [program](#))

We reconvened in small groups to continue our deepening conversations, and then moved back into the larger circle to explore these questions:

- What idea seeds are there from the morning?
- What shoots are showing?
- Where is the fertile ground?
- What might prevent growth?

Some themes and green shoots:

Changing our stories. The dominant Christian narrative has been about individualism, with a human-centric view of creation. But this is now changing to a holistic acceptance of the whole of creation. There has also been a change in intellectual framing generally, to give nature a voice.

Remembering our indigeneity. We all have Indigenous pasts. Artefacts from about 30,000 – 6500 years ago show that Indigenous Europeans had strong generative connections with the Earth.

⁵Words and music Glenda Cloughley, 2008-12 from ‘The Gifts of the Furies’

Acknowledging trauma. From around 4500 BCE, peaceable European settlements seem to have been overtaken by warrior-king cultures with traumatised and traumatising organisational structures based on fear and destruction (degenerative). These structures still persist today.

Reactivating regenerative ways of life. Even under traumatised institutional structures, the healthy, regenerative ways of life carry on in families and communities. Our work is to try to reactivate these cultures into our institutional systems. This could be helped by interdisciplinary collaborations like this one.

Finding new ways of cooperation. The altruism of open systems in software is a great example of a green shoot because it is a new form of 'commons', which can be shared by all.

Making times for quiet, rest and reflection.

Some in the group were frustrated by a perceived disconnect between all the stories and richness of the conversation, and the urgency of the need for big system change and not fiddling around the edges. Others were more content with the need to do it slowly and quietly, working on themselves to be the best people they can be.

Moving forward

In the last session of the day participants explored what they felt wanted to happen as a result of the conversation. Some significant threads emerged:

- While the gathering had sat in a very serious and sometimes difficult conversation, there was a feeling that something special had happened and there was a real enthusiasm for everyone to come together again sooner, rather than later, or at least stay in touch. A sense of hope and urgency.
- Could also do other outreach work as a group or individually that takes the same or similar conversations to different places /people.
- Some caution that we also need to develop our core ideas further so that we are not just perpetuating the system that is currently broken.
- A sense of wanting to provide a safe space for difficult conversations – including for people working in politics — affirming what we value but debriefing about complex or painful issues and developing confidence in following visions – even when it means taking risks.

Everyone agreed about the possibility of working towards a more significant event later next year (possibly associated with the ACC&C 20th anniversary) that builds on what we have done and provides a date around which to frame other activities during the year.

We ended the day singing together. Johanna McBride taught her song 'Ubuntu' – much loved by A Chorus of Women – whose words express the Zulu philosophy that united South Africa in overthrowing apartheid.

I am who I am because of you

We are who we are because of each other

Ubuntu

Reporting

Some participants recast their reflections in light of the conversation. All were given the option to have them made public or not.

To aid reporting after the day, we recorded each session (with agreement from the participants). This freed those in the room from note-taking to inform a later report. We have transcribed the recordings and added some other facilitator notes from the day, which is a fascinating record of the very rich conversation.

We welcome feedback and further articles on this conversation from those present, as well as reports of any other conversations held using this approach, or other follow up activities by group members.

We would be happy to partner with other organisations to develop wisdom conversations, participate, assist with facilitation, etc. Please contact us if you have an idea to explore.

The hosts

The mission of A Chorus of Women is to 'give voice to matters at the heart of our communities', and to create spaces for 'honesty, clarity and wisdom' to emerge. Artistic expression, mainly through song and dramatic interpretation, is a central component of our work. Although individual members hold their own views, as a group, we are independent of any religious or political affiliation. For information about A Chorus of Women's activities, see www.chorusofwomen.org.

Since its formation in 2003, Chorus has championed public dialogue as a way to help open up conversations that build relationships and generate new understanding and insights across different perspectives. From 2009 to 2014, we hosted 13 'Canberra Conversations' to create opportunities for constructive conversations on matters of importance to Canberra citizens. The adversarial discourse in politics, public decision-making processes and the media prompted us to host these conversations and test their value in tackling complex issues.⁶ Importantly, we integrated story and songs from A Chorus of Women's original repertoire into the conversations to allow participants to connect with artistic, emotional and ethical aspects of the topic. These human qualities are of central importance but are not easily brought to the fore in public forums. Participant feedback was positive and showed that attendees valued the artistic expression and appreciated the opportunity to interact in a positive way with people who brought different perspectives (such as government, business, academic, activist, community).

For this wisdom conversation, we collaborated with the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, an ecumenical organisation with a mission to activate 'wisdom for the common good'. Both Chorus and ACC&C affirm the citizen's place in public life and have championed dialogue as a way to help understanding across different perspectives. A Chorus of Women have been artists in residence at the ACC&C since 2016 and the Centre generously donated the use of their Pavilion meeting room for this event.

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⁶ These conversations were facilitated using various larger and small group approaches inspired by dialogue practices such as those described by David Bohm (David Bohm 2004. *On dialogue*, Routledge), Art of Hosting Conversations that Matter (www.artofhosting.org), and The Circle Way (Christina Baldwin, Anna Linnea (2010). *The circle way: a leader in every chair*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco), to create safe and inclusive opportunities for listening and respectful conversations to happen.

Word cloud of audio transcripts

Word size is proportional to frequency of use.

