

Center for Whole Communities Summer 2006 Retreat Season
Summary of Participant Interviews (conducted January – February 5, 2007)
February 12, 2007

Getting there

As in past years, the most significant factor in decision making was the nomination and the nominator. Often the nominating alumni was an important, trusted, and high respected person for the interviewee, and a number of interviewees reported a willingness to take a leap of faith based on the nominator's experience.

People who weren't nominated by someone in specific often found a person or people they knew on the website alumni list and that, along with conversations with that person or those people, convinced them to say yes. A number of people of color highlighted the importance of seeing other people of color they knew on the alumni list and of knowing that the retreat leadership included one or more people of color.

A number of interviewees talked about how it was a good time for them to stop and take stock and the CWC website and materials made it clear that the retreat would support them in doing that. A few people even scheduled their retreat attendance during a birthday or some other significant date.

Some people are actually doing something akin to "Whole Thinking" with their work, or would like to move in this direction, and they could tell from the materials that this would be a good fit for them.

A few interviewees expressed hesitation about the language, which seemed a little "green" or "crunchy" to them, but reassurances from alumni and nominators overrode these perceptions. A number of people also said the time away from home and work was a matter for hesitation.

Most people were able to prioritize attending the retreat because of the advance notice and because there were dates options. For academics, the summer schedule makes it especially easy to fit in.

The physical experience

A number of people commented on a sense that everything done at the retreat, from walking to eating, to working, to sleeping arrangements has a purpose and enforces the overall goals of the retreat. It all feels organic, intentional, and "whole."

The **silence** offered space for grounding in the day and made people draw on alternative (and sometimes more intimate) ways of communicating with co-participants. Some struggled with it, but in the end, most felt its value:

“I come from the city where no one is silent, even at night. A couple of times I slipped and said ‘Good morning’ instinctively. I had to learn to talk with my eyes and hands and expressions. I was using other capabilities I didn’t think I had. It took a couple of days to get used to it, but then when I came back to the city I was in another mode and I craved the silence again, which is hard to get here. No one knows how to get quiet.”

Most people saw the **walking** as a critical piece of the retreat, symbolically as well as physically.

“I liked the separation between the sacred place and the eating place. The walk was symbolic, uphill we all convened there. It made you more present, more alive.”

“Sometimes when you’re walking in the woods sometimes that’s when your thoughts are clearest. It makes things that were complicated in our minds simple and easy to see.”

Most people enjoyed the walking, however, a number were challenged by it, and for some the difficulty of it made it something of a detractor (if not a distraction) from the retreat. Even participants who enjoyed the walking pointed out that Knoll Farm is not a place for everyone. The walking, in fact, factored significantly into who alumni were willing to nominate for future retreats.

One interviewee pointed out that the retreats are actually prejudiced towards well and able people and that it might be interesting to include physical ability in future privilege walks so that the issue gets surfaced and people are aware of it.

The people who highlighted their own difficulty with the walking usually noted that there was mobility assistance available and there didn’t seem to be any stigma attached to using it. However, they had a desire to participate and be a part of the whole experience, which they saw as including the walking.

The **sleeping accommodations** for most interviewees were the sleeping platforms. Almost everyone (across race, gender, sector) noted how lucky they were to get a platform and a number of them said it would have been a different story for them if they had gotten a ground tent – to the point that it would have detracted from their experience. (That said, the two people I talked with in ground tents said they were fine.) Even seasoned campers said they liked the platform tents because they didn’t want to have to “work” at the retreat, not in the way you work to do a backpack trip. Basically, people liked having a space of their own where they could stand up and hang out to read, journal, or etc.

Some felt the **on-the-farm activities** were an opportunity contribute and give back. A couple found that the activities were disorganized and didn’t really add much. Mostly, people experienced them as another opportunity to connect further with the place and with each other. A couple of people explicitly mentioned gratitude for an opportunity to interact with Helen.

Everyone loved the **meals** – from the content, to the chefs, to presentation, to the wooden bowls, to eating family style – everything. In particular, people were very moved and influenced by the emphasis on eating locally.

The retreat values

In general, interviewees resonated with the values the retreat seeks to promote and felt that they had an experience of them in one way or another. An exception is the value of **bridging divides and the critical importance of authentic collaboration**. Although people felt that the dialogues, the privilege walk, and other exercises opened them up to others, a number questioned whether there were really any divides to bridge. Although there was a certain level of racial diversity in most of the retreats, for the most, people perceived their co-participants as middle class, relatively educated, and relatively liberal – people of “like mind,” so that the value of bridging divides wasn’t really tested.

“I didn’t really feel pushed because everyone is of like mind. People in this field of work are liberals, I would like to see some folks who are on the opposite end – if they were there and were fully open, that would be something. It wasn’t a lot of challenge when you’re dealing with folks of like mind.”

With respect to the importance of authentic collaboration, a number of interviewees pointed out that there was not time for creating collaboration, although they would have liked that as part of the retreat. Some suggested that the retreat should provide guidance on real collaboration, or set the stage for it. Others, however, saw the value of simply having the concepts lifted up in the retreat so that they could bring them back home and identify and pursue opportunities for authentic collaboration.

“The concept [of authentic collaboration], absolutely, but the reality of actually doing something? I don’t know if it’s really the point. I thought it was the point to know how to get to that point – use the process to get to a collaborative project.”

The dialogue process

A number of interviewees commented that the clarity of the guidelines and the definition of dialogue in the introduction resulted in respect for the process and for each other:

“It was helpful to be able to practice it [dialogue] where everyone knew the rules and to be in a space where everyone followed the rules. The group curtailed the people who didn’t follow the rules. There was accountability to self and the process.”

Some suggested that even more clarity was in order, given the importance of the dialogue process to the retreat experience:

“I would have liked the dialogues to have been more specific – clearly articulate why we’re doing this, why it’s important in the context of your work. It unfolded in a way that’s non-threatening, but when it’s that important, it should be presented in a very direct way. It took me a while to understand what that activity was about.”

With respect to clarity, one person emphasized the importance, in terms of ensuring full participation and inclusion, of clarifying terms:

“I’m not sure we got at the deepest levels of assumption we could have gotten to because we didn’t clarify terms. It keeps you from the combative and it opens listening in ways that open them to the claims of others. I also think it can be incredibly self reflective when we clarify terms because embedded assumptions get revealed.”

From this person’s perspective, *“If you’re wanting more cultural perspectives present, not just environmentalists or whoever, that’s going to be challenging. There are certain protocols in place at Knoll Farm that are really wonderful for western culture, but not for others.”*

A couple of interviewees mentioned a sense that the dialogues were too dominated by Peter, his stories, and his experiences and offered suggestions for broadening the tent of contributions.

“That’s an important component because it sets the tone and drives home the issue for the day, but I felt like there was an opportunity to bring in some other stories. There was room for more there, other people’s ideas.”

“Continue to find other people who are as thoughtful and humble and inspiring as Peter with talking about these issues.”

Another suggestion was to incorporate something less cerebral, possibly more physical, like a game, into the process. This would be another way of getting at some of the collaboration concepts.

Overall, however, interviewees valued having the opportunity to speak their truths and felt, for the most part, like there was adequate space for them to share and to be heard, although no one mentioned feeling pressured by the group or the process to talk.

A couple of interviewees wondered whether the retreat should incorporate more of a race and class analysis, in particular more exploration and building of a common understanding and analysis of how race and class impact land conservation work, since this is such an important piece of the dialogues. Although concepts related to race and class came up in the dialogues and conversations, they weren’t really explored and the structure of the retreat wasn’t set up to deal with those kinds of conversations. In the end, while there wasn’t certainty that the CWC retreats should facilitate the development of such an analysis, it was clear for these participants that in absence of it full collaboration is difficult to imagine.

“There are still some questions for me ...did I fully trust everyone that came to the retreat to be in full co-collaboration with them? No. But do I think that possibility could exist given time to have further conversations? Probably.”

“I’m always a little curious to how it’s going to play out when there’s not an education component to make sure we’re on the same page around analysis ... [I’m] not suggesting that

CWC do a full analysis, but the question exists of how to bring people to a space of fully trusting one another.”

Another question about CWC’s role – how far it should go, what kinds of things it should facilitate – came up with respect to difficult emotional issues that are raised for some participants through the process of the dialogues. As the retreats are currently structured, there are no “containers” to hold emotional issues when they emerge. However, because the nature of the dialogues are such that these reactions may (and do) emerge, some participants felt that the retreat should include space for people to talk about and process what is coming up personally.

“Big things came up and it was a bit of loose end for some people. It could round out the loose ends for people to get together who want or need to discuss the loose ends that are more personal.”

One person pointed out that to truly get to “Whole Thinking,” effective structures for dealing with the emotional distress are essential.

We need models where both are dealt with simultaneously, dealing with the emotional distress and the intellectual and cognitive dysfunction are intricately connected.

An interviewee who expressed concern about emotional and personal issues being a distraction from the dialogues and other conversations felt that providing a space for these issues to be addressed and processed would be one way to move the issues out of the dialogues.

Other desired outcomes

A few interviewees were disappointed not to have created something together, to have harnessed the good energy that was generated to develop something collaborative. Some suggested processes for doing this.

“We spent a lot of time creating community, but didn’t emerge with a communal consensus on anything. It felt more like it was to get people together to take what they would take, rather than to build something together.”

One participant suggested that the lack of process or clarity about process hindered the group’s ability to get to something like this.

“I kept asking the questions: What process are we engaged in? What is the backbone? [It] seems to be built loosely around storytelling, quiet time, communication in unthreatened environment, but beyond that it seemed mute about internal significance. You go forth and do what you will with it. That’s not my idea of what an actual functional community would do.”

Another suggested that a clear process would take the burden off of one person to make the retreats all come together. *“If the process issue were better defined (with help from “process people), it would take the heat off of the facilitators to make it all happen.”*

Diverse participation

A number of the interviewees of color expressed relief that there were other people of color at their retreat and some emphasized the importance and value of having people of color among the retreat leadership. Knowing there would be a person in this role influenced heavily some of the participants' decisions to attend the retreat. While people felt good about the level of racial diversity, a number of people mentioned the need for class and age diversity.

“One thing very present for me was that for the first three or four days I wasn’t able to settle into the full experience – that was about being the youngest person there by a good eight years. I had my own emotional response to that, feeling isolated. I’m often the youngest person, it comes with a certain emotional response – anxious, on edge, trying to prove something.”

Beyond race and class, interviewees mentioned a need for more different perspectives (artists, for example) to move the conversation beyond the usual realm. Finally, a few participants expressed an interest in being challenged by perhaps including people “not in the ‘choir.’”

Post retreat

Some interviewees are drawing on their retreat experience in very concrete ways – to form new types of collaborations and to introduce new practices at work. Most participants have used the retreat to help them restructure and rethink how they are in their work and their lives, and for some the recollection of the retreat provides inspiration. Some participants felt that this was not sufficient, that alumni need to be able to put it all into action rather than just a nice memory.

Most thought that they would participate in another CWC opportunity and most were willing and even enthusiastic about nominating people to attend, across race, class, gender, and sector in their own networks. A few people pointed out that, for them, the retreat was about Peter. What would it be if it’s not him leading it? One participant noted that whenever you have a dynamic leader, their loss changes the personality of the experience.