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World of Diverse Perspectives

THE WISDOM COUNCIL: THE MIAMI CIRCLE DEBATE

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“If we are to deal with our collective challenges, it must start here and now with each of us. Can we learn to balance Power with Wisdom? Can we trust that we possess the vision, values, character qualities, imagination, heart and know-how to overcome the problems that we create?”

In August 1999, while demolishing an old apartment building to clear the way for a new condominium project, construction crews came across artifacts and evidence of a prehistoric archeological site in Dade County, Florida.

Dubbed the Miami Circle, this 2000 year old sacred site has been attributed to the long extinct Tequesta tribe and has been compared to Stonehenge in its importance. Pro-development forces and the indigenous and scientific communities cannot agree about how to proceed. While everyone agrees that the Miami Circle needs to be protected and preserved, no progress has been made on a plan that can satisfy the interest groups. Deadlocked, the matter is now before the courts, where a lengthy and expensive battle is being fought.



The Miami Circle debate is but one of the daunting problems that face us as we attempt to chart a civilized course through a new century. Rwanda, Bosnia, Tibet, hunger, protection of the environment, abortion, euthanasia, third-world debt, nationalism, and universal healthcare are some of the critical issues that effect all of us with no simple solutions.

As Edward O. Wilson points out “the problem of collective meaning and purpose is both urgent and immediate because, if for no other reason, it determines the environmental ethic. Few will doubt that humankind has created a planet-sized problem for itself.”

Can we solve these problems? Can we make quality decisions in the face of complex, even paradoxical questions? How will we settle interpersonal, community, organizational or world disputes without resorting to litigation or violence?

Solving our co-created dilemmas will require a fundamental shift in personal and collective thinking, action and relationship.

The Wisdom Council

Marshall McLuhan argued that the electronic age would catapult society forward and backward in time simultaneously. With the rise of new media, electronic commerce and globalization, half of his prophecy is manifest. But what is the human legacy that can support us in making wise decisions that protect universal human values and support a shared and sustainable future?

Wisdom Councils have their roots in oral tradition practices. Peoples native to Europe, North and South America, Australia, Africa, the Middle East and Asia have wisdom traditions, many of which feature council processes. Wisdom work is at the heart of our global collective experience.

To be successful in addressing problems like the Miami Circle, there is an urgent need to equip ourselves with the knowledge, skills and experience to harness Collective Wisdom. But it will also require a change of heart forged from a deeper recognition that we share responsibility and must live with the impact of a path of our own creation which is leading to breakdown locally, nationally and internationally.

Collective Wisdom is not a new flavor. It is the practical output of the continuous flow of gifts, talents, diverse perspectives, expertise, knowledge, creativity and experience between people joined by collective goals. In essence, it represents the true source of abundance in human systems.

A Wisdom Council requires each member to share responsibility for protecting, facilitating and stewarding Collective Wisdom. It requires personal leadership, collective responsibility, and the willingness to stand alone and together. This is a responsibility that cannot be left to experts, jurists, elected officials or diplomats. If we are to deal with our collective challenges, it must start here and now with each of us. Can we learn to balance Power with Wisdom? Can we trust that we possess the vision, values, character qualities, imagination, heart and know-how to overcome the problems that we create? Will we abandon the collective patterns that sabotage wisdom: power struggles, social politics, control patterns, unhealthy levels of personal ambition and competition, expedience and win-lose dynamics that may prevent the rise of wise action?

These are some of the developmental challenges facing each of us as we attempt to apply wisdom to raising and educating our families, building civil communities, finding meaningful and fulfilling work and nation building in an atmosphere of peace and prosperity. It is hard work done within a prevailing paradigm that favors power and personal gain over the collective good.



Six Skills and Two Processes

The Wisdom Council process is an opening to build a base of practical experience working with Collective Wisdom. It is an opportunity to practice our stewardship of Collective Wisdom by dealing with a real problem.

In this forum, our collective problem is what to do about the Miami Circle! In a multi-part role-play, you will be asked to play a real person representing one of five interest groups: the Developer of the Brickell Pointe project; the Government, including the cities of Miami, Miami-Dade and the State; the Science community; the Conservationist/Indigenous alliance; and the Media.

Your assignment is to work with six skills and two processes that support the application of Collective Wisdom to arrive at an agreement deemed to be a win-win solution by all the parties.

The six skills are:

- 1) Exploring Assumptions: The way we think feel and act is based on the assumptions or stories we tell about ourselves, other people, circumstances and the world. The ability to track how we assemble these stories allows us to explore alternative perspectives from which deeper insight and new possibilities can emerge.
- 2) Building Trust: The container of Collective Wisdom is built from our ability to trust ourselves and each other. Trust provides a foundation for the flow of gifts and talents, cooperation and mutual gain. Learn how “the inner victim” sabotages personal leadership and collective work, preventing the rise of wisdom.
- 3) Hosting Different Points of View: Robert Frost said “education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.” Fixed perspectives

create conflict. Patience, compassion and respect are wisdom tools that support our ability to see and hear beyond our own opinions and beliefs, to explore unfamiliar perspectives.

- 4) Holding Creative Tension: Can we stay with the process of inventing original solutions to problems especially when solutions aren't immediately evident or available? Can we meet the unfamiliar and explore new territory without retreating to old comfort zones? Will we stay open and flexible in the face of competing visions or social polarization or will we collapse into frustration, withdrawal or conflict? The ability to work with creative tension is a foundation skill for conflict resolution and creativity.
- 5) Mutual Gain: Arriving at mutual gain is a form of principled negotiation and problem solving that requires each of us to stretch our vision and creative muscles. Can we apply wisdom to build fair, equitable solutions that support both individual interests and the greater good? Can we expand our loyalties to host the needs of others without abandoning our own? Will we align with sufficiency over scarcity? A commitment to creating mutual gain recognizes that win-lose dynamics invite serious and far-reaching consequences.
- 6) Shared Meaning: Shared meaning is the chief organizing principle around which communities of purpose are based. Shared meaning generates purpose, membership, provides common frames of interpretation and supports "right action". Right action is defined as wisdom applied to impact – the recognition and responsibility for the impact of our actions in multiple domains.

Inclusion and Closure

Two processes lie at the heart of the Wisdom Council process. Inclusion is the ability to actively cultivate the involvement of all parties in generating a pool of Collective Wisdom.



Closure is the ability to make wise decisions that provide clear focus and direction for action.

The balance of inclusion and closure is the art of wisdom work.

Can we use the Wisdom Council to create a breakthrough in the current impasse in Florida? What can we discover together about wisdom that has application to real issues in our own communities?

Wisdom Council work is part of humanity's inheritance. It requires a personal commitment to mutual gain over personal ambition and as a result, will require a vigorous and collective swim upstream against the prevailing cultural currents.

The Presenter

Patrick O'Neill leads Extraordinary Conversations Inc., a Toronto-based management consulting firm specializing in cultural transformation and leadership development. His mission is to assist people in igniting creativity, innovation and collective wisdom in support of shared goals.

Patrick's work in leadership development has taken him to global corporations in North America and Europe; to the townships of South Africa; and to the peace process in the Middle East. Some of Extraordinary Conversations clients include: The Walt Disney Company, The Investors Group, Canada Trust, The Mosaic Group of Companies, BMG Music Canada and AstraZeneca Inc.

Patrick teaches the Eight Skills and Two Processes of Collective Leadership in a 3-day program called *Extraordinary Conversations for Breakthrough Results*.

With Dr. Angeles Arrien he leads *Principles of Collective Wisdom* which looks at collective practices from a cross cultural perspective. Together, they have also developed a four-weekend seminar program, *Triumph of the Imagination: A Journey to the Heart of*

Creativity, that is about unleashing creativity and character in support of personal or collective vision.

Patrick lives in Toronto, Canada with his wife and three daughters.