



This month's circle tale comes from Stefan Cantore of London who came to Whidbey last March to attend the Art of Hosting in which we practiced circle, World Café and Open Space, three complementary conversation modalities. His story speaks for itself. Thank you, Stefan, for your presence on July 7th and your articulation in writing this piece.

Circle Tale, July 2005

Hosting Café Conversations in the Midst of Terrorist Bombings

Reflections on a World Café held in Central London 7th July 2005

"It sounded like a massive bomb blast—we could hear it in the meeting room," said a colleague.

We were standing in the grand entrance of the Royal College of Surgeons in Central London at about 9.50 am, just three minutes after the last of four terrible bombs hit the city on the 7th July.

I confess I was pre-occupied with other things. The enormity of what was going on around me did not really sink in until several hours later. I was busy attending to the practicalities of setting up a World Café for about 120 people. I was looking for the pots, pens, paper tablecloths, and working out how the sound system worked! All the usual practical stuff involved in running a café.

I had been invited to host a World Café event for the Informatics Group of the Healthcare Commission, a regulator of healthcare standards in England. The support staff and the planning group had done a great job and I was really looking forward to the conversations.

Earlier in the morning, before arriving at the venue, I had followed my usual practice of reflecting on the purpose of this café and grounding myself in the role of Café Host. By the time I had arrived at the Royal College, my mind and heart was committed to being the most useful Host I could be that day. This perhaps explains why, when news of chaos around central London started coming in through texts and the web, I still focused on my role as café host.

The scheduled arrival time for participants was 9 am and most had made it by about 9.30 so the Head of Informatics agreed that we should make a start. The café itself was due to start after a coffee break at about 11.30. Before then we were to have a short presentation, a keynote speaker and a Question and Answer session.

I sat out of these first sessions. I was anxiously awaiting the arrival of a couple of my colleagues who had phoned to say that they were on their way but were taking far too long to arrive given they only had a short distance to travel. Only when they arrived at about 10.30 did I realise that central London had virtually shut down and all of us were being advised to stay indoors.

My mind was buzzing. Through a TV link set up in one of the lecture rooms the true scale of the attack was just becoming obvious as now we could see live pictures of the destruction. As we watched the television we could hear the police helicopters fly by and hear ambulance sirens as they ferried injured people to hospital. By this time a big notice had been placed by the front door of the college:

"THE POLICE STRONGLY ADVISE NO ONE TO LEAVE THIS BUILDING"

Given that we were ready to set up the café it crossed my mind that creating this comfortable, gentle environment might be helpful regardless of what we eventually might decide to do. As people heard the news and had a chance to look at the TV reports their anxiety rose. The mobile phone networks were not working well (some not at all) and people were frantically trying to contact relatives, friends and colleagues. Amongst the leadership of the Group we sensed that people were too distracted to start having conversations about the work of the Informatics Group.



What emerged was a different type of café.

Many folk used the tables for conversations that mattered to them. It just happened! Some of these conversations were about the events going on around us, some were work related. For some, the events had prompted thoughts and conversations about what really mattered to them in life. At this point I still had not been introduced as the Host but this did not seem to matter. I was in a real sense "holding the space" as conversations caught light in this most unusual of all cafés.

Some early reflections:

- Throughout the morning people remained calm and controlled. There was no screaming or panic. The terrorists had failed to induce terror.
- Conversations continued and flourished in the middle of all of this terror. The terrorists had failed to silence us.
- A café environment offers a helpful conversational space which many people value and can be used by them even in the most extreme of circumstances.
- The plan for the café had to be re-written as the morning progressed but what emerged was a café that suited the situation and the needs of the participants.
- The calling to host conversations stays with you regardless of the circumstances and is a major part of the contribution you can make to people in such difficult circumstances.

At the end of the café we had ten name badges left on the reception table. It now appears that one belongs to a young man missing since Thursday and presumed killed. His friend, quoted in the newspaper, said he was passing through Kings Cross on the way to a seminar. He never made it to the café. I pay tribute to him, to all those killed and injured and renew my personal commitment to serve my fellow citizens by offering conversational spaces that offer the possibility of hope and healing.

Stefan Cantore
Guildford, UK
8th July 2005

May we restore civility to the world, conversation by conversation!

If you have a tale to tell, contact the PeerSpirit office and we'll help you share it.

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