

Community Earth Councils

By Eric Utne

On July 18, 2007, Nelson Mandela announced the formation of The Global Elders, an idea brought to him several years earlier by entrepreneur and adventurer Richard Branson and recording artist Peter Gabriel. According to Branson, since the world is now a global village, “it’s time we had our global village elders.” Among the group are Nelson Mandela, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Kofi Annan, Jimmy Carter, Mary Robinson, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Muhammad Yunus, and several others.



As President Mandela put it, “Let us call them Global Elders, not because of their age, but because of their individual and collective wisdom. This group derives its strength not from political, economic or military power, but from (their) independence and integrity...They can help foster and introduce innovative ideas and little known solutions to connect those who have real practical needs with those who have something to give.”

Editor’s Note: Eric Utne was founding publisher and editor of the *New Age Journal*, now owned by Martha Stewart/Omnimedia. In 1984, he founded *Utne Reader*, of which he was chair for 15 years. In June 2006 the magazine was sold to Ogden Communications, publisher of *Mother Earth News*, *Natural Home*, and ten other special interest publications. Eric is the father of four Waldorf-educated sons and was integrally involved in the founding, growth, and development of City of Lakes Waldorf School and Watershed High School. In November 2006 he was elected to the Executive Committee of the Nobel Peace Prize Forum.

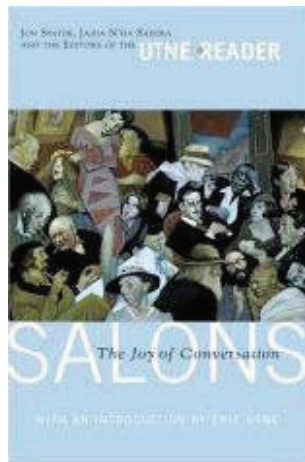


I believe that every city, town, and village in the world needs its own Council of Elders. Building on the success of *Utne Reader's* Neighborhood Salon movement and the “Let’s Talk America” initiative, my colleagues at the Utne Institute and I are launching local Councils of Elders, called “Community Earth Councils,” throughout North America. The Community Earth Councils are designed to:

- ◆ Train young and old participants in the arts of council, mentoring, and social entrepreneurship;
- ◆ Discuss common interests and concerns;
- ◆ Inspire and equip the participants to create solutions to social and environmental problems; and
- ◆ Link them to worthy organizational partners and promising projects, both domestic and international.

UTNE SALONS

In 1991 *Utne Reader* published a cover story titled, “Salons: How to Revive the Endangered Art of Conversation and Start a Revolution in Your Living Room.” Readers were invited to send in their name, address, and daytime phone number if they wanted to meet other readers in their zip code. The magazine got over 10,000 responses and eventually set up 500 salons, with 20 people in each, all across North America. Within a year 20,000 people had joined the Neighborhood Salon Association, meeting at least monthly in office conference rooms, church basements, coffee shops, and mostly, in each other’s living rooms.



The Blue Man Group met each other and formed in an Utne Salon. Countless marriages, businesses, and non-profit initiatives got their start there too. Several schools and co-housing projects trace their genesis to Utne Salons. Shortly after the issue came out a number of large daily newspapers, including all 77 properties in the Gannett newspaper chain, started discussion circles for their readers. The salon movement was born.

In 2004 Utne Institute joined with several other organizations to launch “Let’s Talk America,” a nationwide movement that brought Americans from all points on the political spectrum together in cafes, bookstores, churches, and living rooms for lively, open-hearted dialogue to consider questions essential to the future of our democracy. Again, many new initiatives for the common good came out of these gatherings.

We think the world is ready for “Community Earth Councils” — the next generation of citizen gatherings; this time, however, we intend to gently encourage and support participants to move beyond talk to action.

THE ROLE OF ELDERS

Most traditional cultures have had councils of elders. One of the primary roles of these councils was helping young people identify and affirm their unique gifts and find their place in the community. While some cultures are still relatively intact in this regard, for many the guidance of youth into fulfilling and purposeful roles in society is accomplished superficially or haphazardly, if at all.

Malidoma Somé, who was born in 1956 in Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), was initiated in the ancestral traditions of his people, the Dagara tribe of West Africa, by the tribe's council of elders. Holding two Ph.D.'s in literature from the Sorbonne and Brandeis, he describes the results of his initiation:

When I was twenty-two, my elders came to me and asked me to return to the white man's world, to share what I had learned about my own spiritual tradition through my initiation. For me, initiation had eliminated my confusion, helplessness, and pain and opened the door to a powerful understanding of the link between my own life purpose and the will of my ancestors. I had come to understand the sacred relationship between children and old people, between fathers and their adolescent sons, between mothers and daughters. I knew especially why my people have such a deep respect for old age, and why a strong, functioning community is essential for the maintenance of an individual's sense of identity, meaning, and purpose.

According to author Terry Mollner, eldering is a verb, the act of helping another grow to his or her next level of maturity. A young person can elder an older person as well as the other way around. Like mentoring, eldering is a reciprocal relationship, a vehicle for mutual exchange and learning.

THINKING GLOBALLY

A common lament these days has to do with Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth." It goes something like this: "I'm convinced that global warming is a fact, there's simply no denying it. But, besides changing my light bulbs and lobbying my representatives to pass more eco-friendly legislation, what can I do?"

This is what the global climate crisis feels like to most people: "I can make personal lifestyle changes, and lobby for legislative changes, but there's little I can do with my neighbors, on the community level." Enter the Community Earth Council.

Community Earth Councils, as their name implies, are groups of local citizens united in their desire to heal, steward, and sustain the Earth, socially and environmentally, locally and

globally. They are local responses to a host of planetary crises, not just climate change. Each Community Earth Council is unique, generating its own activities according to the ideas, interests, resources, and abilities of its particular mix of members.

Our fundamental premise, or theory of change, is that engaging young people and elders in thoughtful, heartfelt conversation about their interests and concerns will enable and encourage them to take meaningful and productive action together. We want to bring diverse groups of young and old together and help them get to know each other. And we want to equip them with a variety of tools and practices that will empower them to act together to address both local and global environmental and human needs.

ACTING LOCALLY

Here are some steps you can take to start an Community Earth Council in YOUR neighborhood:

- 1) Begin by inviting a group of 8-10 elders (50+ years old).** Ask everyone to commit to meeting at least once or twice a month (or even weekly) for 9-12 sessions. Toward the end of this period you will create a public event or launch a project “for the greater good.” It can focus on any social or environmental need your group chooses to address.

Take some time to get to know each other before welcoming the youngsters (16-28) or rushing to discuss possible projects. The American Leadership Forum of Silicon Valley, which is one of the models for the CECs, starts their year-long leadership program with a six-day wilderness retreat. The retreat includes lots of individual and group challenges as well as time for solo reflection. A day-long or weekend retreat can serve the same community-building ends. If a retreat is not possible for your group, then take at least three or four meetings to simply get to know each others’ life stories, your personal successes and failures, and hopes and dreams, before discussing projects.



Organizational meeting of the community members from Linden Hills who have agreed to be “compost captains” for the SSO collection. One shining example of citizens coming together for the greater good is Linden Hills Power & Light, which began with a few Minneapolis neighbors discussing what they could do as a neighborhood response to Al Gore’s “An Inconvenient Truth,” and Minnesotan Will Steger’s “Global Warming 101.” They soon developed a campaign to promote bike use by local students to neighborhood schools. This evolved into the recent commitment by the city of Minneapolis to collect organic waste (food scraps, pizza boxes, etc.) from 4000 neighborhood homes. When the system is fully functional, the waste will go into an anaerobic garbage digester, producing methane gas that will either be bottled and sold to 3M, or used to put electrical power back into the grid.

- 2) **Welcome the youngers.** We suggest that each elder invite one young person to join the group. Start by meeting the young person individually, getting to know their background and interests, with an eye to really seeing who they are, what special gifts they may have to give. Of course, one meeting is not enough time to really get to know anyone, but having the intention to really see another's special gifts (and challenges) can help. Then, introduce them to the group in a special, council-forming meeting. Again, take some time for everyone in this new, multi-generational group, to get to know each other before moving to discussion of possible projects.
- 3) **Conduct a community needs assessment.**
- 4) **Brainstorm and choose an event or project.** This may take several sessions.
- 5) **Implement the event or project.**
- 6) **Share your group's experience.**

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Utne Institute, originator of the Community Earth Councils initiative, is a think-tank and social enterprise incubator. It has attracted the support of a Board of Advisors including vital aging experts Rick Moody, Richard Leider, and Jan Hively, authors Paul Hawken and Frances Moore Lappé, polar explorer Will Steger, and Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of the Peace Corps ('93-'95) and UNICEF ('95-'05).

In the near future, the Institute will be unveiling a new web site, www.EarthCouncils.org, where you can find ideas about organizing an Community Earth Council, finding and incorporating young people into your group, conducting a community needs assessment, brainstorming, choosing, and implementing possible projects, and links to other Community Earth Councils and related initiatives and resources.