

INVITATION

This book is an invitation ...

Imagine we're sitting around a fire. We've gathered to tell our stories, learn from each other, drink from the well. I'm telling you what I'm learning, not to convince you of its rightness, but to share my story and the questions that are coming to me now.

My story is a co-created dialogue, starting with my dialogue with my Self. From time to time, I've reflected on what I am noticing, what my questions are, what hypotheses I'm living. And that's how I've learned with everyone I've encountered.

So I've set up this book with wide margins to invite you to make notes, raise questions, engage. Several pages at the end of each chapter are blank so that you can write in them. The book is also an e-book, so you can engage freely with it when you want to. I've included some introspective practices, poetry, and songs, as they've illuminated my experiences. My journals reveal some of my internal dialogue, which is part of this telling, as it is part of my lived experience.

Some years ago, I decided to live my life according to the law and principles of Open Space Technology, a practice of co-creative self-organizing, based on taking responsibility for what you care about. I took respon-

sibility for following my heart: following what love called me to. My story of living in open space is a story of finding my way home. In telling it, I realize I've been enacting a process of remembering wholeness, simply by following what love called me to do, learning in public, and acting on my hypotheses.

I am simply sharing my small window of our experience, realizing that we share this journey in a profound way. And hoping that, just as it's happened in my life, my story will trigger yours and help us co-create the world we want to live in.

I feel profoundly humble and grateful that you've picked up this book and have in some way joined me in song ...

*Dancing along in the madness,
There is no sadness,
Only a Song of the Soul!*
(bows to songwriter Chris Williamson!)

Chapter 1

STEPPING INTO OPEN SPACE

Be the change you seek in the world.



This story begins with a cup of tea. My friend Dee was going to India. I had been there several times, so she came to my house for a cup of tea and some pointers. When she told me she was attending a conference in Goa entitled "The Business of Business Is Learning," my heart leapt.

In 1989, I was a television producer. As a producer of specials and documentaries on issues such as living with AIDS, environmental degradation, and U.S.–Soviet relations, I was aware of the perils we were living with. I was very much aware that the engine of my business was our capacity to learn, and to communicate what we were learning. I also realized that King Broadcasting, the company I worked for, was organized in such a way that it was losing the benefits of employee creativity, intelligence, and learning.

I knew I needed to be at that conference and asked Dee if I could be invited. She immediately phoned Harrison Owen, one of the hosts. He said, "If you want to come, then by all means, come." By late afternoon, everything had fallen into place. I greeted my husband, Dave, with the news. I was booked to travel from our planned vacation in England on to Goa.

The ripples from that dive into the unknown would

propel me into a new phase of my life—a phase that intimately connected me with the evolutionary spiral of creation on the planet.

From my journal, late summer 1989:

The airboat swims along currents I cannot see. I sleep across five seats—grateful for an empty nine-hour flight. Dave is heading in the opposite direction: back to Seattle. I am going to India to meet people I do not know at a meeting to which I wasn't originally invited.

Arrival in Bombay, 3:00 AM:

At the arrival gate, I shoulder my gray pack and emerge into dark, humid air, ripe with smells of dung smoke and sweaty bodies.

Hotel, Missus? the taxi wallahs ask, waving their signs.

No, thanks, I say. I have a hotel.

Hotel? What hotel, Missus? I can get you better, Missus.

The Taj Hotel, I say.

You? Looking at me with surprise—You? the aging woman with her gray backpack—the Taj?

I can't believe it myself. Yet I sleep for what's left of the night in the white paleness and flowered counterpane of the British Raj, and awake to the porter bringing bed tea.

I will meet strangers to fly to Goa—that exotic Portuguese colony where white beaches and black magic live side by side with Catholic girls wearing sober school uniforms.

When I arrived at the hotel from the airport, I learned

that Dee would not be coming. There had been an emergency in her family, so I was on my own. The next morning, as I emerged from the cocoon of my room and walked down the hallway toward the lobby, I was acutely aware that I knew no one there.

The Taj is a gorgeous relic of the Victorian era; it sits across the esplanade from the Gate of India, a grand reminder of the failed British rule. The lobby was full of people and luggage, the confusion of coming and going. As I moved toward the entrance, hoping to see someone holding a sign for the conference, I noticed a New England-looking fellow wearing a casual white shirt and seersucker cutoffs, his grayish hair pulled back in a ponytail. He leaned against a post, smoking a cigarette.

“Are you Harrison Owen?” I asked.

“That's me,” he said. “You must be Anne Stadler.” From that moment, I realized that my experience in Goa would be a lesson in intuition and going with the flow.

From my journal, late summer 1989:

I luxuriate in a high-ceilinged room in a lovely cottage, with screened windows open to earthy-smelling jungle vegetation. My room is dim and airy, with ceiling fans keeping the warm, moist air moving softly over my body. My roommate will not arrive until tomorrow. I can hear unfamiliar bird calls. People walk by on the path, speaking in a language I do not recognize.

Alone, I walk the long sands of the Fort Aguada Hotel beach. Bathe in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean.

Oiled and massaged, I meditate on why I am here, and wonder what will happen. All I know is that I don't know. I am simply here, a beneficiary of all these amazing gifts.

After breakfast, I walked up the hill on paths overhung with tropical vegetation to our first meeting. We gathered in a spacious cottage, situated on a grassy plateau, surrounded by palms, banana trees, and other exotic plants. It had rained the night before. The air was heavy, the foliage wet and lush.

Inside, we sat in a circle of forty or more people of different ethnicities, from different backgrounds and countries. I'd learned that most were corporate executives and consultants. There were a few academics, a retired bank president, and one other journalist, a writer from Business India. The center of the room held a round table on which was a lovely mandala made of colored flower petals. Ceiling fans lazily circulated the humid air.

We introduced ourselves one at a time to the group. I felt shy—what could I tell them about my presence there? People asked me if I was going to do a television story on the conference. I knew that was not actually why I was there. And that's all I knew.

Our host, V.S. Mahesh, vice president for human resources of the Taj Hotels, opened the gathering by lighting a lamp in the middle of the mandala and telling a story: "Once upon a time, there was a king who had a very gifted jeweler. For many years, the jeweler served the king by making marvelous ornaments and gifts of gold and precious stones. As the jeweler neared the end of his life, the king decided to reward him for all his years of service. He called his kingdom together

and presented the jeweler with precious gifts thanking him for his incomparable service. The jeweler graciously declined to accept the gifts, saying, "Thank you, sire, but you must give these gifts to God, for it is He who is the creator of whatever I can do."

That story laid the foundation for our work together.

Harrison Owen began his presentation by taping two large pieces of white paper on the wall at the front of the room. One of them, handwritten in his back-slanting prep school printing style, stated:

1. Whoever comes are the right people.
2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could've.
3. Whenever it starts is the right time.
4. When it's over, it's over.

The other sheet contained this scribble: *The Law of Two Feet.*

Harrison described how we would work together:

"This is the one law of Open Space: The Law of Two Feet," he said. "Take responsibility for your own contribution. If you are not interested and not contributing, use your two feet to move to somewhere you are."

Then he pointed to an empty wall: "That blank wall is our Agenda Wall," he said. "In a moment, you will fill it up with your own postings."

"Our subject is 'The Business of Business Is Learning.' Ask yourself: What am I interested in? What conversation do I want to convene? And write it down on a sheet of paper, with your name and a time and place