

Welcome

This book is intended for people who seek more effective and satisfying ways of working with others. It is for people who are working to make their communities, neighborhoods, and organizations more inclusive, effective, and wise. Everyone who participates in groups has something important to contribute and something further to learn. As authors, we bring to bear our learning from decades of convening groups and participating in large-scale change efforts in business, health care, education, mental health, criminal justice, conflict resolution, and global initiatives. Ten years ago, we founded and have since shepherded the Collective Wisdom Initiative, an informal network of practitioners and scholars from around the world who are bringing together a body of research, theory, and practice into a field of study that we have come to call *collective wisdom*.

Collective wisdom refers to knowledge and insight gained through group and community interaction. At a deeper level, however, it is about our living connection to each other and the interdependence we share in our neighborhoods, organizations, and world community. Supported by the Fetzer Institute, a private operating foundation in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the Collective Wisdom Initiative shares with Fetzer a common conviction: that efforts to address the world's critical issues must go beyond political, social, and economic strategies to their psychological, spiritual, and cultural roots. Behind our shared conviction lies a belief that human

survival depends upon our recognizing that we have a stake in each other's well-being, and that groups have potential for being sources of extraordinary creative power, incubators of innovative ideas, and vehicles for social healing.

The Power of Collective Wisdom is the result of a collaboration involving dozens of contributors and hundreds of people from our network and beyond. Stories fill the book, telling of collective wisdom's emergence in diverse settings, across different cultures, and in earlier times. Our book outlines the commitments and convictions that aid collective wisdom's emergence in groups. It also sketches a larger worldview, one encompassing the reverence for life associated with wisdom and the importance of a collective perspective. Throughout these pages, readers will be guided toward a deeper understanding of the conditions that make wisdom possible in groups and the characteristics that underlie many successful group methodologies.

We also offer a caution. We need to be alert to wisdom's opposing potential. One of the main messages of the book is just how easy it is to fall into the trap of *collective folly* instead of collective wisdom. This happens when groups, organizations, or communities become so polarized that they can't see the consequences of their collective actions. Similarly, false or forced agreement in groups can lead to tragic consequences. The power of collective wisdom is furthered when we learn how to navigate skillfully between the shores of polarization and false agreement.

We see our efforts as part of a larger social movement. Everywhere we look, we see groups, networks, and communities rising up to address common challenges. What all of us

share is a collective outlook and a desire for wise action. We seek what human beings have always sought: to find what is best in ourselves and what is best in and for the group. Our intent in the following pages is to articulate some of the key ideas of this search and to provide a foundation for the field of collective wisdom's further development.