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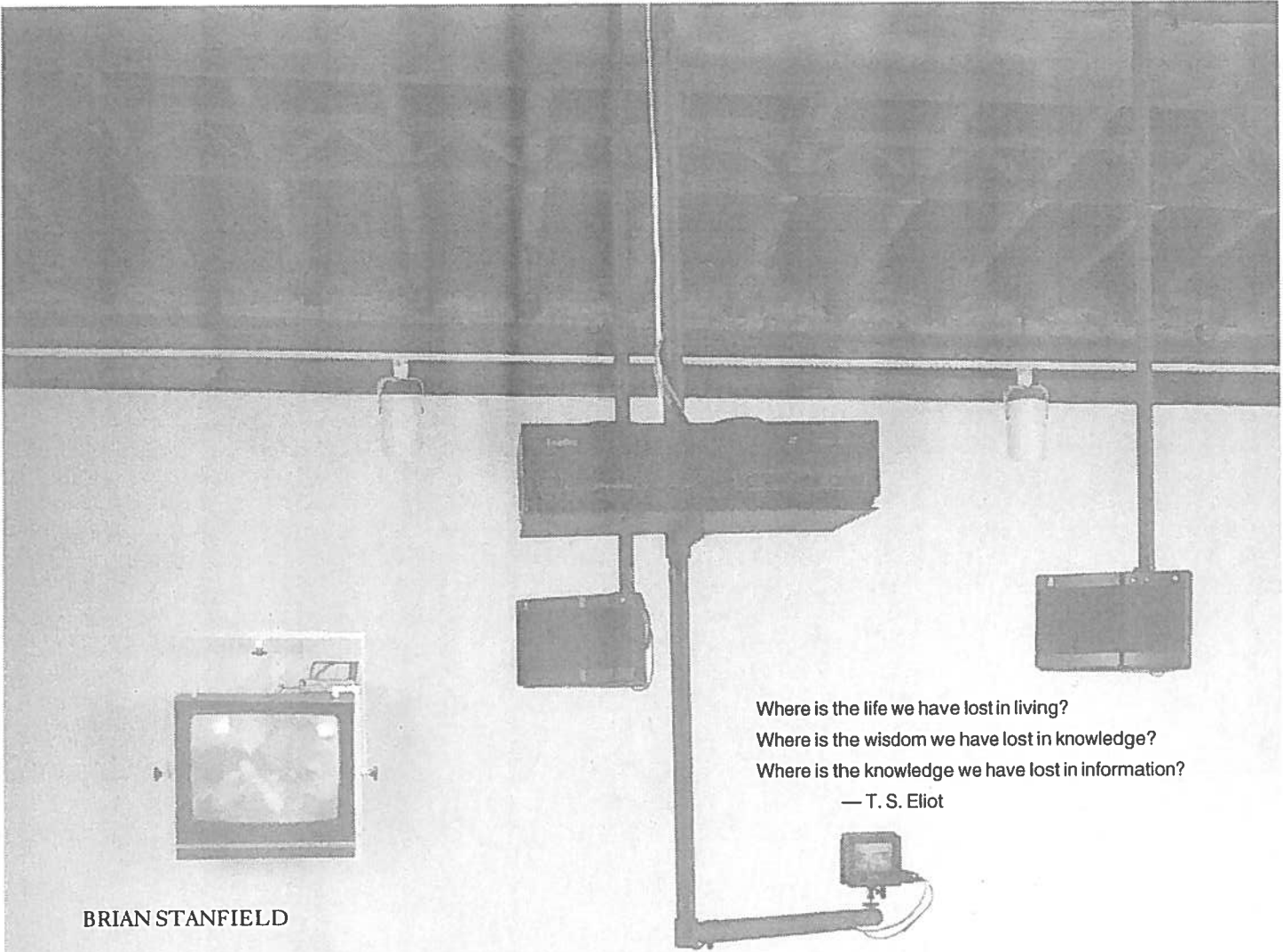
# EDGES

NEW PLANETARY PATTERNS

Doing your  
Homework  
in an  
Information-rich World

DAVID RINDA / Transition Science: Break-in Transmitter, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Gent, 1800/91

ICA  
CANADA



Where is the life we have lost in living?  
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

— T. S. Eliot

BRIAN STANFIELD

## Doing your Homework in an Information-rich World

There are times when the overwhelming reality of life in the 21st century makes us want to dig our heads in the sand like the ostrich. Or we want to deal only with what we feel we can manage — as in me, my wife and my pet canary. But life challenges us to stand present to all of reality. As life grows more complex, there is a growing list of new things that are constantly pushing us to make new decisions. As ethical beings, we can't say, "Well, that's none of my business. That's for the scientists, the doctors, the teachers, the lawyers to decide about. After all, that's why we pay them so much."

The problem with this is that these matters are very intrusive. They march right into our lives. With some aplomb they ask us, "Well, what do you make of me? Aren't I something? Are you going to use me, buy me,

try me out? Recommend me to your kids?" When your kids at the dinner table ask you, "Hey, mom, what's all this talk about this US food company throwing Mexican peasants off their farms? Do we buy their foods?" Or when little Johnny asks, "Hey, mom, can I get cloned?" Or when Jane comments "I've been trying out marijuana. It will soon be legal, you know." Or, when one of our colleagues at work asks us, "Fred, what do you make of the War?" What are we going to say? Is it "Good God, I know nothing about this"?

The need to be informed is only growing greater. The array of issues and new discoveries on which we need to be informed is awesome. So are the mountains of information to get on top of. Walk into a magazine superstore like Presse Internationale to buy something that goes beyond *Time* or *Maclean's*, and you have to

choose from thousands of magazines arranged in rows, stacks, and levels. Unless you know what you're looking for, you are lost.

Keeping up with the times and staying informed, it seems, takes more than reading the weekend paper. We need to go beyond the headlines, to frequent the local library a little, and the Internet a lot. Getting coffee klatches together round the kitchen table can provide a useful forum for discussing and sharing ideas. Magazines like *Utne Reader*, *McLean's*, *World Watch*, or *World Press Review*, can provide us with news and views that reach far beyond what's available in the popular media.

Is doing this information homework merely a practical issue? Is it perhaps an ethical issue? I would dare to say it is one of the major ethical issues of our time. It has become impossible to live responsibly and make informed decisions without it. But what has "ethical" got to do with purchasing magazines, reading your email, or watching TV? To be a responsible citizen of planet earth, we need to be information literate. We need to be able confidently to surf the waves of information coming at us, and not get wiped out by sheer confusion — no small task. The first challenge is to find the right information

### THE RIGHT INFORMATION

The word, right, in an era of politically correct relativism, is for many like a red rag to a bull. But we have to acknowledge that much of the information that comes at us is biased, reductionist, and coloured by the values of the publisher. Right information declares its bias if it has one, gives the big picture and does not pander to publishers, governments or corporations. It acts as mentor and guide to responsible action.

Why is it difficult to find right information? First, because we are awash in information garbage, endlessly featuring celebrities, sporting events and, of course, ads. In certain parts of the world, the front-page news is that a football player is retiring. What bundle of values would tell a news editor that Jimmy Fleetfoot's demise is *the news* that readers need for the day. This simply panders to the reader's tastes. It does not tell them what the real news of the day is. Why do we need many sources of information? Partly because publishers and editors tend to have different loyalties. Some don't trust the infor-

mation being delivered on TV, or in *The Financial Times*. The media news filters tend to be dominated by the needs of advertisers. And they don't want you to know that the body lotion they advertise has caused some ghastly rashes on young people. The information made available in the media is not scientifically objective information. It is coloured by all kinds of needs: the needs of certain groups who may not want their doings in the high Arctic or the Amazon rainforests well known.

At times, the conflicting biases of news reporters are compounded by scientific relativism. For example, if our Johnny is doing a project on climate change, serious confusion is likely to result. On the one hand, Johnny will learn that leading scientists of more than a hundred nations, under the UN Panel on Climate Change, have compiled massive evidence of global warming and the human causes of it. In the day's paper, however, he may read that the President of the most powerful nation in the world is telling his people that there is still scientific doubt about global warming. When Johnny discovers this inconsistency and asks you about it, what are you going to say? Are you going to throw it off with some bromide such as, "Today's world is full of things like that — you just have to get used to it" — and thus consign your son to the world of double-talk. Or, are you going to take a deep breath, and lay it out for him? Then you'd have to explain how the truth is often a victim of politics. Acknowledging global warming would simply be too inconvenient for the President's political friends and those who put him into power. These days everyone could do with a course on media education.

### FORMING OUR OWN STANCE

There are so many issues today where responsible citizens must read under and around the news reports, to form their own opinions enough to take their own stance. The recent Iraq war called for a stance on our part. We could easily opt out of responsible information-seeking by being doctrinaire on the side of war or peace: "I believe any war is immoral, so I am on the side of peace" or, "My country right or wrong. I'm all for the war". Or, failing arbitrary conviction, we could throw our hands up in the air, saying, "The world today is just too complex to be able to form any opinion".

To avoid those doctrinaire or know-nothing stances, it's necessary for us to get past our own habitual assumptions, and seek out the facts of the situation. We'll have to read some history of Iraq-US relations. We'll have to seek out other interpretations of the war. We'll have to investigate motivations and ask the old question, *cui bono*? Who's going to benefit from the war? Then we have to read wider still, beyond for and against. This may scramble previously formed views. Once you have a cross-section of news and views, then you have to think for yourself and look at it from a global viewpoint. To do that, it may be necessary to turn off the TV for a while, and think. Out of that you may create a stance toward the war that you can live with.

We also need information homework simply to make responsible everyday decisions. Economic decisions: what newspaper to buy? What food companies to patronize? Which to boycott? Then there is ethically responsible investing — a universe in itself. What organizations am I going to support? How do I know they're worth supporting? How much of their funds get to the needy parties? How much goes to administration? This takes some digging and asking around.

### MAKING RESPONSIBLE DECISIONS

Bringing the right information to bear is critical to making responsible decisions. To walk into a voting booth without having done one's homework on the candidates, and then make a few marks haphazardly opposite some names is electoral immorality. To buy a car with values based on appearance and fashion without enquiring about safety, miles per gallon, and emissions, does a disservice to the planet and to one's future passengers.

There is political homework. Who are the parties? What do they stand for? What's their record? Who are these individuals that will show up on the ballot? Are they good, decent people? What platform are they standing on? If they already occupy a seat, what bills did they support in parliament?

Then there are cultural decisions? Do I have a budget that covers cultural events and resources? Is this video I am renting a cultural plus or minus? Does it just reinforce my values, or does it challenge them? The Net is loaded with multiple reviews on videos. There is no excuse for picking a dud. Am I in touch with the

human settlement I live in, be it city or town? Or am I content with continuing to feather my nest at home, and letting the rich local culture go by?

Then there are all the new discoveries and possibilities that abound as we move into this century — genetically modified (GM) foods (and animals) for example. Sounds like a mad scientist at work. And we are eating GM foods willy-nilly. What's to be thought of them? The Europeans are quite negative about them, and call them Frankenstein food. Most North Americans don't seem to care. Is GM food a good idea? The African farmers seem to think so. By some accounts they can triple or quadruple their crop production with GM seeds.

What about the upcoming decriminalization of marijuana? Are we just going to let others decide about that? If it becomes legal, what is our stance towards it? Are we going to let our kids deal with the issue alone, or do our homework and find enough information to be able to take a responsible stance toward it?

To become a responsible seeker of information in today's world takes some sweat. One has to work horizontally and vertically — horizontally, to get a wide cross-section of information, and vertically, to read and think deeply on a specific set of issues.

To go wide, one will have to resort to unusual measures, since the news media stopped going wide some time after World War II. When was the last time you saw a news item related to Latin America? To find out what's going on in

Latin America, Africa, or China, some solid time on the Internet will be needed and/or investing in some magazines like *BBC Focus on Africa* or *NACLA: Report on the Americas* or *The Economist*. If we let our local media dictate our news access, there will be large gaps in our grasp of the world. This kind of reading is especially important in these times, since big news stations like CNN developed the idea of "Breaking News". This gives them permission to eliminate news from everywhere else until they have run the current breaking news into the ground.

### SPECIFIC ISSUES

Every year, new sci-tech advances seem to pop up and receive initial reviews from the media, either rave or suspicious. You hear reference to these occasionally in conversations, and may form an initial opinion. But after a while you realize you don't know what on earth to think about it. You can bracket it and go on to more pressing things, but, it may keep on coming back. In conversations about the topic, you find yourself caught out time after time. Now it's time to do your own research. I have mentioned GM foods and would like to use that as an example.

For some time I have been fiddling in my mind with the question of foods modified by biotechnology. To me, it seemed at first blush a pretty natural process, despite the human agency. After all, our most common cereal and food source, wheat, happened through the gene sharing of three kinds of grass.

One day I picked up a book on the subject by a British author. The writing manifested a great deal of heat and indignation, and I wondered why the British would be so indignant about it. All the same, some of the suspicion rubbed off on me. I took some notes but didn't finish the book. Some time later, my editor made a chance remark that questioned my suspicion of GM food. Then I was reading *BBC Focus on Africa*, and came across a very interesting few lines:

Standing in the way of the GM revolution is like stopping a stampede of elephants. Globally, farmers have embraced the new technology because it makes them more efficient, protects or increases yields, and reduces their reliance on chemicals. The issue in Africa is not whether to adopt biotech but how to adopt it. With GM technology, Africa can quadruple its maize output, more than

triple sweet potato output, and increase banana production by eight times.

Well, the Africans know a good thing when they see it. Now I really was confused. At this point, I decided to drop everything and give the topic an hour's worth of research on the Net. It seems that anyone who thought the inexorable rise of genetically modified crops had been stymied by consumer pressure and green opposition is wrong. According to figures out recently, 5.5 million farmers worldwide, mainly in the US, Argentina, Canada and China, now grow GM crops. These crops cover more than 50 million hectares. That's an area the size of Spain. And with vast countries like Indonesia about to join the GM club, next year's leap could be bigger still. By 1999 in the US, it was expected that 40 per cent of the corn, 50 per cent of the cotton, and 45 per cent of the soybean crop area would be genetically modified, reducing the use of chemical pesticides by millions of kilograms. A further benefit is that these crops create more scope for minimum-tillage farming, reducing erosion of topsoil. Yet in Britain, where there is still no commercial growing, the GM industry's prospects have taken another dive. A report on the potential health impacts of GM foods slams the current system of safety screening-developed in the US-as flawed and subjective, and calls for better tests. The fact that existing GM crops haven't harmed anyone is no reason for complacency, the report warns.

I had one more question to ask before I had enough data to form a firm, tentative opinion. Why are the British so down on GM foods? Why is such a vigorous campaign being waged to raise suspicion and fear in the public mind, and stop the use or experimental development of genetically modified crops? I asked the Web this question. The penny dropped as I read a paragraph of an analysis by Gordon Conway, author of *Food for All in the 21st Century*:

The first thing to say is that the UK is living in the aftermath of the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) crisis, which has fundamentally changed the attitude of most people toward government, industry, and food safety. ... The BSE outbreak, with its as-yet-undetermined impact on the human population of the UK, acted like a vaccine, causing the public to develop psychological antibodies to novel food.

#### NORTH AMERICAN TRENDS RESEARCH PROJECT

Every 5 years ICA Canada researches and documents world trends. This is a participatory process coordinated by Brian Stanfield who then documents the information. This was last done in 1997 resulting in the *Smoke Signals* publication. Understanding the trends of our times enables each of us to understand what is going on because we have a larger picture. It gives us the opportunity to respond to those trends and to participate more effectively in our communities.

There are many different ways to participate:

- Host coffee klatches, evening, kitchen table dialogues with your family and friends.

- Attend an event in the fall: in Vancouver the week of October 20 or in Toronto (date to be announced)

- Participate online as well as form a web link. Information on this will be available later.

To participate or to host a Trends event, please contact Duncan Holmes at [dholmes@icacan.ca](mailto:dholmes@icacan.ca) or at 416-691-2316 (Toll Free in Canada 1-877-691-1422).

The British negativity on GM foods can be traced to their general suspicions arising from the outbreak of mad-cow disease. It had little to do with GM foods themselves.

Well, there was a lot more I could find out, for example: what are scientists outside Europe saying about GM foods? Is there a real downside? But my curiosity was satisfied for the time being. I felt I could give a good account of myself if someone put the same questions to me. Then, two weeks later I was having lunch with some old friends who raised further questions. An Indian colleague pointed out that GM genes are inherited at the expense of non-GM genes, when cross-pollination occurs between GM and conventional species. That means the local Indian farmer loses the seeds he has depended on for centuries. I was sent back to the Internet again, and the dialogue goes on. An hour's worth of research on the Net can yield a relevant crop of facts. But it is dangerous to be absolutist with your findings.

None who use the Web needs convincing about the amazing piece of work the Internet is. To use a search engine like Google you don't need to know anything about Boolean operators or structured query language. You can simply type in your question: "Why are the British so negative about GM foods?". And back comes a string of answers, presto. These days, everyone can be their own research institute.

#### SOUL RESEARCH

Finally, there is another world of investigation, which proceeds less by scientific deduction than intuition. These are the issues of the human spirit. They arise daily, but there are issues on which we need to dig deep. How do you know which questions to pursue in depth? The answer to that question is existential, not intellectual. These are the questions that bug you. They are probably centered around some recent event in your life. They rankle, leave you frustrated, maybe anxious, or intensely curious. They wake you up at two in the morning, and rattle round in your being until they force you to get up and start mind-mapping the question.

There are feelings tied up with these questions and events. All feelings, whether positive or negative, are an important part of the body's intelligence



## ICA Australia Celebrates 35 Years of Service

Recently, ICA Colleagues from Northern Territory, Queensland, parts of NSW, Victoria and South Australia gathered at a small town near Mildura, by the noble Murray River in south-western NSW. Together with many associates engaged in various arenas of social care, they met and celebrated around a theme of "Shared Earth Connections".

A great storm bursting out of the Southern Ocean preceded the weekend. As folk gathered, they told stories of travelling for three days by car, and arriving in the midst of a heavy dust storm. The forces of history had provided us with a huge, well-equipped hall in this tiny town. To enter the anniversary space, you navigated between the bingo hall and the poker machines, taking care not to get distracted.

After appropriate contexts on Friday evening, the following day we piled into buses for a two-hour trip to Lake Mungo, an aboriginal sacred site and World Heritage listed. Our Aboriginal guide was Graham Clark, whose expertise on the site was astonishing. He pointed out that aborigines had settled on the banks of the fertile lakes, which dried up 15,000 years ago. Carbon-dated Aboriginal remains go back to 60,000 years. Shimmering white cliffs known as the Walls of China showed remains of aboriginal hearths, campfires and burial sites. The impact of Mungo on everyone was obvious. The awe thickened and we felt the centuries within us.

Next day we saw displays on different kinds of work which our colleagues were doing. We shared an amazing array of projects and experiments, ranging from the Wayside Chapel, Kings Cross Sydney, to Chances for Children in rural districts, environmental work on Kangaroo Island, the work of reconciliation with Aboriginals, work with Sudanese refugees, and much, much more. Next, we discussed and identified the keys to success of these projects.

Walking round the hall, you captured a sense of an amazing number of hives of activity going on. The colourful Australian decor added to the effect, and made the space a celebration of doing and being.

On Sunday, groups worked further to identify the levers and catalysts in the projects. Sunday evening was celebration time. The whole group got into cars and crossed the Murray to the Victorian town of Robinvale. There, a group of multi-ethnic young people had prepared a concert for their guests. The participants were touched not only by the music, but also by the hospitality of Robinvale and its citizens.

Next day, people rounded off the conference with a session on action. Then everyone repaired to a large gum tree outside near the banks of the Murray and presented gifts to each other. We pulled out the depth significance of the gathering. Then each of us touched the tree and dispersed. The 35 years of the Institute had been celebrated and projected into the future.

— Brian Stanfield

because they introduce us to these deeper felt meanings. Feelings are like the phone ringing. A message is trying to get through. We don't have phones in our offices or homes just to make noise. They ring to alert us that some information is waiting. The trouble is that when the internal phone is ringing, people do not rush to respond — they want to escape. A bank manager will have to dig deep to come up with a responsible decision on how to handle his daughter's unplanned pregnancy. He would prefer turning on the TV or pouring a Scotch rather than devoting time to deciding his stance. He may go to the refrigerator, pick up *The Economist*, daydream, go shopping. When a superintendent wrestles with a question of integrity in relation to her job, she wants to escape, go numb in order to avoid it, or substitute something she likes in place of what is perceived to be a fearful threat. So she goes shopping.

**An Important Announcement About Edges**

*Edges* is now available to members and subscribers on our web site and as an e-mail. If you wish to receive *Edges* electronically, please ensure that you fill in the form on the back of the accompanying letter, or contact us at [ica@icacan.ca](mailto:ica@icacan.ca).

ICA Canada's web site address is <http://icacan.ca>.

A party goer is rattled by a comment made at the party on Friday night. Rather than wrestle with its meaning, she goes to bed. The neural response in our brain stimulates and reinforces this particular habit of avoidance — a real shame, since a little sustained and focused reflective work might yield a truth we have been hiding from.

Getting the process of event, questions and emotions to yield light and meaning most often means that the

human spirit has to work it through. This is not to say that books and mentors can't help. But on the larger issues of the soul, it might take some midnight oil to come to terms and make a responsible decision. Here, you become a wrestler with the issue, getting a half-nelson on it. In the morning you know what must be done, or at least you know the arena of action.

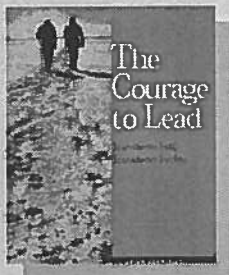
**ACTION**

As I said, keeping up with the times and staying informed is work. Noam Chomsky reminds us that understanding the world is everyone's responsibility, but it doesn't help yourself or anyone else unless such understanding leads to action. So after we have imbibed so much information, what can we do? Here are a few ideas:

1. You have been reading about Latin America and are upset by some of the

## The Courage to Lead Book Series

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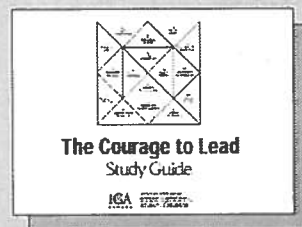
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**The Courage to Lead Study Group** — Sessions on October 15, 29, November 12, 26 from 6:30pm-10pm, in Toronto. Cost is \$65.00. For more information please contact Duncan Holmes at [dholmes@icacan.ca](mailto:dholmes@icacan.ca).

**To order any of the above please contact Christine at:**

Phone: 416.691.2316 Fax: 416.691.2491 E-mail: [ica@icacan.ca](mailto:ica@icacan.ca) Web site: <http://icacan.ca>

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news events from there. Decide to volunteer for a year with some international development organization. It will change every image you had.

2. Gather together a discussion group. Get them to choose a topic and discuss it every Monday night for X number of weeks. Have someone write up the conclusions and get them published.

3. Write a letter to your electoral representative stating what you have discovered and recommending a course of action.

4. Start your own Web Page and publish your findings on issues. Invite dialogue about them.

5. In the case of a spirit struggle, talk to your group about what you went through, your feelings, what became clear, and what decision you arrived at and where you are on implementing it.

6. Have a family news conversation regularly. Saturday and Sunday break-

fast times may be suitable. Here's a format you can use:

#### *News Conversation*

Give a context like this: "This morning we want to experiment with a conversation on the news. Remember there are no wrong answers. We want to share whatever knowledge we have on the news events".

#### *Questions*

- What are some news events of the past week?
- Which of these events do you consider very significant?
- Someone tell us a bit more about this event? What's going on? What's really happening?
- What makes this event important? How will it affect the rest of the world?
- What can be done to deal with the after-effects of this event? What could we do?

Try this out sometime. You might be surprised. ❖

### *In Appreciation*

The staff of ICA Associates Inc. have provided the non-profit ICA Canada with hours and hours of their time over the last few years. They have served in monitoring finances, writing and publishing *Edges* newsletter, promoting and encouraging new projects such as "Youth as Facilitative Leaders", board training in facilitation, environment and sustenance preparation for board meetings, and active participation in the AGM's.

Royalties from their courses and publications help sustain Institute research and method development. We, the board members on behalf of our members and friends and international ICA's say a loud "THANK YOU". We appreciate you!



**ICA Associates Inc. is pleased to announce the translation of its book, *The Art of Focused Conversation: 100 Ways to Access Group Wisdom in the Workplace***

*L'Art de la Discussion Structurée* will be available this fall through ICA Associates Inc. It has been completely translated and our French team of Renaud and Marie-Noëlle are anxiously awaiting the arrival of the book. The book contains a new forward specific to the French edition as well.

The book will have a special introductory price from June through to October and it will be available on our web site as well. Keep watching the ICA Associates Inc. web site for further details. WEB SITE: [HTTP://ICA-ASSOCIATES.CA](http://ICA-ASSOCIATES.CA)

## **Volunteer Opportunities**

*There are volunteer opportunities in the following areas:*

**Archivist:** ICA Canada has an active archive and related database that serves its ongoing writing and research work. We are looking for a volunteer who can incorporate newly acquired material into the archives and continue the ongoing maintenance of our archives and database. Experience with archives is helpful but not required.

**Volunteer Coordinator:** ICA Canada is beginning to expand its use of volunteers to enhance its ongoing work. We are looking for a volunteer who can establish and coordinate an active volunteer program. Our intent is to involve members in contributing to the organization both within the GTA and through the rest of Canada. Experience with volunteer programs is helpful.

## Youth as Facilitative Leader Program

In June this year, 15 young people participated in the first session of the YFL training program. In diversity of backgrounds and experience, the participants ranged from high school students to university graduates, from government employees to youth hostel workers, and from youth working with youth at risk, to 4H volunteers. The training offered was the Group Facilitation course, and responses to this were very positive. For some it was a life changing experience. Others felt it was the best leadership training they had experienced. This summer they have been using the methods learned in their jobs and volunteer placements. A second session will be conducted in the fall.

## Organizational Changes

As mentioned in the last *Edges*, ICA Canada is in the process of hiring a new Executive Director. This will allow Duncan Holmes to focus full time on the work of ICA Associates Inc. in its delivery of facilitation and training. The position has been advertised, and a selection process has begun. We hope that shortly we will be introducing the new ED to you. Our expectation is that this shift will provide a new energy and focus that will take the organization to its next level of development.

## ICAI Guatemala Conference 2004

The next ICA:I global conference is scheduled for Aug 15-21, 2004 in Antigua, Guatemala. Entitled "Weaving a New Society - Connecting the Local Village to the Global Village", it promises to be a great opportunity to explore the country and key global themes including:

- |   |                              |
|---|------------------------------|
| Holistic Life Long Learning             | Community Youth Development  |
| Building Social Capital                 | Sustainable Economic Systems |
| Building a Vitalized Social Fabric      | Global HIV/AIDS challenge    |
| Process and Techniques of Participation |                              |

Information updates will be posted on our web site at <http://icacan.ca>. Begin to think about attending a conference with a difference; a conference of sharing how what we know locally can impact our globe.

ICA Canada would like to sincerely thank our supporters over this past year for helping us to fulfill our mission to empower positive social change. To correct any errors or omissions to this list, contact Vera at (416) 691-2316, ext. 234.

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Edges highlights new cultural patterns and fresh approaches to participation and social change.

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