

Verna Allee - 8/02/04

The following are Excerpts from an interview conducted in the summer of 2004 by Alex Bennet, who was interviewing thought leaders in KM for her dissertation thesis in the Ph.D. program at Fielding University.

ALEX:            Could you tell me your first connections with KM and how that interest grew?

VERNA           My first interest in knowledge in organizations was around organizational intelligence and collaborative intelligence. My Masters degree is in the study of human consciousness. When I finished my undergraduate studies in the mid 1980's at UC Berkeley I picked up two books to read. One was *The Dancing Wo Loo Masters* (Zukov's first book on the new physics) and the other *The Portable Jung*, Carl Jung's writing. I was starting serious meditation practice about the same time in conjunction with a very intense, near-death, death's door kind of medical crisis with my (late) husband. There was something rather magical that happened and I couldn't articulate it, but somehow I became very open and all of these things were working on me in such a way that I suddenly started seeing systems everywhere. I was seeing connections of everything, the interdependence of life and business - and I had no language to talk about it. All I did was babble.

Once the crisis was over with my husband, I had the Promethean impulse to write a book on Wisdom. I felt at that time in my life, in my mid thirties, a cognitive shift. It wasn't just a psychological shift. I actually began to think differently. It felt cognitive to me because the way I was thinking was so dramatically different. So I became absolutely fascinated about the mind and how that shift into what I think of as wisdom really happens. I decided to write this book called *Growing Wiser* and I deliberately didn't talk to anybody who might know anything about wisdom because I didn't want to be influenced. For a year I wandered bookstores and libraries reading whatever drew me, and integrated a lot of the ideas I was exploring. I found at the end of this time ... the book never got published, and it probably wasn't worth publishing, but it was an incredible experience ... at the end of this time, this process, it was very clear that I had two big interests. One was organizational systems, including the business itself, not just human systems. I wanted to know how the whole thing goes together, how things work. And I was very interested in intelligence, in mind, especially collaborative or group intelligence.

I talked to Michael Ray, whose book *Creativity in Business* has just come out, and babbled on about these things I was interested in, and he said, "There's a field of work that you might be interested in looking into called organizational development."

I said, "What's that?"

"Well, you look at the whole organization, the enterprise, and help people make it better." I said, "You're kidding! Do you mean people get paid for this? Sign me up!" [Laughter]

He pointed me to graduate school at JFK University in Orinda, California, which had a specialization in organizational leadership. What I did not know until later, and I am incredibly grateful for it - there was a small window of about three years in time that this program existed, and it had an advisory board with people like Peter Senge, physicist Fritjof Capra, Willis Harmon who founded the Institute of Noetic Science, and Juanita Brown whose book on world café is going to be out very shortly. It was an absolutely amazing program led by a charismatic young Frenchman who was just delightful. It wasn't academically rigorous in the way Berkeley was, but it gave me courage to pursue my questions. I was very attracted to organizational learning, and this was before Peter's book had come out but I saw some of the early writings that later turned

into the book. So I hung out my shingle in 1989-1990 to consult in organizational learning and... nobody came. Nobody wanted it! Could not sell it.

So after a year of no paying customers I got a call from a man who identified himself as a benchmarking manager at Pacific Bell who asked me if I could do a secondary literature search for benchmarking on the topic of customer service measurement. I assured him I could do an excellent job of that for him if he would just tell me what he was talking about. [Laughter]

So he did, and I found this great practice where I could get paid to learn about business challenges and support cross-boundary learning. So I actually managed to work the knowledge question as some other people like Melissie Rumizen and Carla O'Dell did through benchmarking. As I began to work in this a little bit, I very quickly got a reputation for best in practice research methodologies. I thought this was really cool: I'm going to get paid to learn about business issues which is what I want to learn about, and I can experiment with all of my understanding of organizational learning and collaborative intelligence, because you have one organization that is trying to learn from another.

The projects I got involved in were so extremely complex that I thought I could also experiment with some of my ideas around systems theory and complexity. So I snuck in all of my work under the radar of benchmarking and reengineering. I was lucky to get one day to work with one of these really interesting teams that were trying to do something like revamp technology support for all of AT&T worldwide. Now there's a small question. [Laughter] I'd get to walk into a company I knew very little about, in an industry I knew nothing about, working with people I had probably never actually met until that moment, working on a very complex business issue that I also was completely unfamiliar with. And it was a wonderful, wonderful discipline. This is actually why I developed this value network mapping methodology because it was the fastest way I knew to really understand how the business worked well enough in the course of a day so that we not only did our benchmarking work, but often they would get surprising insights as well.

Over the course of two or three years I evolved an understanding and a certain interest in complexity - knowledge complexity and organizational complexity. No one of course was interested in KM at that time - it wasn't part of the language.

I remember vividly in December 1993, I was working on this framework for organizational complexity and I'd been working one around knowledge complexity. I'd actually been teaching a course on knowledge insight and consciousness, and thought I'd like a little quiet time at Christmas to think about this. They say, be careful what you pray for because you might get it. Well I was so sick Christmas eve I couldn't go to any parties and I was home in bed. It was quiet all right! At 4 o'clock in the morning I got up and I went to my desk and I wrote two phrases: organizational learning and modes of knowledge. And I thought, "why did I do this?" There's nothing here. That's what I want to look at, but I'm sick, I'm going back to bed." So I went back to bed and then ten minutes later I got up and wrote most of a table of all the different theorists I integrated for the knowledge complexity framework, If you know *The Knowledge Evolution*, I threw all the theory in the back of the book and the table is there. What really popped out at me was the archetypal pattern, what I call the knowledge archetype, this pattern of our understanding about knowledge and complexity. So I thought "this is either good or it's total junk - I don't care, I'm sick and I'm going back to bed." [Laughter] When I started feeling better I thought, maybe it isn't junk. And I actually rolled that insight and that framework into all of my consulting engagements and found I became more effective both in problem solving and in workshop design.

So that is how I came to the question of knowledge, and it was really the knowledge question, it wasn't just organizational learning, it really was the knowledge archetype that I was working. But I didn't know anybody else that was working that question and I had absolutely no one to talk with. It was probably the loneliest period of my life, retrospectively speaking.

ALEX: Then when did you hear about KM?

VERNA: KM began to come on the radar screen just a little tiny bit in 1995, and Juanita Brown helped me make some connections. I think I was doing a workshop in Boston about 1994, I don't remember exactly when it was. She arranged for me to meet with Rita Cleary who at that time was handling Peter Senge's speaking engagements. So I spent some time with Rita and her husband Bill and shared with her the knowledge complexity framework and also shared with her this mapping methodology and she looked at my stuff and she said "the kinds of work you're doing is what thought leaders do, you're really innovating." It was like a light bulb went on, because I'd been trying so hard to market my consulting group and my own work really took a back seat. So I thought, wait a moment, if this is the kind of work I really want to do, then what do people do - who do this kind of work? And she said well they write books, and they speak a lot, and they do use their name as a recognition point, not necessarily the company name. So I changed a lot of things and Rita also introduced me to my Karen Speerstra, the acquisitions editor at Butterworth Heinemann. She was just launching a line of books and she had a feeling that KM was going to be a good topic. Had no way of knowing for sure, but she had this hunch and was actively looking for people who could write on that.

I didn't really realize at the time just how few of us there were. So anyway she really wanted a book and we did a contract and, in the meantime, I was so discouraged because people weren't interested in this question - that I decided in 1996 to give it up. The benchmarking was no longer alive for me because the questions were too small and people weren't really interested in doing things differently. Also there was too much marketing involved and I hate to try and sell anything to anybody and I didn't like that part of the business. So I told all my associates - I had about 6 people in my core group and 10 or 12 different researchers - I'm not going to do this anymore. And people who loved me a lot thought I was crazy because it was my core business at the time. But I thought I just can't do this, it's not alive for me, I have creative work that I want to do to put these ideas forward about knowledge. I'm going to do this book as a last hurrah for the business. I'm going to put everything I know and understand in there and at least I'll be able to come to closure on all the work of the last several years. And so I was literally going away, going out of business.

At that time there were less than 100 articles in business journals on KM, intellectual capital, all of it. People who are now good friends like Karl-Erik Sveiby, Hubert Saint-Onge and Tom Stewart, they were just names that I saw in a Fortune article or some other article. I didn't know any of these people personally. So I still had no one to talk with and I had never had enough money together to be able to participate in the Society for Organizational Learning, so I was never in the core group around that, though I had a lot of friends there. So I wrote the book and much to my amazement by the time it hit the shelf it was the hot global management topic. As the manuscript was circulating I almost immediately connected with the Intellectual Capital Pioneers, which was the community of practice group that Leif Edvinsson pulled together, and they were meeting in early 1997 and my book had just come out. It was literally hot off the press, wasn't even publicly released yet. And it was like instant community. Most of them at that initial meeting I went to had seen the manuscript and even endorsed it. People would talk with me about that time asking, so how's your book going? I'd say, "I can't believe this! I have people who understand what I'm talking about! I have friends. I got to speak at a conference. I've got speaking engagements, I've got work, (because people like Charles Savage would say, I've got

some work here, come on and do this engagement with me.) I've got work, I've got friends, I've got recognition." And they'd say, "wow, that's great how long has the book been out?" I'd say, "Oh, it will be out next May!"

And I was off and running.

ALEX: Great. So from the ashes ...

VERNA: I don't get to tell that story very often so I'm glad you asked. [Laughter] Clearly it was really following my passion at a time when it ... actually, people who loved me a lot were asking me if I didn't think I should be getting some therapy because I abandoned my business, I was in serious financial jeopardy because I had no work, and I was taking time to write a book on a topic that obviously nobody cared about. It looked totally nuts to people around me.

ALEX: But you knew it was important ...

VERNA: The only thing I would say was that I don't have a choice. This is what I have to do right now. I don't know why, but this is what I have to do. And I've been having such a great time ever since! [Laughter]

ALEX: So how do you define knowledge?

VERNA: You know, that is one quagmire that I try not to step into. I managed to write *The Knowledge Evolution* and you can look cover to cover and I never did actually define knowledge.

ALEX: I actually did. [Laughter] I told you I was going to ask some hard questions.

VERNA: And my usual answer is that philosophers have been mucking around with that for 3,000 years and there's no way I want to step into that quagmire.

ALEX: Nonetheless, with all that you write you have to have some sort of pattern or consideration that you have, howbeit a description, not a definition.

VERNA: In a nutshell it's basically what people know. If you're talking about knowledge in organizations it's how do you better work with what people know to improve the quality of that and share it ...

ALEX: So that's actually your definition for KM as well?

VERNA: Right. Knowledge is what people know. What I've learned Alex is that it doesn't matter how I define it. I thought when I wrote *The Knowledge Evolution* and teased out the knowledge archetype that would once and for all settle this question of data, information, knowledge, and it didn't. I know the book is selling very, very well but nobody ever refers to that. And if I've been in one I've been in a hundred conversations about this question of what is data, what is information and what I realize is it's not about the answer, it's a learning question that people have to explore when they begin work in this area. That's what it's about, it's about that conversation. Now there'll never be a definitive answer to it and it's not important. The important thing is ... the real management question is what do we pay attention to in order to be successful? Clearly in this economy knowledge is something you have to pay attention to as a leader, as a manager in order to be successful in your business. That's where people need to go with it. It's not the answer, but to get their awareness onto the right question.

ALEX: If KM is considered a management initiative such as TQ, Six Sigma, BPR, how would you say it's different?

VERNA: It doesn't fit any of the boxes conveniently, it's actually an umbrella question. There are a few questions that if you pursue them they take you into another world view. And it's one of these questions. When I was deciding whether to write that book, whether to really put the energy into it or not, my touchstone for the work I do is ... is this really what people need? Is it what the Earth needs? Is this a good question for us? Is it going to take us into a more hopeful future? And when I look at the work that people like Leif Eriksson and Karl-Erik were doing, they weren't asking the knowledge question, they came to that second. The first question is how is value really created? And they began to focus on intangibles out of that. That is a great question. I was so riveted by that question. Wow! If we stay with this question and we take it as far as we can go it will open us into another world, and how we think about what makes us successful, and we may be able to reconcile our business and economic models with the fabric of society and the web of life. If we take that question as far as it can go, it will take us to the earth, to the care of the planet.

ALEX: And that question being?

VERNA: How is value really created?

ALEX: And KM's relationship to that is?

VERNA: Well, the relationship to that is when you look at how do we really create value, it is by working consciously with our intangible assets, the competence of our people, the ability to get things done, the efficiency of our internal systems and structures, and the web of our relationships - the quality of our relationships with customers and suppliers and business partners. These are all intangible assets, the classic three of the intellectual capital, the intangibles. And working with knowledge flows is essential for leveraging intangibles.

ALEX: Where do you think KM is in its life cycle?

VERNA: I think it's actually being mainstreamed in many ways and I think also in its life cycle, it's sort of coming full circle again because the field was actually launched by this bigger question of value, and I think we're coming back to that bigger question. In *The Future of Knowledge* I talk about the three levels of innovation that have to happen for any real transformation, particularly in business. One is the level of tools and technologies and another level is a new kind of social innovation, and the third is innovation in how we think about the business. So it was really led off with the innovation in how we think about the business ... It was really the intellectual capital people who launched the KM field. But it almost immediately turned to the technology question as the vendors jumped all over it, and there is a technology underpinning that is absolutely essential to do really sophisticated work around knowledge sharing. So it's important for us to do that too.

Now we're seeing, the current interest is all in social innovation, communities of practice, social network analysis. What is coming forward in the questions around complexity in particular is a return to that question of how is value really created? How does it really all work? That's the innovation I'm working the hardest with around the kinds of things that you work also, to help people think of the business in a fundamentally different way, based on a totally different set of assumptions.

In reengineering we had the new technologies of statistical analysis and flowcharts and process analysis, a lot of new tools and technologies. We had the social innovation of teams (remember when that was new?) and we had the business innovation of the value chain, right? So they all three were there. It was a huge shift in business. So all three of these are here, or potentially here, but for us to really come through this passage we're going to have to do all three. People are really struggling with the new business thinking, it's so enormously difficult for them.

And also we need to learn an entirely new set of behaviors, and I believe that the communities of practice and interest and the way people are beginning to learn how to support communities of practice, learning communities, is actually building the skills that we need to live in a self-organizing world of business. We are operating from different principles, there also has to be different kinds of behavior that go with it. And this is skill building. People need to learn how to be accountable to each other for the work that we're doing. That's the basic skill that people are building with communities of practice.

ALEX:            Could you tell me about a time that you felt really passionate about KM?

VERNA:           I had a bit of a renewal last year. Because so much of the work the last two years has been the basics with technology, and communities of practice, I helped Environment Canada launch their communities of practice initiative. And that began to really be fun for me again, because it was people connecting and people seeing what was alive for them in that. What really shifted for me last year, was that I came to an appreciation that there is no way to make it safe. At some level that was just immensely freeing for me. I began speaking differently, and incidentally getting a better response because I was more alive and more passionate, and I just call it as I see it. I try to do it intelligently, I try to make it understandable, communicate as best I can, and be compassionate and supportive, but at the same time I will not back off the message. We do have to move to a totally different way in thinking about how things work. And there's some urgency about that for the planet. It's not about making people feel comfortable or safe.

We're constantly working this edge, all of us that are working with these new ideas. Max Boisot's book, *Knowledge Assets*, reminds us that whenever there's a really new idea in the world a number of things happen. First of all, it's ignored to see if it will go away. If it's not ignored then people laugh at it, and we certainly had our period of KM being laughed at and called flavor of the month. And then people will challenge it. You know, going back to traditional basics about how the marketplace really works. And just at the point that people begin to really accept it, you get a couple of things. There's some really fierce backlash about how wrong it is, but the other thing that happens is that people will try to pull this new thing, this new world view, back into their own understanding. Sometimes I'll reach for an analogy, and the heads will start nodding, and I think great, we communicated then I'll realize we all just fell back into the old thinking. Working with a customer I don't use the language of tangibles and intangibles, it might be in an environment where we use the terms mandated and non-mandated. In another business we might use contractual and non-contractual, but the art is to hold the line with the ideas and principles so that we're not sucked right back into that old way of working.

ALEX:            So keep it as a systems approach ...

VERNA:           Yeah. Oh ...if it's too easy then they think this is just like something they already know - they're happy, they're comfortable but they haven't really come into this new place. So there's something about realizing that... it takes a kind of courage if you will ... to just hold with the group what the thinking is. I even get hecklers once in a while in an audience now, and it's

not bad, it's provocative because I am challenging some of the prevailing assumptions out there, and that can be very uncomfortable to people. And to still not back off.

ALEX: How has your energy changed over the years as you've been involved in KM?

VERNA: My energy ... [Laughter] I think I've just sort of become more who I really am [Laughter]. It's kind of always there, but it's getting more and more comfortable in the messages that I carry. We can't be all things to all people. I learned to stop doing that a long time ago, and I will say no to opportunities that don't feel like they're right on target for me where I know that I'm not the best person to serve that question, whatever one is being posed. And I will try to help people connect to other good people that will do that. In traditional business terms, that is not how most people work businesses. And I really do try to run my business as a value network. I have wonderful colleagues and friends who have a lot experience with how successful value networks work. I actually partnered with my husband in 1975 to create a networked manufacturing group in the sign industry that much to my surprise volume-wise and revenue-wise became almost one of the largest companies in its industry, and yet we had no employees. So there are some deep principles about working with other people and collaboration that I live and breathe down to my toes. Not everyone comes from that same philosophy, or if they do there's still old behaviors that they can't quite let go of. They get in the way.

ALEX: What areas of thought other than KM do you find exciting or have a passion about?

VERNA: What really gets me excited right now is work around complexity - self-organization is just a fascinating question. And the other area that is particularly intriguing to me is the way that network strategies and network muscle is beginning to exert itself in the civil society segment. I think what we're going to see is an entirely new kind of global governance on the planet, which is not going to be civil societies *or* nation states *or* business, but a very, very interesting dynamic relationship between all three, with networks and network strategies really at the heart of what makes it all work. And I'm going to be absolutely fascinated to see how that unfolds. There are only a few people who are really trying to understand this. It's not even something that people are really talking about that much. We talk about the rise of civil society, but I don't think people have put it together with the capacity for working as action networks. And we don't understand what action networks really look like. If we look at a network as a purposeful network, such as an organization, then there might be a very different typology of shapes, structures and dynamics that we need to understand.

ALEX: What is your source of inspiration for creating new ideas ... where do they come from?

VERNA: I have no idea! [Laughter] I commented to my sister some time last summer when I was invited onto this fascinating think-tank project for the European commission - I looked at Fran and I said, "I don't get this, all I do is sit here and pet the cat!" I don't know ... it's not so much a source of inspiration as it is just ... it's being a maverick, I guess, and asking is that the right question? And it's a habit after years and years of turning the question on its head, and asking what's the question behind that question, what's really going on here? Is it really about what people think it is or is there something else going on? It's more of a way of delving into whatever is at hand rather than looking for particular sources of inspiration. I'm pretty eclectic in my reading tastes, everything from people to pulp fiction to Ph.D. treatises and extremely heavy research on this, that or the other thing, but it's not any one particular source that I can identify. Conversations are great. Also, I'm very attracted to things that are deceptively simple, like Meg Wheatley's work.

ALEX: Describe some of the new ideas that you have contributed to KM?

VERNA: From my viewpoint, I think one contribution is the knowledge complexity framework in *The Knowledge Evolution*, which I think was helpful in bringing out some of the different arenas that people would need to look at and how they might think about things. And I've had very good feedback on that, everything from "gee, this is the most practical thing I've read" to "this is really a wisdom book in a business suit isn't it?" [Laughter] I think that was an important piece of work. And the current work with value network analysis is generating a lot of interest and people seem to find it really useful.

ALEX: So those ideas have been pretty well received?

VERNA: They have been well received. The interesting thing is that I don't see a tremendous amount of reference to that first work though. Which is kind of interesting, so I think it's something that works on people at a deeper level. All I can do is drop my little pebble into the pond.

ALEX: Why are you dropping that pebble in the pond?

VERNA: Because [pause] ... I don't know, it could be mild insanity! [Laughter] It's just what I'm called to. It's just what I do. I had a great teacher and aunt of mine who I had many conversations with as a teenager ... she's the one who first taught me the power of thoughts and the idea that thoughts are things ... which I truly believe, that thoughts do manifest. She said that every thought we have, every word that we speak, every act that we make is like dropping pebbles into a pond. And she looked at me and she said, "Verna, it's not your responsibility to know where the ripples spread. Your responsibility is to pay very close attention to the quality of the pebbles you're dropping in the pond." It is nice to be cited though because it keeps your name in front of people so you can get invited into the really interesting questions and get to tackle really cool stuff.

ALEX: So how do you feel about your ideas?

VERNA: I feel like they are gifts that just drop in my lap – or into my mind, I guess. I'm just absolutely delighted when one shows up! [Laughter] And also the other thing for me is to pay attention to what is alive for me, and to go with that question even if it seems totally insane. As soon as the knowledge evolution came off the press, I was racing down this pathway around the value network perspective and methodology, to bring that body of work together and forward. And someone said to me, Verna, wait, wait, wait, you just got this knowledge book out and KM is really hot, shouldn't you be following that (and making some serious money is really what she was thinking about)? And I said to her "but I've been working that question for several years. It's not alive for me in the same way that this question is." It doesn't seem very sensible to people. I've learned to live with that. As far as a life philosophy, as long as I can pay my bills and keep the cat fed and do the work that I feel that I must do, then I'm pretty lucky.

ALEX: So what are your core values and beliefs? Tough question.

VERNA: That is a huge question. Um, boy we could go into ... One thing, a little philosophy that I like very much that came from a Yoga philosopher kind of person, and people were asking him very deep questions about the meaning of life and purpose on the planet and all of these really big questions about what we're going to do, and he finally just smiled and said, "Love everybody, do your meditation, all the rest is entertainment." And I think that's probably

pretty much it. I do try to live with love and compassion as the operative stamp. I have to work very hard at this as we all do, but I do try to love everybody and I try to stay with the meditation part, to stay tuned spiritually, stay connected with higher self or being, purpose, deity, spirit, whatever you want to call that energy, to stay tuned to it. The entertainment part is not light and frivolous. What it really means to me is that everything is here for my learning, everything that we're going through collectively is for our learning, and to bring us joy, to bring us insight, to bring us to compassion. Everything else is truly about delight and joy, miracles and the absurdity and pain of being human.

ALEX: Do you see a relationship of KM to these core beliefs and values?

VERNA: On a good day, yes. On a good day. I think particularly now that it's beginning to evolve into the questions of knowledge networks and relationship, it's getting a lot closer, because that's really about love, isn't it? When we talk relationship and honoring relationship we're talking about Philos at least, brotherly love. We also know that knowledge will not multiply or be shared where there is no trust, where there's no respect. Our knowledge is very deeply linked to our identity, and we have great deal of sensitivity about knowledge and sharing our knowledge, because in a very real sense we're sharing who we are when we talk about the things that we know and understand and care about and believe in.

ALEX: Do you see yourself as a thought leader?

VERNA: [Pause, sigh] Well, I think in order to be a leader you have to have a lot of people following you and I'm not sure there are any... [Laughter]

ALEX: Not necessarily, just one.

VERNA: Then probably not [Laughter]. The funny thing is in the consulting business you get to write your own bio, right? They'll say well send me a bio about who you are and this is going to show up as the description of who you are. After this conversation with Rita Cleary, who said what you're really doing is thought leader stuff, I had an enormous deep process to go through around stepping into that role. And it was doubly charged - one is the self doubt that any human being has, but also as women in particular we're taught not to put ourselves forward. I looked at the kind of work I really wanted to do in the world, and I finally had to get to the point where I said Verna it's not about claiming this from an ego standpoint, the question is do you really want to do this work or not? Because the kind of work I love is the kind of work that thought leaders do. I was very careful in writing these bios and I would never write something until somebody else, usually several other people had said it. And so I sat down at my typewriter and I started to write this new bio, to put forward Verna Allee instead of my consulting group. So I get to the first line of this and it says Verna Allee is a recognized thought leader in..., and I start hyperventilating. [Laughter] I said, I can't do this, I absolutely can't do this. It was really funny to go through that process. But at a very deep level what really calls me is the kind of work that is about helping people think differently at a fundamental level and that process truly fascinates me. So if that is what they call that kind of work – then so be it.

ALEX: So you do own it?

VERNA: Yep, really own it. Sometimes I ask the universe if it couldn't have picked something just a little bit easier for me [Laughter]...but there it is. It's just what I do.

ALEX: How has being a KM thought leader then affected you?

VERNA: It's given me a wonderful platform to wreak a lot of havoc!

ALEX: Now we're going to go larger ... how has it affected YOU?

VERNA: Well, it has given me the opportunity to really stretch myself. What I didn't realize is the trap in that, of course, was once you write this down, once you get acknowledged as a thought leader, is that you have to stay a step ahead. [Laughter] So sometimes I sort of panic and think, my gosh, what am I going to do now! But it's great. It forces me to always stay tuned, first of all, to what is alive for me, to really listen to my gut, and to have the courage to speak to that even if it goes against what other people are saying. It could be completely opposite to what other people might say. And to have the courage to speak to first of all what I really truly believe, and secondly to really listen to other people, to listen to what their questions are, what the pain points are, where are they confused, what they're trying to understand, what they're trying to grapple with. You can be too far ahead of where people are, and completely lose them, so it's really forced me to listen to people. It's partly the philosophy of Disraeli who said, "Oh, there they go, I must hurry and follow because I'm their leader!" [Laughter]

I'm trying to listen for the heartbeat, the pulse, the question behind the questions that people are asking. The question behind the question is usually what's next. It doesn't feel so much as original to me personally but more being able to articulate what is ready to emerge as the next question or theme.

ALEX: And you know what's next. What rewards have come to you from your work in KM?

VERNA: I feel like I am just one of the luckiest people on the entire planet to get to do the kinds of things that I do. I pinch myself every day. I grew up in Kansas, and didn't have a whole lot of opportunity, and if there were predictions on who would be the most likely to fail I probably would have won hands down. I didn't much fit because of the way my mind works ... it was a real struggle for me. I came out of not much opportunity and a place where my self esteem was knocked down pretty much on a regular basis. So I had a big, quite a rich fantasy life when I was little. My library card was my lifeline to escape out of Kansas. I envisioned a life of getting to go all over the world and see interesting places and do interesting things and hang out with really cool people, and I never, never, ever imagined that I would be doing it this way. So I envisioned the life style a little bit, but what I didn't understand as a child, which I do now, is the really great thing is to be able to live a life of passion. I get to do something I am truly passionate about. And I get to pursue questions that I really care about, and hang out with people I really genuinely enjoy being with. How lucky can you get?.

ALEX: At a very high level, why are you passionate about what you do?

VERNA: I'm very earth-connected. When I travel places like India where you have a lot of human suffering and need and want, I feel the pollution and suffering of the earth as much as I do the people. I care very much about the planet, and I feel these questions that we're asking in business around knowledge and complexity and how is value really created and honoring intangible assets and honoring the wisdom and knowledge within people that we work with - these are the kinds of values that can carry us to a more hopeful future.

ALEX: In what ways has your thinking been influenced by other thought leaders?

VERNA: When I was welcomed into the thought leader community, it was just an amazing time. I felt so incredibly (I'm going to tear up now) - I felt so incredibly validated after having

been so lonely in my thinking for so long. And the kindness and welcome that people like Karl-Erik and Leif and Juanita and David Isaacs and Hubert and Charles Armstrong was so humbling and gratifying. It made me also feel like KM was a community I really wanted to be a part of because people were interested in learning from each other and building off of each other's ideas instead of tearing each other down. I think there is a real undercurrent of missionary zeal that runs through the community ... in particularly the thought leaders in the community, and I think it's somewhat a missionary zeal because I carry it too. I think... we really truly believe that these questions are important questions for our society and for the planet, not just business questions. All of these people not only encourage me to keep going when it gets bumpy but in a very practical way are thinking partners to test out ideas and integrate our work.

ALEX: How do you think your ideas have influenced other thought leaders?

VERNA: [Pause] I'm not sure I can really answer that. I do know that some of the ... particularly around the value network ... the language I've introduced has gotten picked up and is very commonly used. I know that people do reference my work I feel like I'm very much part of the community. And I feel very respected in the community. As far as the influence in other people's work, sometimes I see it show up as a direct influence in something they might say or write about and other times not. But generally I feel that I've had an impact and that I'd be missed if I went away.

ALEX: Or if you'd not been there, would you have been missed. Pretty powerful.

ALEX: What future opportunity does KM offer to individuals do you think?

VERNA: [Pause, sigh] I think what is going to be required in the future is that we are beginning to finally appreciate social skills and what Daniel Goleman calls emotional intelligence, much to the amusement of most of the women I know since women have "known" about this for thousands of years. [Laughter] But I think we are beginning to finally appreciate in business that there is a very human emotive side of being successful that we have managed to ignore for several decades at least and maybe we should start paying some attention to.

ALEX: So that's going to be an opportunity also for organizations then.

VERNA: I think what organizations are going to struggle with is the loss of power-type positions that they have enjoyed in the last economy as we move more and more to a network world of business. I truly believe that there is convergence between the forms of social network and the business network and how all this works. I think people are going to find that power by position is no longer the way they can operate, that it is power by influence and it's a very, very different kind of personal power. It has to be authentic for one thing. It can't be power by manipulation. That doesn't work either.

Last summer I worked on a think-tank project for the European commission where we put forward the vision that we feel the world is truly moving into 360 degree transparency between business, nation states, government and civil society. Orwell's very dark vision of the future was that big brother is watching and can see everything you are up to. We're now entering a world where not only is big brother watching, but we are also all watching each other and we are watching big brother. In a transparent society, which we are moving towards more and more, a very different kind of ethical underpinning is needed than we had to have in business before. And I think all the recent corporate scandals are reinforcing that. So the opportunity for individuals and businesses is that people with high integrity and character and good emotive skills are going to be very much appreciated. The opportunity for business, and the challenge, is

to change their mode of operating, their behavior, as leaders and organizations to live in this more transparent society.

ALEX: Let's ratchet everything up here ... I'm near the end and I'm going to deal with a couple of topics that you've brought up in our discussions. These are obviously things you're very passionate about and very near home. At the very highest level, how has your work in KM changed you? [Pause] Are you there ...

VERNA: That is a really hard question. [Laughter] I'm probably too much in the forest to see the trees.

What just popped in my head is that I feel there's been an evolution from the eternal student to, still being the eternal student, but what's come forward is the teacher aspect, the educator aspect, a guide perhaps might be more appropriate word to help guide people into a different way of seeing and understanding. I like that kind of shift from being the new puppy on the block to being considered one of the elders although my mindset is still totally learning. I can only tell how much I'm learning by how much I don't know. And I have a lot more questions than I have answers.

ALEX: [Laughter] Then you're definitely learning. Now you're still up above the forest here and not looking at the inside or the means or ways, which is usually where you're dealing here with organizations, but how is KM changing all of those organizations. A systems view.

VERNA: I think it's bringing them a lot of humility, to realize that they are so incredibly dependent on the intelligence of people and have so little control and influence and understanding about how it really works. We do not understand how we really dream the world together, yet that's exactly what we do. We just dream it up. Everything that we touch, everything that we create - it's an idea, and it's an idea or a dream, if you will, that we had together. And we don't really understand that process of dreaming together, or thinking together, or evolving our ideas together. How do we really create the society that we're all a part of, and what is that process for how that emerges through our thoughts and our shared beliefs and our shared understanding? If we can't drill down to that level of assumptions and beliefs and be able to work collaboratively, collectively together at that very fundamental place of creation, then how can we create a more hopeful future? How can we dream a different kind of future together if we don't even know how to do that?

ALEX: We've gone up even higher level ... how is KM changing the world? That's clearly the area you're discussing now.

VERNA: Yeah. It's bringing ... I do believe that it's bringing questions onto the planet that we need to ask. It is another form of, another way of thinking about the mental model question, if you will, from Peter Senge's work. It's our capacity to work with mental models that is very much at the heart of the KM question. There are a tremendous number of constraints in the usual corporate environment where you can't comfortably talk about certain things, but you can ask the knowledge questions quite safely. But you can't ask it very long, you can't get anybody to think about it very long without them getting to "oh, you understand differently than I do don't you?" And just that simple acknowledgement that another human being has a different thought world than we do and maybe there's something we need to understand about each other's thought world in order to work together better, that's pretty powerful. We don't do it very well yet, but it is a powerful question. And I believe that certain questions do have the power to change the world.

ALEX: You talked earlier about the urgency for the planet ... could you explicate that a little bit for me?

VERNA: One of the most symbolic and powerful images to come forward in the last century was the image of the earth from space. It was incredibly powerful. Young people have grown up with that image. You and I can remember when it was new. You and I can remember when we stood there with our mouths hanging open looking at this incredible blue jewel floating in a vast darkness. I truly believe that as a human society, as a species, that image evoked a shift of consciousness on this planet. I truly believe this. It's not something that's going to happen. It's something that really already has happened in a very fundamental way. We got it down to our toes about our interdependency, we got the fragility of that beautiful blue planet and the connectedness ... it truly is one living planet and we're all part of it and we're all dependent on each other and what I do here does affect the other parts of the world. That was so powerful for us as human beings. What we have not been able to do is reconcile our business and economic models with that understanding, and that's the urgency. That image came at the time when we truly were getting the power to destroy the balance of the earth ... we might wipe our species out first, but if we do that then unfortunately we'll take a lot of species with us when we do and that's the real tragedy.

KM is a part of that new consciousness - it's a way to tap into that new understanding, that awareness. A shift of language will give us a shift in focus. Language is very tangible, another way to begin shifting the business and economic models and practices into that kind of consciousness. That's what I really listen to in people's work, the people that I want to support in the work that they're doing, even if they could be doing it better, is where is the consciousness that this work is coming from and how clearly does that come through, how powerfully does this work carry us in that direction? And those are the kinds of things that I want to support and I believe KM is one of those questions, one of those vehicles for helping us to manifest a world that's more in line with that kind of consciousness.

Ken Wilbur talks about a deep shift and translation - whenever there's a really, really new world view it's like a deep shift in our consciousness. And we do have a new understanding. We have had the deep shift. What he calls the translation is that once you make that shift, then you have to revisit everything that you've been doing, everything that you understood before, and see where it fits or doesn't fit. And that's what we're doing in business right now, we're revisiting everything that we think we understand, whether it's customer relationships, whether it's supply chains, whether it's KM, we're revisiting everything we think we understood and trying to translate or retest our business and economic practices so we can come from that new consciousness. That's my belief.