

10 Lessons from Wisdom 2.0: A Twitter-Sized Ethnography

By Neekaan Oshidary

Last year I considered doing an [ethnography](#) of the [Wisdom 2.0](#) conference for my master's thesis. Good thing I didn't. My views of Wisdom 2.0, an annual conference on the intersection of technology, business, and mindfulness, have changed radically after attending last week. [Soren Gordhamer](#), the founder, said we should treat Wisdom 2.0 as more of a “practice” than conference. In that spirit, here are the ethnographic field notes packaged into 10 core lessons that leave plenty of room for practice.

1. Course-correct. “Course-correction” emerged as a recurring catch-phrase. The phrase itself conjures up the image of sailing at sea. [Marianne Williamson](#), author of [Return to Love](#), challenged us, to steer society's ship away from ruin. In a world of immense suffering, how do we steer back toward safe harbor? I've tried sailing just once—with Inflection actually, and man was it hard to steer!

2. It's not easy, but simple. Mindfulness teacher [Jon Kabat-Zinn](#) and Twitter's [Melissa Daimler](#) taught us that mindfulness practice is not easy, but simple. [Chade Meng Tan](#), Google's “Jolly Good Fellow,” taught the simplicity of kindness. Wish people well—in your head for just two people every hour—and you'll develop habits of happiness (which can make you more charismatic and attractive, btw). But there's a lot more than meets the eye. It's like the iPhone. Not easy, but simple. You have to know a lot about technology to use it, but once you learn it's simple.

3. Carefully utilize language and framing. [Pam Weiss](#) stressed the importance of the language we use. As a Buddhist practitioner and teacher for many years, Pam warned against reducing the value of mindfulness practices to “transactional language”: e.g. don't just say we practice mindfulness to reduce stress, to boost productivity, or improve a company's profit in a win-win “pay-off” mentality.

4. If you're going to say something critical, say it positively. No one said this explicitly, but it was kind of in the air, especially on stage in the first few days of the conference. In my six years of schooling at Stanford, I always associated “critical thinking” with being negative, finding the flaws and problems in an argument. But I had an “Ah-ha” moment when someone said to me, “You can point something out that's wrong, but still say it nicely.” she said. (See: [Nonviolent Communication](#).)

5. Compassion can be taught. To prove his point, [Jeff Weiner](#), CEO of LinkedIn, in a discussion with Soren referenced Bill Moyers' PBS documentary [A Class Divided](#), in which an elementary school teacher's demonstration of racial equality in a classroom influenced the students' involvement in the civil rights movement later in life. How extraordinary.

6. Intimacy and democracy require privacy. [Sherry Turkle](#), author of [Alone Together](#), challenged us to ask the "questions we are not asking." Even though the seductions of technology abound, trust and intimacy within our relationships requires a true sense of privacy, untethered to our electronic devices. Privacy is also important because it enables democracy in allowing us the ability to discuss difficult questions and plans without fear of intrusion or spying. But the habits formed on social media these days run counter to the long-standing traditions of privacy and democracy in this country.

7. Technology is neutral but the language we use to talk about it *ain't*. [Gopi Kallayil](#), "Chief Evangelist" of Google+ (who also gave [a great talk](#) at Inflection), challenged technologists to find and communicate the stories of compassion created by their products and services. He urged us to talk about the positive, empowering aspects of technology, which allows for more discussion and engagement. At the same time, I believe it is just as important to address the negative aspects of technology. The balance of the positive and negative is the critical examination that will lead us to find solutions for our most difficult technological problems.

8. Privacy enables sincere conversations in business. One of the most moving and sincere interactions came from [Jack Kornfield](#) and Bill Ford (who is Executive Chairman of Ford). Bill half-joked about very discomfoting real truths: the effects of Ford on the environment, layoffs, feelings of guilt and turning to Jack as a phone-line for help when Bill simply did not know what to do. It was clear that this beautifully sincere interaction emerged through many years of friendship, which the two were only able to cultivate in privacy, without it being short-circuited with leaks or phone taps.

9. Compassion requires action. Gandhi said, "Mere knowledge is not enough; it must be followed by appropriate action. An ethical idea is like an architect's plan" (as cited in the opening pages of [Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience](#)). Rachel Bagby, a social artist and intellectual of social change and law, cited Martin Luther King as an example who initially resisted protesting but ultimately acted, which was the truest realization of his compassion.

10. Pursue ethics. The phrase “Radical compassion,” the title of Roshi Joan Halifax’s talk evoked the image of a deep river for me, a perfect synergy between strength and gentleness. Developing radical compassion means starting with the basics, the foundational development a moral compass. You must be rooted in ethics, or at least actively pursue ethical learning. What does “radical compassion” mean to you?