

BOOK REVIEW - *COOPERATIVE GAMES FOR A COOPERATIVE WORLD: FACILITATING TRUST, COMMUNICATION, AND SPIRITUAL CONNECTION*

**By: Dada Maheshvarananda
InnerWorld Publications
2017**

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Keywords: cooperative games, group games, youth development

Note: This piece is a book review and as such was not subject to blind peer review. It was accepted by the editorial team

I was first introduced to the idea of cooperative games back in the 1970s when those of us in the “alternative education” scene were engaged in rethinking every aspect of schooling from how buildings were designed, to who should control the curriculum, to what should be taught, to what kind of food should be served, and everything in between. We generally agreed that “competition” whether for grades or comparative test scores or on the football field was mostly an unhealthy modern preoccupation, aligned with our dominant capitalist economic system and America’s cutthroat, anything-to-get-ahead society. Cooperative games, designed to facilitate positive relationships, collaborative work, and true team spirit, came along at just the right time. We hoped that the practice, through play, of working together towards common goals would counteract the

ruthlessness of the modern high school, with its cliques and its winners and losers and lead us to a more gentle and cooperative society. Our national conferences and local events were sites where these games were practiced and refined, and we were filled with hope that the new society was just around the corner.

Such optimism! If anything, the advent of social media has brought about ever more treacherous forms of bullying and intimidation in schools and in the anarchic new world of the Internet. A recent Young Adult novel, made into a popular Netflix series (*13 Reasons Why*) has sparked national conversations about bullying, social media, competition, the cult of popularity, and suicide. Schools are a mirror of society, so these conditions are not surprising in a world in which the income gap is increasing, hate speech is championed by our leaders, and violence of all sorts continues to plague our world. Clearly, something is out of whack, at least from the perspective of those of us who long for more peaceful, just, and cooperative ways of living.

Now we have a new book of cooperative gaming for a new generation based on themes and concepts crucial to developing the social-emotional “intelligences” and interactive skills necessary to bring about this new society. Building on the unique history of cooperative games (the author acknowledges the important roles played by Augusto Boal, Viola Spolin, the New Games Foundation, and Project Adventure, among others) but integrating many new ideas from the author’s twenty-five years of international experience, *Cooperative Games for a Cooperative World* by Dada Maheshvarananda, a Yogic monk, offers practical strategies for cultivating the values and mindsets necessary to bring about healthy new ways of living together and preparing us with the skills essential for solving the many problems and challenges we face. As Bill

Book Review - Cooperative Games for a Cooperative World:
Facilitating Trust, Communication, and Spiritual Connection

Ayers says in the Foreword to the book, “Dada Maheshvarananda invites readers to play games, but these games unlock the magnitude: we begin to imagine the future we would like for generations to come; we unleash our spiritual and social imaginations” (p. 2).

The book is organized thematically, so that facilitators can easily choose appropriate games for their purposes. These include familiar categories, such as Icebreakers, Trust, Cooperation, and Communication, but these traditional activities are well supplemented by more values-based games that promote spiritual development and communal well-being. In the first category, there are games that foster the themes of Consciousness Raising, Going with the Flow, Forgiveness, Living in the Present, Non-Attachment, and Unconditional Love. In the second category, there are more politically oriented games with themes such as Diversity, Futures Thinking, When Will Hunger, Poverty, and War End?, and Together Nothing is Impossible. It is in this seamless integration of a universal approach to spirituality coupled with a strong sense of social and economic justice that the book fills a unique niche, and readers will be able to explore the theoretical foundations of this social/spiritual blueprint for society in a brief supplemental chapter that is clear and comprehensible. Facilitators will also enjoy a chapter that provides guidelines for organizing group games in various settings. Practical ideas for boundary setting, rules, debriefing, and other facilitation techniques are offered, and given that the book is geared towards an international readership, there are notes on gender and cultural sensitivity as well.

Change is difficult. Change on the scale of what needs to happen to bring about a planet of peace, sustainable prosperity, and social justice can seem overwhelming. Human beings internalize mindsets that resist doing things in new ways, even when the

old ones aren't working. As Dada Maheshvarananda says in the book, "people find it hard to imagine this possibility [of changing the world], because they're conditioned to believe that the way things are today is the way they will always be" (p. 6). Reasoned arguments are insufficient to the task of transformation. Games, however, with their playful and exploratory approach to novel ideas and practices—new "ways of being in the world"—can be powerful, transformative catalysts for opening up new possibilities. We know from neuroscience that learning is more effective when it is a multi-sensory activity and games involve breathing, smelling, listening, hearing, watching, jumping, touching, shouting, whispering. Games are facilitated in safe spaces that allow us to experience the emotions of a new experience (What doubts or fears must be overcome to do a "Trust Fall" into the void and be caught by a group of attentive strangers?). Games like the Barter Game demonstrate in symbolic but vivid ways the value, for example, of sharing limited resources. And in Yurt Rope, we experience the feeling that no one of us can be successful unless we are all successful. Teachers, workshop leaders, parent organizers, coaches, and activists will find imaginative ideas in these pages for engaging in the exhilarating work of transforming society through facilitating group experiences that free people from conditioned responses, provide visual and kinesthetic metaphors for understanding the human condition, and open up new pathways for taking action in the world.

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Book Review - Cooperative Games for a Cooperative World:
Facilitating Trust, Communication, and Spiritual Connection

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