

WhatIfWe

The First Conversations

Complete Strategy Reference · Version 3.1 · May 2026

Who to target · How to identify them · How to reach them · How to attract their attention

Confidential · For collaborators only

WhatIfWe.community · Founded by Hector Ibarra · 2026

DOCUMENT ARCHITECTURE

This document is the companion reference to *Building the Lab*. It provides the complete strategy for the interview programme that constitutes Phase 0: who the guests are, why each one matters, how to reach them, and how to structure the conversations. It is not required reading for funders — *Building the Lab* provides the investment picture — but it is the document that answers the question: who, specifically, are these conversations with, and why are they worth the investment? The technology ecosystem that these conversations will engage is addressed in depth in the companion document *The Technology Landscape*.

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The Most Important Decision

Why guest selection is the experiment

The first 10–20 interviews are not just marketing content. They are the first instantiation of the experiment itself. The people who appear in them will define, in the minds of everyone who watches, what WhatIfWe is actually reaching for. A wrong guest — someone intellectually serious but at the centre of their tradition rather than the frontier, or someone who performs cross-tradition openness without genuine depth — will communicate the wrong thing far more powerfully than any written clarification can correct.

This means guest selection is the single highest-leverage decision in Phase 0. It deserves more careful thinking than any infrastructure or platform question.

The guest list is the argument made flesh. Every name on it is a claim about what kind of intelligence this experiment is reaching for.

Failure mode 1 · The credentialled centre

The most common mistake in this kind of project is selecting guests based on prominence within their tradition — senior academics, widely published authors, institutional leaders, holders of recognised titles. These people are often excellent at articulating the mainstream of their tradition. They are rarely at its frontier. Their depth is real, but it is the depth of mastery, not the depth of someone who has pressed against the limit of what their path can see and stayed there. A conversation with someone at the centre of their tradition produces content that is interesting but not surprising. It confirms what people already think they know about that tradition. It does not demonstrate the quality of encounter WhatIfWe is designed to produce.

Failure mode 2 · The professional bridge-builder

The second failure mode is selecting guests who are known for cross-tradition dialogue — people who have made a career of convening conversations across boundaries. These people often know a great deal about many traditions without being deeply formed by any of them. They are fluent in the vocabulary of encounter without having experienced what genuine encounter at the frontier actually costs. A conversation with a professional bridge-builder produces content that is warm, inclusive, and ultimately thin. It communicates pluralism rather than planetary intelligence.

The right signal: frontier depth with honest limits

The guest who is right for WhatIfWe is recognisable by a specific combination of qualities that almost no one talks about explicitly but that becomes unmistakable once you know what to look for:

- They name what their tradition cannot see — specifically, not rhetorically. They can point to a place where their path has taken them to the edge of what it can do, and something remains. This is different from saying their tradition is incomplete — everyone can say that. They have actually stood at that edge.
- They speak from the frontier with uncertainty. The formulations that emerge from the frontier are always somewhat reaching, somewhat provisional, honest about incompleteness. Guests whose answers are fully formed and confident are almost certainly not at the frontier.

- They sense what the experiment is pointing at without needing it explained. When you describe WhatIfWe to the right guest, they recognise it. Not because it matches their agenda, but because it names something they have been sensing without a language for. This recognition response is the most reliable indicator.
- They have had at least one genuine encounter across a boundary. Not a conference. A real experience of encountering someone from a genuinely different tradition and sensing that they were pointing at the same threshold from a different direction.
- They carry something they have not yet found a space serious enough to bring. The frustration of existing containers — conferences, institutes, dialogue forums — falling short of what they sense is needed. This is the most common experience among the people this experiment is looking for, and it is almost never publicly stated.
- For Category F guests (technology track): the equivalent signal is someone who has pressed their technical framework to the point where it requires something the framework cannot itself provide, and who is honest about that gap.

The Guest Architecture

How to structure the first 20+ conversations

The first conversations should be distributed across three axes deliberately, maintaining the two-track architecture throughout.

Axis 1 • Across the spectrum of traditions

- Contemplative / religious (5–6 guests): Buddhist, Christian contemplative, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu/Vedic. At least one from a tradition with no Western academic audience — important for the credibility of the diversity claim.
- Indigenous knowledge (3–4 guests): The hardest category to get right. The right guest is not an academic who studies indigenous knowledge, but a knowledge holder who has engaged seriously with the challenge of speaking their knowing across cultural boundaries. Latin American, North American, Pacific, and African traditions if possible.
- Science at its limit (4–5 guests): Systems scientists, complexity theorists, consciousness researchers, ecologists, and physicists who have pressed against the boundary of what their methodology can see. Not science communicators — researchers who have felt the methodological ceiling personally.
- Cross-domain practitioners (3–4 guests): People who operate across domain boundaries in active work (faith + diplomacy, science + policy, ecology + economics) and who can articulate what becomes possible for cross-domain actors that single-domain actors cannot achieve.
- Consciousness researchers (2–3 guests): Working at the boundary between contemplative and empirical frameworks, holding the methodological tension honestly.
- Technology and systems frontier (3–4 guests): People who have built systems for knowledge synthesis and reached the frontier of what those systems can do.

Axis 2 • Across the worthy challenges

Each conversation should be anchored in at least one of the six worthy challenges: ecological intelligence, collective meaning, AI governance, education, civilisational conflict, civilisational intelligence. Each conversation should be anchored in at least one of these — not as a topic to be discussed, but as the ground on which the guest's frontier becomes visible.

Axis 3 • A deliberate sequencing logic

- First 3–4 conversations: most accessible, establish register and quality bar for everything that follows.
- Middle conversations: full spectrum coverage across all six categories.
- Final tier: most ambitious — guests who would not have agreed to an interview with an unknown project, but who will consider it once they have seen 15 conversations of genuine quality in the public record.

Age-urgent contacts: Seyyed Hossein Nasr (93), Sister Chan Khong (87), Joanna Macy (late 80s), and Tu Weiming (85) should be approached immediately, regardless of sequencing logic. These conversations cannot wait for the public record to be established.

The technology-track conversations in the first tier will open networks that the philosophical track cannot reach alone. Both tracks must run simultaneously.

The Candidate List

All profiles — named, detailed, and sequenced

Tier 1 guests are reachable directly with a well-crafted cold outreach. Tier 2 require a warm introduction or an established public record of 6+ published conversations. Tier 3 are stretch possibilities that will emerge from the network built by the first 15 conversations — not from advance planning.

Reference Archetypes (Deceased) · For framing outreach only

These figures are named not as invitation targets but as framing devices. Their work defines the profile each living candidate is being measured against. Reference them in outreach to demonstrate the quality of engagement the invitation is claiming to offer.

Raimon Panikkar

Philosopher and theologian — Catholic priest, Hindu scholar, Buddhist practitioner. The clearest historical example of someone who went to the frontier of three traditions simultaneously and could name what each could not see alone. His concept of 'dialogical dialogue' defines the quality of exchange WhatIfWe is designed to produce: not a comparative theology, not a synthesis, but an encounter in which each tradition is genuinely transformed by the other. Use his work as a framing device in all contemplative outreach.

Francisco Varela

Neuroscientist and Buddhist practitioner, co-founder of the Mind and Life Institute. Defines what it looks like when a scientist goes far enough in their own discipline to need what contemplative practice knows — not as a philosophical curiosity, but as a methodological necessity. His work on enactivism and the Mind and Life dialogues with the Dalai Lama remain the closest existing model for the Category E profile. The Mind and Life Institute (mindandlife.org) is the warm contact network his legacy opens.

CATEGORY A

Contemplative and Religious Traditions

B. Alan Wallace

Contemplative scholar · Founder, Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

Trained as a physicist before becoming a Tibetan Buddhist scholar, Wallace holds both traditions to genuine depth — not as complementary perspectives, but as frameworks he has pressed into real tension with each other. He has written more carefully than almost anyone on what contemplative practice can see about consciousness that empirical science is structurally unable to access, and on what that implies for the study of mind. His books *Choosing Reality*, *The Taboo of Subjectivity*, and *Mind in the Balance* represent the most rigorous available treatment of this methodological frontier. He is also the founder of the Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies, which means he has

built institutional infrastructure for exactly the kind of cross-tradition encounter WhatIfWe is attempting.

THEIR FRONTIER

“Empirical science has extraordinary power to describe the correlates of consciousness. It cannot account for consciousness itself. That gap is not a technical problem awaiting a better instrument. It is a structural one — built into the methodology of third-person empirical science, which has no mechanism for accessing first-person experience as such.”

APPROACH

Cold outreach via the Santa Barbara Institute contact form (sbinstitute.com). Reference his specific work on the 'attention crisis' and the methodological gap between contemplative and empirical approaches to consciousness. Worthy challenge: consciousness and AI governance.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. Institution-based, has infrastructure for evaluating invitations. Has engaged with cross-tradition conversations before and is actively seeking serious interlocutors at the intersection of contemplative practice and philosophy of mind.

Joanna Macy

Buddhist scholar · Systems theorist · Founder, Work That Reconnects · Born c. 1929

Tier 1 · **AGE-URGENT — approach immediately**

WHY THIS PERSON

One of the very few people who has genuinely integrated Buddhist philosophy of interdependence with General Systems Theory and ecological thinking, and applied the synthesis to collective practice at scale. Her Work That Reconnects methodology — developed over 50 years — is one of the most serious existing attempts to design practices that shift the perception of self-as-separate-from-living-systems. She has pressed both Buddhism and systems science to their frontier regarding ecological crisis and has been honest, over decades, about where each runs out. Her book *World as Lover, World as Self* is the clearest statement of her position. She is in her late 80s and still intellectually active.

THEIR FRONTIER

“The crisis we are in is not a crisis of resources or politics. It is a crisis of perception — specifically of the self as separate from the living systems it depends on. That perception cannot be changed by argument. It requires a different kind of knowing — one that Buddhist interdependence philosophy and systems science have each been developing, in different registers, for decades.”

APPROACH

Via the Work That Reconnects network (workthatreconnects.org). Strong warm contact route through anyone in regenerative ecology or contemplative activism communities. Age means scheduling requires both flexibility and urgency — this conversation should be treated as time-sensitive.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. Age-urgent — approach immediately, regardless of where you are in the sequence. Her age (late 80s) makes this a priority that cannot be deferred for the public record.

Richard Rohr

Franciscan friar · Founder, Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC)

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

Has spent 50 years at the intersection of Christian mysticism, Jungian psychology, and what he calls 'non-dual consciousness.' Explicitly critical of Christianity's structural inability to generate the collective transformation it describes — a critique made from within the tradition by someone who has given his life to it. His work through the CAC, and specifically his teaching on 'the universal Christ,' represents one of the most serious attempts within contemporary Christianity to press the tradition to its frontier regarding collective and planetary questions. His books *Falling Upward*, *The Universal Christ*, and *Everything Belongs* trace the arc of this frontier. He reaches an enormous audience and remains one of the most intellectually serious voices in contemplative Christianity.

THEIR FRONTIER

"The Christian tradition has extraordinary resources for individual transformation. It has almost no resources for collective transformation at scale. That gap is not incidental. It is structural — built into a theology of individual salvation that has never adequately theorised what it would mean for communities, institutions, or civilisations to be transformed in the same way."

APPROACH

Via the CAC (cac.org). His team handles speaking and interview requests. The invitation needs to be genuinely distinctive to stand out from the high volume of requests he receives. Reference the collective meaning and civilisational intelligence worthy challenges specifically.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. Has a professional team. The specific angle — the structural gap in Christianity's collective transformation capacity — is the framing most likely to distinguish this from generic interview requests.

Roshi Joan Halifax

Zen Buddhist teacher · Medical anthropologist · Founder, Upaya Zen Center

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

Has integrated Zen practice with medical anthropology, hospice care, and climate work over a 50-year career. She is one of the few contemplative teachers who has pressed the question of what Buddhist practice can contribute to collective action on civilisational-scale problems — and who is honest, specifically and publicly, about where it runs out. Her concept of 'strong back, soft front' — developed through decades of work with dying patients and climate activists — is a direct attempt to articulate what contemplative practice can offer collective crisis that purely strategic or analytical approaches cannot. Her book *Standing at the Edge* is the clearest statement of her frontier position.

THEIR FRONTIER

"Buddhism is very good at helping individuals face death with clarity and equanimity. It is much less clear about what to do with civilisational systems that are dying. That is not a Buddhist problem. It is everyone's problem. And it is the question I have spent the last 20 years trying to approach."

APPROACH

Via Upaya Zen Center (upaya.org). She is active on social media and has a podcast (Being With Dying). Direct outreach to her team is feasible. The intersection of contemplative practice and civilisational crisis is her explicit focus area.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. Active and accessible. The WhatIfWe framing maps directly onto her stated concerns.

Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati

Stanford psychology PhD · Hindu sannyasi · International Director, Parmarth Niketan Ashram, Rishikesh

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

Made a total biographical crossing — not a professional bridge-builder, but a person who left Western academic psychology at its threshold to enter a living Hindu tradition at its depth. Raised in the United States, completed a doctorate in psychology at Stanford, and then, following what she describes as a transformative experience in India, left her academic career to become a fully initiated Hindu sannyasi (monastic renunciant) — a crossing that required years of deep immersion, not a weekend retreat. She now serves as International Director of one of India's most respected spiritual institutions. What makes her uniquely valuable for WhatIfWe is her ability to articulate, from direct experience, what Western psychology can see that Hindu contemplative practice cannot — and what the tradition gave her that psychology structurally could not provide. These are not rhetorical claims. They are the testimony of a life genuinely lived at the boundary.

THEIR FRONTIER

“Psychology gave me tools for understanding suffering as a pattern in a nervous system. The tradition gave me the experience that the one who suffers is not who I thought it was. Those are not two different answers to the same question. They are different questions. And moving from the first question to the second is not a conceptual shift. It is a biographical one.”

APPROACH

Via sadhviji.org or Parmarth Niketan directly (parmarth.org). She is actively engaged with Western audiences and gives many interviews in English. Worthy challenge: collective meaning.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. Accessible and engaged with exactly these questions. Her biographical crossing makes her a uniquely positioned voice on the relationship between Western psychology and Hindu contemplative practice.

Sister Chan Khong

Elder nun, Plum Village International Sangha · First fully-ordained monastic disciple of Thich Nhat Hanh · Born 1938

Tier 1 · **AGE-URGENT — approach immediately**

WHY THIS PERSON

The most significant living continuation of Thich Nhat Hanh's lineage. She has pressed engaged Buddhism — Buddhism in genuine encounter with the world's hardest realities — for 65 years under conditions of extreme civilisational stress: civil war in Vietnam, exile, the boat people crisis, decades of humanitarian work in refugee camps. She is one of the last living witnesses to the full arc of what engaged Buddhism actually requires when the problems are not individual but civilisational. Her

memoir *Learning True Love* documents this arc. Her age (87) makes this the single most time-sensitive conversation on the list. She holds something that cannot be recovered from books once she is gone: the direct transmission of what 65 years at the frontier of collective Buddhist practice has cost and what it has given.

THEIR FRONTIER

“Buddhism has extraordinary resources for individual clarity. What it has been slower to develop are structures for collective action that can hold that clarity at scale — structures that do not dissolve under the pressure of civilisational crisis. That is the frontier I have worked at my whole life. And I have not yet crossed it.”

APPROACH

Via Plum Village (plumvillage.org) or Deer Park Monastery. She is 87. This conversation should be treated as the most time-sensitive in the entire list. Approach before any public record is established. Be explicit about the project's scope and be genuinely flexible about format — the conversation can be shorter, in a different medium, or structured around her availability.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. Accessible through Plum Village channels. Contact immediately — this is age-urgent and cannot wait for sequencing logic.

Haemin Sunim

Korean Zen Buddhist teacher · Author (10M+ books sold in 30 languages) · Founder, School for Broken Hearts · Born 1973

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

A Korean Zen monk who studied film at UC Berkeley and completed a PhD at Harvard, reaching one of the largest Buddhist audiences in the world through books that have sold over 10 million copies in 30 languages. This reach is not incidental — it reflects his ability to communicate contemplative depth in the idiom of a generation that is simultaneously hungry for it and structurally prevented from accessing it. Founded the School for Broken Hearts in Seoul as a practical attempt to bring contemplative depth into the specific context of modern Korean urban life — a society experiencing some of the highest rates of loneliness, youth disengagement, and suicide in the developed world. He has pressed Korean Zen to its frontier through the specific question of what a tradition built for individual liberation can offer to a culture experiencing collective psychological crisis.

THEIR FRONTIER

“What does a society do — not an individual, but a society — when its capacity for contemplative depth has been disrupted by exactly the speed and disconnection that contemplative practice is supposed to address? My generation in Korea is the experiment. And Korean Zen does not yet have an answer adequate to it.”

APPROACH

Via haeminsunim.com or the School for Broken Hearts (Seoul). Active in English. His work directly engages the worthy challenge of collective meaning in the specific context of modern urban alienation.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. International, accessible, and engaged with exactly the right questions. His combination of Buddhist depth and Western academic formation (film studies at UC Berkeley, Harvard PhD) makes

him fluent in the register WhatIfWe is working in.

Sheikh Hamza Yusuf

Islamic scholar · Co-founder, Zaytuna College (first accredited Muslim liberal arts college in the US)

Tier 2

WHY THIS PERSON

One of the most intellectually serious voices in contemporary Islamic scholarship in the English-speaking world. Has engaged seriously with Western philosophy, classical Islamic thought (kalam, fiqh, Sufism), and the question of what Islamic civilisation has to offer a world it did not design. Co-founded Zaytuna College to build the institutional infrastructure needed to transmit the tradition with full intellectual depth into the American context. He is at the frontier of the question of how Islamic wisdom can be brought into genuine encounter with other traditions without being reduced to a set of ethical principles — which is precisely the question WhatIfWe is designed to hold.

THEIR FRONTIER

“The Islamic intellectual tradition has extraordinary resources for thinking about justice, community, and the relationship between the human and the divine. It was developed for a world that no longer exists. The question of how to translate those resources for this world — without dissolving what makes them distinctive — has not been answered.”

APPROACH

Via Zaytuna College (zaytuna.edu). He gives many interviews. Approach after 6 conversations are published. The distinctiveness of the WhatIfWe framing — specifically the frontier question and the worthy challenges — is what would make this stand out from the very high volume of requests he receives.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 2. High-profile, significant volume of requests. Needs a warm introduction or an exceptionally well-crafted cold outreach that demonstrates genuine engagement with the depth of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

CATEGORY B

Indigenous Knowledge

This is the most important category to get right and the hardest. The wrong guest — an academic who researches indigenous knowledge, or a knowledge holder who has compromised their tradition's integrity for institutional acceptance — does more damage than no guest at all. The right guest is rare: a knowledge holder who has engaged seriously with the challenge of speaking across cultural boundaries without losing the integrity of what they carry.

Robin Wall Kimmerer

Botanist · Member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation · Author, Braiding Sweetgrass

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

Holds genuine depth in both Western plant biology (as a professor at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry) and in the Potawatomi tradition into which she was born — and has pressed both to their frontier. Her concept of the 'grammar of animacy' — developed through years of recovering the Potawatomi language — is the clearest existing example of what an indigenous way of knowing can see that Western science is structurally unable to access. *Braiding Sweetgrass* reached a wide audience precisely because it demonstrated synthesis rather than comparison: not 'here is what science says, and here is what the tradition says,' but 'here is what becomes visible when you hold both at once.' Her most recent work presses further into what this synthesis demands.

THEIR FRONTIER

"Science asks: how does it work? The Potawatomi language asks: who is it? Those are not the same question, and the second one opens dimensions of the living world that the first is not designed to see. The grammar of animacy is not a poetic gesture. It is a different ontology — and it has consequences for what we can perceive and therefore for what we can protect."

APPROACH

Via SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (her institutional home) or via her publisher (Milkweed Editions). She is selective about interviews. The specific framing of her frontier — what neither Western plant biology nor Potawatomi knowing can do alone, and what becomes visible only at their genuine encounter — is the angle most likely to interest her.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. High-profile but genuinely engaged with the questions WhatIfWe is asking. The planetary intelligence framing is directly relevant to her work. She has been waiting for exactly this kind of conversation and will recognise it.

Tyson Yunkaporta

Indigenous Australian academic · Author, Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

One of the most original thinkers currently working on what indigenous knowledge systems can contribute to systemic thinking — and specifically on why Western systems thinking has structural limits that indigenous thinking can address. *Sand Talk* is not a celebration of indigenous wisdom: it is

a rigorous argument, from within an indigenous knowledge system, about the specific functional capacities that system developed for thinking from inside complexity rather than above it. He has engaged seriously with AI, complexity theory, and civilisational design from this perspective. He is explicitly not a bridge-builder — someone who holds the integrity of his tradition while pressing it into genuine encounter with Western frameworks. This is precisely the profile WhatIfWe needs in this category.

THEIR FRONTIER

“Western systems thinking can map complexity. It cannot think from inside it. Indigenous knowledge systems developed for exactly that — thinking from inside living systems, not above them. That is not a romantic claim. It is a functional one. And the difference matters enormously for what kind of intelligence a civilisation can bring to its own crises.”

APPROACH

Via his academic position at Deakin University (Melbourne) or via his podcast Future Dreaming. Active on social media. The AI governance and civilisational intelligence worthy challenges are directly relevant to his recent work. A well-crafted cold outreach referencing his specific critique of Western systems thinking — not his general prominence — is the right approach.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. Likely to respond to a well-crafted cold outreach. The WhatIfWe framing is close enough to his own intellectual concerns that recognition response is probable. He has been explicitly not a bridge-builder and will appreciate an invitation that understands the difference.

Itzhak Beery (Taita)

Shamanic healer and teacher · Initiated Quechua Yachak and Amazonian Pajé · Founder, ShamanPortal.org · New York

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

The most intellectually serious example of a Western-born individual who has undergone genuine initiation into living indigenous traditions — not through academic study, but through a lifetime apprenticeship culminating in formal recognition by the traditions themselves. Inducted with the Taita (grandfather/master) title by ten Ecuadorian indigenous masters in 2019 after decades of apprenticeship in the Andean shamanic tradition. Also formally initiated into the Amazonian Kanamari Pajé lineage. Holds the Ambassador for Peace Award from the Universal Peace Federation and the UN. Featured in the New York Times. Founder of ShamanPortal.org, the largest online directory of shamanic practitioners globally. Author of three Amazon bestselling books on shamanism. What makes him uniquely right for WhatIfWe is not the crossing itself — many Westerners have apprenticed with indigenous teachers — but his position as someone who holds genuine initiatory depth in two living indigenous cosmologies while operating full-time in the Western world, and who is unusually honest about both what the tradition can transmit across that boundary and what is irretrievably lost when removed from its ecological and community context.

THEIR FRONTIER

“The Andean cosmology is not a philosophy. It is a living relationship between the practitioner and the land, the plants, the spirits, the community. When you move it to New York, some of it survives — perhaps more than sceptics think — and some of it does not. I work with what survives. But I am aware every day of what I cannot transmit, because the ground it grew from is not here. That is the limit I work with and against.”

ADDITIONAL CONTEXT

Organises regular ceremonial trips to Ecuador and the Amazon. His essay 'Shamanism as a Living Tradition' defines his position on the cultural transmission question with unusual precision — it is the closest existing statement of the WhatIfWe frontier question from within an indigenous tradition. Read it before writing the outreach.

APPROACH

Via itzhakbeery.com or ShamanPortal.org. Accessible and gives many interviews. Worthy challenge: ecological intelligence — specifically what Andean and Amazonian cosmologies can see about living systems and the human relationship to the natural world that Western frameworks structurally miss. Read his essay 'Shamanism as a Living Tradition' before writing the outreach.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. Has been looking for exactly this kind of encounter. Will immediately recognise the difference between WhatIfWe's approach and institutional interfaith formats.

Rigoberta Menchú Tum

Maya K'iche' activist · Nobel Peace Prize laureate (1992) · Founder, Winaq indigenous political movement · Guatemala

Tier 2

WHY THIS PERSON

The most internationally recognised living holder of Mayan K'iche' spiritual and political identity. Born in 1959 in the Guatemalan highlands. Lost her father, mother, and brother to state violence during the civil war. Her 1983 autobiography brought the Mayan experience into global consciousness and led directly to the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. Founded Guatemala's first indigenous political party (Winaq — meaning 'the wholeness of the human being' in K'iche' Maya) as a practical attempt to translate Mayan political philosophy into institutional form. Received Mexican citizenship in 2025. Practices both Catholic faith and Mayan spirituality as a lived whole — not as a philosophical position, but as the inheritance of a biographical life that has traversed both. Her voice would bring the Guatemalan indigenous dimension into WhatIfWe directly, and would open the Latin American indigenous network more broadly.

THEIR FRONTIER

"My tradition told me that every person on this planet carries a special energy, and that these energies are compatible. The problem is not incompatibility. The problem is that we have learned, over centuries, to see incompatibility where there is difference. Unlearning that is harder than learning anything new."

APPROACH

Via the Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation (frmt.org). Do not attempt cold outreach — a warm introduction from within the Latin American indigenous rights or Sant'Egidio network is needed. Realistic in months 10–14, after the Sant'Egidio or Beery conversations open the relevant networks.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 2. High-profile and active. Warm route is essential — cold outreach will not reach her directly.

Vandana Shiva

Environmental activist · Philosopher of science · Founder, Navdanya

Tier 2

WHY THIS PERSON

Has spent 40 years at the intersection of indigenous agricultural knowledge, feminist epistemology, ecology, and political economy. Trained as a physicist, she shifted from physics to philosophy of science after experiencing the destruction of traditional forest communities in the Chipko movement — a biographical encounter that generated the philosophical question she has pursued ever since: what does industrialised modernity's way of knowing structurally prevent it from seeing about living systems? Her books *Staying Alive*, *Monocultures of the Mind*, and *Who Really Feeds the World* develop this question with extraordinary specificity. Controversial precisely because she holds the integrity of her position without diplomatic softening — which is exactly what WhatIfWe needs.

THEIR FRONTIER

"The crisis of biodiversity is not a crisis of insufficient data or inadequate technology. It is a crisis of the wrong kind of knowledge — knowledge that cannot see living systems as living. Traditional agricultural knowledge was built for exactly that seeing. And we have spent 70 years systematically destroying it."

APPROACH

Via Navdanya International (navdanya.org) or her speaking agency. The ecological intelligence worthy challenge is her primary arena. The invitation must be clearly distinguished from political interview format — this is specifically about the frontier of her epistemological position, not her activism. Approach after 6 conversations published.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 2. High-profile and politically active. The framing of the invitation is critical — she receives many requests for political interviews and fewer for the kind of epistemological conversation WhatIfWe is designed to produce.

Science at Its Frontier

David Chalmers

Philosopher of mind · ARC Laureate Fellow · New York University

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

The philosopher who named the 'hard problem of consciousness' — the question of why physical processes give rise to subjective experience — and has pressed it to the frontier of what empirical philosophy of mind can see. His 1995 paper 'Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness' remains one of the most cited in the field and defines the structural problem that his own tradition has not resolved. More importantly for WhatIfWe, he has openly and publicly engaged with contemplative and non-Western approaches to consciousness as serious philosophical responses to what his framework cannot resolve — not as curiosities, but as frameworks that may be pointing at something his own tradition has missed. His book *The Conscious Mind* and his more recent work on panpsychism trace this arc.

THEIR FRONTIER

"The hard problem is genuinely hard. It is not hard in the sense that we lack data. It is hard in the sense that our entire framework for what counts as an explanation seems inadequate to it. I do not know how to resolve that. And I think that not-knowing is pointing at something important about the limits of what third-person science can see."

APPROACH

Via the NYU philosophy department. He is active, accessible, and gives many interviews. The consciousness and AI governance worthy challenges are both directly relevant. The specific angle: what does the hard problem reveal about the limits of his own tradition — and what does he make of contemplative responses to it?

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. Intellectually adventurous and genuinely at the frontier. Has already engaged with contemplative approaches to consciousness as serious philosophical responses. Opening a relationship with Chalmers opens the philosophy of mind network — unusually small and interconnected.

Iain McGilchrist

Psychiatrist · Neuroscientist · Author, *The Master and His Emissary* and *The Matter With Things*

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

Has spent 30 years pressing neuroscience to its frontier regarding the relationship between reason, intuition, and reality. His central thesis — that the left hemisphere's mode of attention has come to dominate Western culture with catastrophic consequences for what we can perceive — is a direct diagnosis from within neuroscience of what Western rationality cannot see. His two-volume work *The Matter With Things* (2021) extends this analysis to epistemology, ontology, and the nature of reality itself, engaging seriously with contemplative traditions, poetry, and the arts as alternative instruments of knowing. He is one of the very few scientists who has pressed their own methodology to the point where it requires something it cannot itself provide — and has named that something with precision.

THEIR FRONTIER

“Science is extraordinarily good at what the left hemisphere can do: analyse, categorise, abstract, predict. It is structurally disabled from seeing what the right hemisphere sees: the whole, the living, the particular, the relational. And the second matters more for how we should live. We have built a civilisation on the first and are paying the price.”

APPROACH

Via his website (iainmcgilchrist.com) or his YouTube channel (Channel McGilchrist). He is actively engaged with public intellectual conversations and has a substantial following. Direct outreach is feasible.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. The WhatIfWe framing of 'instruments of perception' maps directly onto his central thesis. High probability of recognition response. Has been waiting for exactly this conversation.

Fritjof Capra

Physicist · Systems thinker · Author, *The Tao of Physics* and *The Systems View of Life*

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

One of the earliest and most persistent voices at the intersection of physics, systems thinking, and contemplative wisdom. His 1975 book *The Tao of Physics* was the first serious attempt by a physicist to argue that Eastern contemplative traditions had anticipated structural features of quantum and relativistic physics — not as metaphor, but as genuine epistemological convergence. His later work, particularly *The Systems View of Life* (co-authored with Pier Luigi Luisi), extends this to living systems, ecology, and the relationship between science and philosophy. He has pressed the question of what Western science cannot see regarding living systems for 50 years, and remains one of the clearest voices on what a genuinely ecological worldview would require from science.

THEIR FRONTIER

“Physics reached the frontier of what the mechanistic worldview could see in the early 20th century. We have still not fully assimilated what that means for how we understand life, consciousness, and the relationship between them. The implications are not merely scientific. They are civilisational.”

APPROACH

Via the Center for Ecoliteracy (ecoliteracy.org). He is selective but genuinely engaged. The ecological intelligence and civilisational intelligence worthy challenges are directly relevant.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. Long-standing commitment to cross-tradition synthesis. The WhatIfWe framing will be immediately recognisable. In his 80s but intellectually active.

Stuart Kauffman

Theoretical biologist · Complexity theorist · Santa Fe Institute

Tier 2

WHY THIS PERSON

One of the foundational figures in complexity science. His work on 'autocatalytic sets' and self-organisation in biological systems established him as one of the key architects of the Santa Fe

Institute research programme. He has become increasingly explicit, in his later books *Reinventing the Sacred* and *A World Beyond Physics*, about the limits of what scientific naturalism can explain — specifically, the emergence of agency, meaning, and the felt sense of being in the world. His argument that complexity requires a rethinking of the sacred is not a retreat into religion but a genuine philosophical frontier: the point at which the science itself requires something the science cannot provide.

THEIR FRONTIER

“Complexity science can describe self-organisation with extraordinary mathematical precision. It cannot account for why it gives rise to the felt sense of being an agent in the world. That gap is not technical. It is deep. And I think it points to something about the nature of the world that reductive science is not equipped to address.”

APPROACH

Via the Santa Fe Institute or his personal website. Has a long public intellectual history and has given many interviews. Opening a relationship with West (also at the Santa Fe Institute) provides a natural warm route. Approach after 6 conversations published.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 2. Intellectually at the frontier but more cautious about the interface with contemplative traditions than some. Needs to be approached from the scientific side of the worthy challenge — specifically the question of what complexity science reveals about agency and emergence that reductive biology cannot address.

Cross-Domain Practitioners

Otto Scharmer

Senior lecturer at MIT · Founder, Theory U and the Presencing Institute

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

Has spent 30 years developing a framework for collective leadership and social transformation that explicitly draws on contemplative practice, systems thinking, and economic theory simultaneously — not as separate elements but as an integrated methodology. Theory U, developed through his work with Peter Senge and others at MIT, is one of the most serious attempts currently available to design for the quality of collective attention that produces genuine emergence rather than mere incremental change. He has reached the frontier of what institutional change processes can do and has been explicit — in *Theory U*, *Leading from the Emerging Future*, and *The Essentials of Theory U* — about what contemplative depth contributes that purely analytical frameworks cannot. His work with the Presencing Institute reaches institutional leaders across sectors globally.

THEIR FRONTIER

“Every change process I have worked with hits the same ceiling: the quality of attention that people bring to the problem is the limiting factor. And that quality of attention cannot be developed by better analysis. It requires something that is more like inner work — a capacity that contemplative practice has been developing for centuries and that organisational theory has barely begun to take seriously.”

APPROACH

Via the Presencing Institute (presencing.com). He is active and gives many interviews. The civilisational intelligence and AI governance worthy challenges are directly relevant. His work on 'presencing' — attending from the future that is trying to emerge — is one of the closest existing frameworks to what WhatIfWe is attempting.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. Has been thinking about exactly these questions for 30 years. The WhatIfWe framing of planetary intelligence and collective consciousness will be immediately recognisable. One of the highest probability recognition responses on the list.

Andrea Riccardi

Founder, Sant'Egidio Community · Architect of the Mozambique peace process

Tier 2

WHY THIS PERSON

Founder of the community that ended the Mozambican civil war — one of the few genuinely successful cases of non-state mediation in modern history, and the case study on the WhatIfWe Field page. Founded Sant'Egidio as a student community in Rome in 1968; it has since grown into a global humanitarian and peace-building presence in 73 countries, with particular depth in Africa. Has operated for 55 years at the intersection of faith, diplomacy, humanitarian work, and education in ways that have been impossible to achieve through any single institutional form. Can speak from direct experience — 25 years of quiet mediation in Mozambique before the 1992 peace agreement — to the question of what a cross-domain actor can achieve that single-domain institutions structurally

cannot. His position in Rome also opens the Vatican network.

THEIR FRONTIER

“We were able to make peace in Mozambique not because we were better diplomats than the professional diplomats. It was because we were not only diplomats. We were also a faith community, and a humanitarian presence, and a long-term relationship with both sides that went back 20 years. The synthesis of those roles was what gave us credibility where they had none. And that synthesis is not something a single-domain institution can produce.”

APPROACH

Via Sant'Egidio (santegidio.org). Based in Rome. The conversation would need to be in Italian or with translation. Warm introduction needed — approach after 8 conversations published. The Field page case study on Sant'Egidio provides a natural entry point.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 2. High-profile and the clearest living example of cross-domain synthesis in active practice. The Field page case study creates a genuine entry point that distinguishes this from generic interview requests.

Consciousness and the Interface

Evan Thompson

Philosopher · Cognitive scientist · University of British Columbia

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

Francisco Varela's most direct intellectual heir. Co-authored *The Embodied Mind* with Varela and Eleanor Rosch — the book that established enactivism as a serious research programme and opened the sustained dialogue between cognitive science and Buddhist philosophy. His subsequent books *Mind in Life* and *Waking, Dreaming, Being* press the frontier of both traditions simultaneously: not using one to explain the other, but holding them in genuine tension and attending to what emerges at the boundary. He does not use Buddhist philosophy to decorate cognitive science, nor cognitive science to validate Buddhist claims — he holds both as serious frameworks that press against each other in ways that neither anticipated.

THEIR FRONTIER

“Buddhist philosophy and cognitive science are not two different answers to the same question. They are two different questions, each of which the other tradition has not yet asked. What happens when you press them into genuine contact is something neither tradition produces alone. And that something is not a synthesis — it is an encounter that changes what each tradition can see.”

APPROACH

Via UBC philosophy department. Intellectually active and engaged with public conversations. A positive conversation with Thompson opens the Mind and Life Institute network — one of the most valuable warm routes on the technology and philosophical tracks.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. At the frontier of both traditions. The consciousness and AI governance worthy challenges are directly relevant. His work on enactivism and Buddhist philosophy is the closest existing model for the Category E profile.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

University Professor of Islamic Studies, George Washington University · Philosopher, theologian, Sufi scholar · Born 1933

Tier 1 · **AGE-URGENT** — approach immediately

WHY THIS PERSON

The most intellectually rigorous living representative of the Islamic perennialist and Sufi philosophical traditions in the English-speaking world. The only Muslim included in the Library of Living Philosophers — a list that otherwise includes Habermas, Rawls, Rorty, and Putnam. Trained as a physicist at MIT, completed his doctorate in the history of science at Harvard, founded the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy. Has argued for 60 years — in over 50 books and 500 articles — that the Islamic tradition, at its Sufi mystical core, holds a form of perception that modernity has structurally excluded and that no amount of scientific or political knowledge can substitute for. Has pressed this claim in direct dialogue with Western philosophy, science, and theology for six decades, most notably in his sustained exchange with Hans Küng and his participation in the 2001 UN Dialogue Among Civilisations. His books *Knowledge and the Sacred* (1981), *The Garden of Truth*

(2007), and *Islam in the Modern World* represent the most rigorous available articulation of what Sufi gnosis can offer a world that has structurally decided such knowledge cannot exist.

THEIR FRONTIER

“The Islamic intellectual tradition has developed, over 14 centuries, a science of the soul — not a metaphor for psychology, but a precise and rigorous account of how the human being can come to know what ordinary reason cannot reach. Transmitting it across the boundary of a secular modernity that has decided in advance that such knowledge cannot exist — that is the frontier I have worked at my whole life. And I am not certain I have crossed it.”

ADDITIONAL CONTEXT

His dialogue with Hans Küng — spanning decades and touching the deepest questions about the relationship between Islamic and Western intellectual traditions — is the closest existing model of the kind of sustained cross-tradition encounter WhatIfWe is designed to produce. Reference this dialogue specifically in the outreach. His age (93) makes this conversation genuinely urgent.

APPROACH

Via George Washington University. His team handles scholarly correspondence. Reference his sustained dialogue with Hans Küng specifically — it demonstrates engagement with his particular intellectual contribution rather than his general prominence. Worthy challenge: collective meaning and what Sufi gnosis offers for the question of collective consciousness.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1 on intellectual fit. Age (93) makes this a priority outreach regardless of sequencing logic — do not wait for the public record to be established.

Dr. Tony Nader

MD (Harvard Medical School) · PhD in Brain and Cognitive Sciences (MIT) · President, Maharishi International University

Tier 2

WHY THIS PERSON

Trained as a neuroscientist at MIT and Harvard, then appointed by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi as his successor — responsible for one of the world's largest contemplative practice organisations. This biographical arc — from the most rigorous Western scientific training to the leadership of a major contemplative tradition — mirrors the WhatIfWe frontier question from the inside. Has spent decades doing structural mapping between Vedic knowledge and modern neuroscience, asking not whether they are compatible but where they converge and where they point beyond what either can see alone. His approach to the hard problem of consciousness — arguing that Vedic consciousness philosophy is not a religious claim but a structural one that the hard problem itself supports — is the most intellectually serious attempt currently available to bring the Vedic tradition into direct engagement with contemporary philosophy of mind.

THEIR FRONTIER

“Neuroscience can describe the correlates of experience with extraordinary detail. It cannot explain why there is experience at all. The Vedic tradition has been saying for millennia that consciousness is not a product of matter — that it is primary, not derivative. I am not asking people to believe this. I am showing that the mathematical structure of the hard problem of consciousness points in exactly that direction.”

APPROACH

Via drtonynader.com or Maharishi International University. Frame the invitation explicitly toward the philosopher of mind and neuroscientist, not the institutional leader. The consciousness and AI governance worthy challenges are directly relevant. Approach after 6 conversations published.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 2. Approach after 6 conversations published. The framing of the invitation is critical — the outreach must engage with his neuroscientific and philosophical work rather than his institutional role.

Technology and Systems Frontier

These are people who have already tried to build versions of what WhatIfWe is pointing at from the technology side, and have reached the frontier of what their technical framework can do alone. They are not invited to explain their technology. They are invited to speak to the gap — the place where the technology runs out and something else is needed. This is directly connected to the technology ecosystem mapping in Part VI. Each person here represents a specific ceiling in current collective intelligence technology, and the conversation WhatIfWe wants is explicitly about that ceiling.

Audrey Tang

*Digital Minister of Taiwan (2016–2024) · Civic hacker · Pioneer of computational democracy · Co-author, *Plurality* (2024)*

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

The clearest available example of someone who has built and operated at institutional scale a system for collective intelligence: the vTaiwan process, which used AI-assisted deliberation (Polis) to synthesise the views of over 200,000 citizens into actionable policy consensus, contributing to 26 pieces of legislation. Has also pressed that system to its frontier and knows precisely what it can and cannot do. Her co-authored book *Plurality* (2024) with Glen Weyl represents the most ambitious current attempt to articulate a political and technological philosophy for harnessing diversity — and is explicit about where that philosophy runs out. She is a self-described 'civic hacker' and has described her approach as 'conservative anarchism' — respecting existing institutions while opening them from within. Her transition from Digital Minister to broader advocacy work gives her the perspective of someone who has seen both the possibilities and the limits of the institutional frame.

THEIR FRONTIER

“We can use AI to find where people already agree without knowing it — to surface the areas of latent consensus that polarised discourse makes invisible. What we cannot yet do is create the conditions in which people can genuinely think together across the deepest differences — differences not of opinion but of the categories with which they make sense of the world. That is the frontier that computational tools alone cannot cross.”

APPROACH

Via her public channels or through the Taiwan Digital Ministry network. Internationally active and gives many interviews. Worthy challenges: AI governance and civilisational intelligence.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. Highly accessible and at the exact frontier WhatIfWe needs to address on the implementation side. A conversation with Tang opens the computational democracy and digital governance network — a route to the Polis/vTaiwan ecosystem and the broader deliberative democracy field.

Nora Bateson

Filmmaker · Writer · President, International Bateson Institute · Daughter of Gregory Bateson

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

Has spent 20 years pressing Gregory Bateson's systems epistemology to its practical frontier. Her concept of Warm Data — 'transcontextual information about and within the interrelationships that

integrate elements of a complex system' — is a direct attempt to design for the kind of knowledge that cannot be extracted from its context without being destroyed. This is precisely the design problem a WhatIfWe knowledge-synthesis lab must solve: how do you create infrastructure for encounter between ways of knowing that are each, in part, constituted by their context? Her book *Small Arcs of Larger Circles* and her more recent work on 'warm data labs' represent the most developed existing intellectual framework for working with exactly the kind of knowing WhatIfWe is attempting to hold. The International Bateson Institute's Warm Data Lab methodology creates temporary conditions for this kind of transcontextual knowing; WhatIfWe is attempting to create a sustained environment for it.

THEIR FRONTIER

"We have very powerful tools for identifying patterns in decontextualised information. We have almost no tools for working with the kind of knowing that only exists in the relationship between things — the knowing that tells you not what a system contains, but how it is alive. That is not a data problem. It is a design problem. And it is the most important design problem we face."

APPROACH

Via the International Bateson Institute (batesoninstitute.org). Active on social media. Worthy challenges: ecological intelligence and civilisational intelligence.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. Her own work already points at the same frontier WhatIfWe is trying to cross — she will recognise the experiment immediately. A conversation with Bateson opens the systems science and regenerative design network.

Geoff Mulgan

Professor of Collective Intelligence, UCL · Former Chief Executive, Nesta · Former Director, UK Government Strategy Unit · Trained Buddhist monk (Sri Lanka)

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

The most rigorous existing thinker on the specific question of what collective intelligence systems can and cannot do. His 2017 book *Big Mind* (Princeton University Press) remains the most comprehensive intellectual account of this question, and is honest about where the technical imagination runs out. Has operated at the highest levels of government policy (UK Government Strategy Unit under Blair and Brown), innovation policy (Chief Executive of Nesta), and now academic research (UCL), making him the figure in the technology track most capable of bridging to institutional funders and partners. Co-created the Institutional Architecture Lab (TIAL.org, 2024) and currently teaches a course on intelligence, AI and algorithmic governance at UCL. Crucially: he spent time as a trained Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka early in his career — a biographical experience that gives him a register on the contemplative dimension of the WhatIfWe question that no other technology-track guest possesses. His most recent book, *When Science Meets Power* (Polity Press, 2024), extends his analysis to the relationship between knowledge systems and political institutions.

THEIR FRONTIER

"We have extraordinary tools for aggregating information and identifying patterns. We have no good tools for generating the quality of attention that allows groups to perceive what is actually happening, rather than what their existing frameworks predict. That gap is not technical. It is something like wisdom — a capacity that comes from depth of experience, including contemplative depth, that no aggregation algorithm can substitute

for. I have spent my career trying to build systems that approach it. I have not yet succeeded."

ADDITIONAL CONTEXT

His combination of contemplative background, policy experience at the highest levels, and rigorous scholarship on collective intelligence makes him uniquely positioned to speak across both the philosophical and technology tracks. He is the guest most likely to understand the full argument of WhatIfWe from first principles — and to introduce it to funders and partners who arrive from the policy and technology worlds.

APPROACH

Via UCL STEaPP or geoffmulgan.com. Active and gives many interviews. Worthy challenge: civilisational intelligence.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. Most likely of all technology-track guests to immediately understand what WhatIfWe is attempting and why it matters at the civilisational scale. His Buddhist formation — however far in the past — gives him a different register on the contemplative dimension than any other technology-track guest.

Geoffrey West

Theoretical physicist · Former President, Santa Fe Institute · Author, Scale

Tier 1

WHY THIS PERSON

Has spent 30 years at the Santa Fe Institute pressing complexity science to its frontier: the discovery of universal scaling laws that govern everything from the metabolic rates of organisms to the growth of cities and the lifespan of companies. His book *Scale* (2017) is both the clearest popular account of this work and the most honest statement of where it runs out. The scaling laws he has discovered are extraordinary — they reveal deep structural regularities in what it means for a system to be alive. But they do not account for why self-organisation gives rise to the felt sense of being in the world, or what it means that a law can govern the heartbeats of mice and the growth rates of megacities simultaneously. His willingness to name this limit publicly makes him exactly the kind of scientist WhatIfWe needs in the technology-track guest list.

THEIR FRONTIER

"The scaling laws are real and they are universal. They describe the metabolism of everything that is alive — including cities, which are extraordinarily alive. What they do not tell us is why. At some point you have to ask what you are actually looking at when you look at a law that governs the heartbeats of mice and the growth rates of megacities. I do not have an answer. I have a question that the science is not yet equipped to address."

APPROACH

Via the Santa Fe Institute. Active publicly. Opening a relationship with West also provides a warm route into the Stuart Kauffman network.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1. His acknowledgment of the limit of what scaling laws can explain is the kind of honest frontier statement that WhatIfWe is looking for. A conversation with West opens the Santa Fe Institute complexity science network.

Tu Weiming

Chair Professor of Humanities and Founding Director, Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies, Peking University · Professor Emeritus, Harvard University · Born 1940

Tier 1 · **AGE-URGENT** — approach immediately

WHY THIS PERSON

The most important living philosopher of Confucian humanism in the world. The key to unlocking the East Asian Confucian intellectual network that is otherwise largely closed to WhatIfWe. Has spent 50 years arguing — from Harvard (1981–2010), and now from Peking University — that Confucianism is not merely an ethical system but a spiritual tradition with genuine resources for planetary-scale civilisational questions: what he now calls 'Spiritual Humanism.' Harvard-Yenching Professor 1981–2010. Member of the UN Group of Eminent Persons for the Dialogue Among Civilisations in 2001. Holds honorary degrees from institutions in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the UK. His dialogue with Daisaku Ikeda (*New Horizons in Eastern Humanism*, 2011) is the closest existing model of the kind of civilisational dialogue WhatIfWe is designed to produce — sustained, rigorous, and genuinely generative rather than merely comparative. His 1996 Harvard lectures on moral reasoning were released on YouTube in 2023 and demonstrate the quality of intellectual engagement WhatIfWe is reaching for.

THEIR FRONTIER

“Confucianism has always understood the human being as a relational being — not an individual who enters into relationships, but a being constituted by them. The frontier I have reached, in 50 years of dialogue, is the question of whether that relational self can be the foundation for a new planetary ethics — one that neither Western individualism nor Chinese nationalism can generate. I believe it can. I am less certain I have succeeded in demonstrating it.”

ADDITIONAL CONTEXT

A conversation with Tu Weiming opens the entire East Asian Confucian network — spanning Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan — that is otherwise essentially inaccessible through cold outreach. This cascade value, combined with his age (85), makes early approach not merely advisable but essential.

APPROACH

Via the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at Peking University, or via the Harvard Asia Center. Accessible to serious intellectual engagement. Worthy challenge: civilisational intelligence — whether Confucian relational humanism can contribute to a planetary ethics no single tradition can generate alone.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 1 and time-sensitive. Age (85) and cascade value — he is the entry point to the entire East Asian Confucian intellectual network spanning Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan — make early approach essential. Do not wait for the public record.

Joscha Bach

Cognitive scientist · Founder, California Institute for Machine Consciousness (CIMC) · Former researcher, MIT Media Lab and Harvard

Tier 2

WHY THIS PERSON

One of the very few people working at the genuine intersection of AI architecture and the philosophy of consciousness — not as a philosophical bystander but as someone actually building computational models intended to produce consciousness-like properties in machines. His diagnosis of what current large language models lack — they simulate the products of consciousness without instantiating its mechanisms — is the most technically grounded account of the gap WhatIfWe's knowledge-synthesis lab needs to address. Founder of the California Institute for Machine Consciousness, which is attempting to build computational architectures capable of genuine knowledge synthesis rather than pattern recombination. Previous researcher at MIT Media Lab and Harvard Program on Evolutionary Dynamics.

THEIR FRONTIER

“Current AI systems are extraordinarily powerful at pattern retrieval. They cannot integrate experience into a continuous narrative or model themselves as agents in a world. That gap is not a scaling problem — it is an architectural one. Building systems that can genuinely synthesise knowledge, rather than recombine it, requires solving for something that looks very much like consciousness.”

APPROACH

Via the CIMC or his Substack. Active at AI conferences. Approach after 6 conversations published. Note: faced reputational consequences in late 2025 following the release of private communications containing controversial statements. He has publicly acknowledged this; his research continues. Monitor developments before approaching.

WARMTH INDICATOR

Tier 2 given current calculus. His diagnosis of the architectural gap in current AI systems is the most technically grounded account available of why current collective intelligence technology cannot do what WhatIfWe is attempting.

The Outreach Strategy

How to reach them: the honest picture

Most Tier 1 candidates are reachable through cold outreach — but only if the outreach itself demonstrates the quality of engagement it is claiming to offer. A generic interview request will be ignored. An invitation that shows the person that you have read their work carefully, named their specific frontier, and connected it honestly to what WhatIfWe is attempting has a realistic chance of response.

The invitation is the first demonstration of the experiment. If it does not itself embody the quality of encounter WhatIfWe is designed to produce, the best guests will not respond.

Route 1 • Cold outreach principles

- Research first, write second. Read or watch at least 3 hours of the candidate's work before writing. The invitation must name their specific frontier — not their field, not their reputation, their specific frontier — in terms that show genuine engagement. This takes time. It is not optional.
- Short and specific — no more than 400 words. Every sentence must do work. The worst invitations explain the project at length. The best ones make the candidate feel that the project was, in some sense, built for exactly them.
- Reference the website once, as context. The website should not be described at length in the invitation. The invitation carries the argument; the website provides the depth.
- Name the worthy challenge specifically. Every invitation should identify which of the six worthy challenges is the intended ground of the conversation.
- One clear ask: 90-minute conversation, recorded, published on YouTube. Nothing else. No ongoing commitment, no institutional affiliation, no expectation beyond the conversation itself.

Cold outreach template (adapt specifically for each guest)

Dear [Name], I am writing because [one specific sentence about what their work has done that is directly relevant to the frontier question — not a compliment, a specific observation. E.g.: 'Your work on the grammar of animacy is the clearest example I have encountered of a scientist naming what Western science is structurally unable to see about living systems.']

WhatIfWe (whatifwe.community) is an experiment in what becomes possible when people who have gone to the frontier of genuinely different ways of knowing meet in sustained encounter around problems that no single tradition can adequately address. The conversation I am hoping to have with you is specifically about [their frontier, named precisely]. The worthy challenge I would want to use as the ground is [one of the six worthy challenges, selected for fit with their work].

This would be a 90-minute recorded conversation, published on YouTube. No other commitment implied. If this resonates with where you are in your own work, I would be grateful to find a time.
With respect, Hector Ibarra · hector@whatifwe.community

Route 2 • Warm introduction

- Through Tier 1 guests after conversations are published. The most powerful warm route. Ask explicitly at the end of each conversation: 'Is there someone in your own network who you think is

reaching the same frontier from a different direction, and who you think would be willing to have this conversation?'

- Through institutional networks: Mind and Life Institute, Presencing Institute, Santa Fe Institute, Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.
- Through the Field case study communities: IPBES, Horizon Europe, Sant'Egidio.
- Through the technology-track network: a conversation with Audrey Tang opens the computational democracy network; with Nora Bateson, the systems science and regenerative design network; with Tu Weiming, the entire East Asian Confucian world.
- Through academic philosophy of mind: the philosophy of mind/consciousness studies community is unusually small and interconnected. A positive conversation with Chalmers or Thompson opens the rest.

Route 3 • Public invitation

A well-placed Substack post, LinkedIn essay, or YouTube short that describes the project and explicitly invites responses will, if the content is strong enough, reach people who were not on the candidate list — people at the frontier who have no public profile that would make them discoverable by research. The Invitation section of the Experiment page is already written for this purpose. This is not a primary route but a real one.

The Two-Track Architecture

WhatIfWe needs two outreach tracks running simultaneously, not sequentially.

Builds credibility, demonstrates quality of encounter	Positions WhatIfWe as participant in active conversation already underway
Creates public record that enables deeper engagement	Builds infrastructure that gives philosophical conversation somewhere to go
Invitation: will you join an encounter at the frontier of what your tradition can see?	Invitation: will you help build infrastructure for a different kind of knowledge synthesis?
Opens contemplative, indigenous, and scientific networks	Opens technology, policy, and systems design networks
Categories A, B, C, D, E	Category F — plus D guests like Scharmer and Tang who bridge both

The philosophical track builds the credibility that makes the technical conversation possible. The technical track builds the infrastructure that gives the philosophical conversation somewhere to go. Both are necessary. Neither is sufficient alone.

The Technology Ecosystem

Summary — see The Technology Landscape for depth

The technology world has made significant progress on four adjacent problems: surfacing latent consensus within shared frameworks (Polis/vTaiwan, Google DeepMind's Habermas Machine); augmenting collective intelligence within epistemologically homogeneous groups (AI4CI, Collective Intelligence Project); diagnosing what happens to knowledge when extracted from relational context (Warm Data, International Bateson Institute); and beginning to address AI's epistemological monoculture (Contemplative AI, Abundant Intelligences initiative).

Every serious initiative in this space, pursued to its frontier, names the same gap from a different direction: the gap between intelligence that operates within a single epistemological framework, however sophisticated, and the intelligence that can only emerge from sustained genuine encounter between genuinely different ways of knowing. That gap is what WhatIfWe is specifically designed to address — not by building better AI, not by scaling deliberation, but by creating the conditions under which something can emerge that none of the existing approaches, combined, can yet produce.

The conversation WhatIfWe wants with technology-track guests is not primarily about what they have built. It is about what they have tried to build and found that they could not — and what they think is missing from the technical imagination that would allow them to get there.

A full treatment of the technology landscape — including detailed assessment of the Polis/vTaiwan ecosystem, the Habermas Machine, AI4CI, the Warm Data framework, the Plurality project, Contemplative AI, and the Abundant Intelligences initiative — is provided in the companion document *The Technology Landscape*.

The Credibility Case

How the website works as the primary attractor

The website provides intellectual credibility — it demonstrates that the project is philosophically serious, carefully argued, and genuinely novel. What it does not yet provide is social credibility (a track record of published conversations) or institutional credibility (affiliation with a known organisation). For the guests on the Tier 1 list, intellectual credibility is the most important kind. These are people who have spent decades navigating institutions and conversations that were not serious enough for what they carry.

What the website does well

- The Argument page makes a philosophically careful and empirically grounded case. A guest who reads it will know that the project has thought seriously about what it is attempting.
- The tradition-specific pages are the most powerful credibility elements for guests from those traditions. A Buddhist practitioner who reads the Buddhism page and finds that it accurately captures the frontier of Buddhist consciousness teaching will be far more likely to respond than one who reads a generic description.
- The worthy challenges signal that this is not a vague pluralism project. It is an experiment with a specific arena.
- The Field page maps the technology ecosystem, demonstrating mastery of the existing landscape for technology-track guests.
- The founder's statement on the Experiment page is honest about what is not yet known — a quality that guests who have spent time in institutional settings will immediately recognise as rare.

What to add to strengthen credibility

- A short video introduction from Hector — 3–5 minutes, no script, direct. Everything changes once this exists. It provides the human register that written text cannot, and functions as a pre-screen: the right guests will watch to the end.
- The first conversation, as soon as it exists. The single most powerful credibility element will be the first published conversation. The outreach strategy should be designed to get the first conversation published as quickly as possible — even if it is not with the ideal guest.
- Begin outreach today, before the first conversation exists. Accept that the first several invitations will be declined. Each decline is a signal that can be used to refine the approach. The first acceptance changes everything.

Complete Priority Table

All candidates sequenced — philosophical and technology tracks combined

Tier	Name / Profile	Tradition / Field	Challenge fit	Route in	Track
1	B. Alan Wallace	Buddhist / Consciousness	Consciousness & AI	Cold — institute	P
1	Joanna Macy ■	Buddhist / Systems	Ecological intel.	Warm — regen network	P
1	Robin Wall Kimmerer	Potawatomi / Botany	Ecological intel.	Cold — publisher/univ.	P
1	Tyson Yunkaporta	Indigenous Australian	Civilisational intel.	Cold — social media	P
1	Iain McGilchrist	Neuroscience / Philosophy	Collective meaning	Cold — website/YouTube	P
1	David Chalmers	Philosophy of mind	Consciousness & AI	Cold — NYU	P
1	Otto Scharmer	Systems / Contemplative	Civilisational intel.	Cold — Presencing	P+T
1	Richard Rohr	Christian mysticism	Collective meaning	Cold — CAC team	P
1	Roshi Joan Halifax	Zen / Anthropology	Ecological & civil.	Cold — Upaya	P
1	Evan Thompson	Cogn. sci. / Buddhism	Consciousness	Cold — UBC	P
1	Fritjof Capra	Physics / Systems ecology	Ecological intel.	Cold — Ecoliteracy	P
1	Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati	Stanford Psych / Hindu	Collective meaning	Cold — sadhviji.org	P
1	Audrey Tang	Computational democracy	AI governance	Cold — public channels	T
1	Nora Bateson	Systems / Warm Data	Civilisational intel.	Cold — Bateson Inst.	P+T
1	Geoffrey West	Complexity / Scale	Civilisational intel.	Cold — Santa Fe Inst.	P+T
1	Itzhak Beery (Taita)	Shamanic / Quechua -Amazonian	Ecological intel.	Cold — itzhakbeery.com	P
1	Sister Chan Khong ■	Vietnamese Zen	Collective meaning	Cold — Plum Village	P
1	Haemin Sunim	Korean Zen	Collective meaning	Cold — haeminsunim.com	P

1	Seyyed Hossein Nasr ■	Islamic phil. / Sufism	Collective meaning	Cold — GWU dept.	P
1	Tu Weiming ■	Confucian humanism	Civilisational intel.	Cold — PKU / Harvard	P
1	Geoff Mulgan	Collective intelligence	Civilisational intel.	Cold — UCL / website	P+T
2	Vandana Shiva	Indigenous epist. / Ecology	Ecological intel.	After 6 published	P
2	Sheikh Hamza Yusuf	Islamic scholarship	Collective meaning	After 6 published	P
2	Stuart Kauffman	Complexity / Emergence	Civilisational intel.	After 6 published	P+T
2	Andrea Riccardi	Faith / Diplomacy	Civilisational conflict	Warm intro, after 8	P
2	Dr. Tony Nader	MIT Neuro / Vedic	Consciousness & AI	After 6 published	P+T
2	Joscha Bach	Cognitive AI	AI governance	Monitor; after 6	T
2	Rigoberta Menchú Tum	Maya K'iche'	Civilisational conflict	After 8; warm route	P
3	<i>Stretch possibilities, unnamed</i>	<i>Emerging from network</i>	<i>TBD</i>	<i>Via Tier 1/2 network</i>	<i>P+T</i>

■ Age-urgent: approach Nasr (93), Macy (late 80s), Sister Chan Khong (87), and Tu Weiming (85) immediately, regardless of sequence. The public record cannot substitute for these conversations and some may not remain available.

Tier 3 note: Conversations at this tier are stretch possibilities that become realistic only once a substantial public record of 15+ conversations exists. They are not named here because the right candidates will emerge from the network built by the first conversations — not from advance planning. A conversation with Audrey Tang opens the digital governance network; with Tu Weiming, the East Asian Confucian world; with Chalmers or Thompson, the philosophy of mind community; with Itzhak Beery, the indigenous shamanic network and the Andean elders. These cascades are more valuable than any list of names drawn up before the conversations begin.

Final Notes

The honest account of what to expect

A realistic expectation for Phase 0 outreach: for every 10 invitations sent, 2–3 will receive a response, and 1 will result in a conversation. This is a normal ratio for cold outreach to high-quality people who receive many requests. It means that reaching the first 10 conversations will require approximately 60–100 invitations, sent over 6–9 months.

This is not discouraging. It is clarifying. The invitation process itself is valuable: each invitation requires genuine engagement with the guest's work, which deepens understanding of the tradition landscape and sharpens the project's capacity to articulate what it is reaching for. The invitations that are declined are not failures. They are part of the work.

Two tracks, one argument

The philosophical track builds credibility that makes the technical conversation possible. The technical track builds infrastructure that gives the philosophical conversation somewhere to go. The technology ecosystem section is not a separate argument — it is the map that makes WhatIfWe's specific position in the landscape legible to investors, funders, and potential guests who arrive from the technology world.

***History does not reward those who waited until the conditions were certain.
It rewards those who attempted to cross the threshold when the need was
clear and the conditions were as ready as they would ever be.***

— Hector Ibarra, from the *Experiment* page
