

A guide to
Convening a Council on the
Uncertain Human Future

RECKONING WITH THE CLIMATE CRISIS

The Northeast Cluster of the Humanities for the Environment Initiative (HfE)
at the Higgins School of Humanities, Clark University
Sarah Buie, Project Director sbuie@clarku.edu

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*What is the nature and scale of the climate crisis,
seen deeply and accurately?*

What does it mean for Earth and for humans?

*How shall we conduct ourselves in the face of grave
danger and uncertainty?*

Imagine sitting with a small group of people who, through their work, commitments and willingness to listen, are ready to look honestly at the climate situation in intentional conversations.

This is a guide for convening those conversations.

Conversations in which to learn more of the climate science, and to comprehend more fully what it implies.

To look into root causes (cultural, political, economic and spiritual) of the crisis, and fathom what it means to address them.

To seek collective insight and creativity in the face of these unprecedented challenges.

Convening a **Council on the Uncertain Human Future** is a way to begin.

We invite you to do so – using our resources and with our support.

Introduction

Climate change is... the unmistakable message that many of our most cherished ideas are no longer viable.

Susan Murphy, *Minding the Earth, Mending the World*

The changes taking place in the Earth's biosphere are re-defining the human future in ways we are only beginning to fathom. Yet, despite the significance of this unfolding crisis, it is rarely framed or addressed comprehensively; the scientific and academic communities are often bound by disciplinary cultures, the media by economics, and some political and economic leaders have purposefully thwarted its consideration. While a shift of media coverage and public awareness took place in the spring of 2014 with major reports on the increasing severity of climate change and its impacts (from the IPCC, AAAS and NCA – National Climate Assessment), opportunities and the will to fully consider their implications are largely absent.

Leadership in convening honest, penetrating and creative conversations on these questions is called for, in the academy and beyond. Council practice is an intentional form that can support engagement with difficult issues. It allows a group working together to go deeply into a question: opening presuppositions to examination, finding common language, and listening together for new, emerging insights. In the UHF Council, participants inquire into the changes underway, examine their causes, and probe their implications. They ask about the stories we have told, and those we can tell for the future. What it means to be human at this time, and what it is we value and will choose to value in response to an altering world. Using a Council practice, they explore these complex questions in a way that supports genuine inquiry and the possibility of new insights among the group assembled.

This guide to convening a **Council on the Uncertain Human Future** and its practice aims to provide the necessary tools and information to launch a UHF Council. The fundamental elements of creating a UHF Council are the **three basic questions** (see page one) and **the Council practice itself**, to be detailed here.

We have organized the Council as a **three-session process** with the basic questions as its framework. For each session, the basic question is raised through a *prompt* and then considered through a Council session. In the original Council, a **public event/conversation** with a distinguished guest serves as the *prompt* to each Council conversation. We provide you links to videos of those events so that you may also use them as prompts for your Council sessions if you choose to.

This guide includes sections on

- *Context / the original UHF Council*
- *Public events*
- *Organizational suggestions*
- *Council practice*
- *Other resources*

The additional resources are

- *Links to special event videos on our webpage <http://www.clarku.edu/higgins-school-of-humanities/initiatives/council-on-uncertain-human-future.cfm>*
- *A guide for Council members (available fall 2014)*
- *Access to consultations and facilitators (contact Project Director, see below)*

Although each process of convening a Council will be distinctive, we will maintain a network among the Councils so that we may all benefit from the insights and work emerging from them, and increase visibility for these issues. Please note that to use the UHF name and be part of the network, we ask that you **observe the basic set of questions and conduct conversations with attention to the Council practice.**

Context The original UHF Council

The UHF Council process is organized around three questions about human-induced climate change and potential human responses to the situation that is unfolding:

What is the nature and scale of the climate crisis, seen deeply and accurately?

What does it mean for Earth and for humans?

How shall we conduct ourselves in the face of grave danger and uncertainty?

These questions structure the original UHF Council being conducted in three two-day retreats over the course of 2014.* Each retreat focuses on one of the basic questions.

The original Council is a **trans-disciplinary group** of twelve humanities scholars, scientists, writers, artists, and social scientists. Every participant brings expertise on issues related to climate change and environmental degradation, and a strong commitment to individual and collective awakening and skillful action. Through a Council practice, we are cultivating a shared capacity for this difficult exploration in an extended dialogue, and will return to a larger public with insights, individual and shared. (Both a book project and a video on *visioning futures* are likely outcomes.)

Public talks related to the framing question for each Council launch each of the retreats. (See next section for more detailed information.) Each talk is followed by a public conversation between the presenter and Council members.

This original Council is the prototype for the local Councils. You can find the project proposal to the Mellon Foundation in the Appendix.

*This original Council is the Northeast Cluster of the Humanities for the Environment (HfE) initiative of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), and is based at the Higgins School of Humanities at Clark University. Members include Mary Catherine Bateson, Sarah Buie (convener and co-facilitator), Janet Echelman, Gretel Ehrlich, Joanie Kleypas, Willa Miller, Kathleen Dean Moore, Susi Moser (advisory board member), Elizabeth Sawin, Camille Seaman, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and Diana Chapman Walsh (advisory board member and co-facilitator). Bonnie Mennell serves as Council consultant and witness. The Council is funded by the A.W. Mellon Foundation and the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Public events

Public talks/conversations related to the framing question for each Council launch each of the retreats, and serve as prompts for the Council conversation. These talks are available as videos for the use of local Council projects on our website.

What is the nature and scale of the climate crisis, seen deeply and accurately?

For the first Council, **Daniel Schrag**, Director of the Center for the Environment at Harvard University, spoke on the *science of climate change*, in a talk entitled **The Anthropocene and Its Discontents** *Climate Change and the Future of the Earth System*. **Daniel P. Schrag** is the Sturgis Hooper Professor of Geology at Harvard University, and Professor of Environmental Science and Engineering. He studies climate and climate change over the broadest range of Earth history, especially how information on climate change from the geologic past can lead to better understanding of anthropogenic climate change in the future. Schrag currently serves on President Obama's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology.

What does it mean for Earth and for humans?

For the second Council, **Maya Lin**, architect and environmental artist, shared her recent work on extinction in a conversation held in her Manhattan studio. This ongoing project **What Is Missing?** has taken many forms (installations, videos, etc). She also speaks about her upcoming *Greenprint* project, which re-envision a sustainable future. Maya Lin is a world-renowned artist and designer, perhaps best known for her design of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC. She says that *What is Missing?* is her sixth and last memorial project.

How shall we conduct ourselves in the face of grave danger and uncertainty?

For the third Council, **Rebecca Solnit**, writer and activist, helps us *vision the future* in a talk entitled **Stories for Hot Weather** *In between Impossible and Easy, Between Despair and Denial*. Writer, historian and activist **Rebecca Solnit** is the author of 16 books about environment, landscape, community, art, politics, hope, and memory, including *Men Explain Things to Me*, *Hope in the Dark*, *The Faraway Nearby*, and *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*.

The talks by Schrag and Solnit are followed by a public conversation between the presenter and Council members.

Organizational suggestions Giving form to a Council

Where is it based? While a Council may be sponsored by any organization or group, the first local Councils will be hosted and funded by CHCI member humanities centers or institutes, nationally and internationally. (The first three are sponsored by the humanities centers at the University of Edinburgh, SUNY Stony Brook, and Clark University.)

Who is convening? One or two people for whom this topic is central to their own work and concerns should take leadership in convening the group; that person could also partner with a center director. The convener/s will also participate on the Council. The convener is responsible for the design of the individual Council sessions (crafting questions, etc., see section on *structuring sessions*).

You may also wish to create a small advisory group (with no more than three people including the convener) for the project, again with people with a serious interest in the topic. The advisory group will support the convener, and be responsible with the convener for the design of each session. Ideally they will also be Council members.

Whom do you invite to participate? In order to facilitate a deep exchange, a Council group is best limited to about twelve people. We suggest convening a diverse group whose members have demonstrated a significant commitment to these environmental / climate concerns in some aspect of their work, and are *ready* for an honest and searching inquiry with others. *A capacity for listening is vital.* Ideally the group will include scientists along with social scientists, humanists, writers/poets and artists. It could also include participants from the wider community, such as other professionals (i.e. journalists, healing professionals) or activists who meet those criteria.

The selection of Council members hinges on your intentions for the range and impact of the Council (at the campus level, a campus/community level, a metropolitan/regional level, or beyond). While this model can be effective for any level of group, most centers will want to bring together participants who both bring a great deal to the opportunity and will be well situated to have an impact afterwards.

Inviting prospective members You will want to send prospective members personal invitations, including some background to the project (the UHF webpage for example) as links or as attachments. For the original Council we sent brief introductory emails with more formal letters of invitation attached, as well as a copy of the project proposal. You will find an example in the Appendix.

Possible structures There are many possibilities for the structure of the Council, based on your intentions, the availability of participants, and funding for meals, etc. Here are three suggestions, which give a sense of the time commitment that will best serve these purposes:

Model One The original Council is taking place in **three two-day retreats** over the year 2014. The group convenes midday on the first day, and is joined mid-afternoon by a guest “expert” for conversation and dinner. We hold a public event that evening, with a presentation by the guest, followed by a public conversation with members of the Council. The Council meets all day on the second day. This version assumes the provision of some meals, as well as overnight accommodations unless everyone in your group is local. *This schedule could be adapted / shortened by starting the meeting later the first day and screening the special event video in the early evening.*

Model Two In a briefer version, **three one-day retreats** could be held. Members could be sent links to the videos for prior viewing, and the full day could be devoted to Council, with lunch provided (dinner optional). An alternative would be to view the video in the late morning as part of the Council session.

Model Three An even more abbreviated version could take place in **a series of afternoon sessions** (three to six in number), with videos viewed in advance. This version works best if the group members are very local (no real travel involved). The brevity of sessions may preclude the evolution of some conversations, but there could be advantages in extending the process over multiple meetings.

Cultivating your Council In convening a Council group, you are creating a container that can encourage deep and honest conversation, as well as new connections and creative exchange among its members. You can further cultivate these aspects of the Council in a number of ways.

For the original Council, we held an **introductory dinner** several weeks before the launch of the Council, with local members in attendance, and far-flung members present via conference call. The advisory group also had **phone conversations** with each member about her expectations and hopes prior to the first Council. In the run-up period, we asked Council members to suggest what they felt were essential readings for the group. A month in advance of the first Council, we sent them a notebook – a **Reader on the Uncertain Human Future** – in which those selections were compiled. We continue to gather readings, and send updates to the reader prior to each Council meeting.

Once your Council is launched, you may decide to create a **list-serve** so that Council members can converse between sessions, send each other links, comment on and support each other's projects, and so you can facilitate planning with them more easily. In the original Council, we also continue the practice of checking in with each member by phone in the few weeks prior to the next Council, to gather responses from the last meeting and hopes for the next.

Council practice

What is the practice of Council, and what does it offer? Over the last 25 years, cognitive psychologists and researchers in the learning sciences have been exploring the fundamental importance of collaboration. Building on the theories of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), they have demonstrated that learning, research, and the generation of new knowledge are collaborative processes. But genuine collaboration requires more than bringing groups of scholars or different disciplines together; it requires listening across divergent presuppositions and worldviews, seeing new possibilities between them, and being willing to engage the unknown together.

As a methodology for collective exploration, Council is a promising practice for collaborative research in the humanities and the academy. It asks participants to enter into a new kind of critical conversation – one that addresses real questions (uncertainties, challenges) from the experience, expertise and knowledge base of individuals while inviting collective insights and connections. In a Council process, participants more readily grasp what unites their ideas in relationship to the issue and what might grow from that. But they also suspend assumptions and certainties as they listen and contribute in the circle. In this process of deepening understanding – a creative matrix – new insights and effective outcomes may emerge. In these ways, Council furthers knowledge creation by eliciting collective intelligence.

As such, the practice of Council may be outside the norms in some academic environments, but this crisis of anthropogenic climate change warrants and requires thinking beyond existing frameworks. We believe Council to be the process that can best support a conversation of this scale and gravity. Please read this *Council practice* section carefully with that in mind.

Council guidelines In Council, we create an intentional space with a set of simple guidelines for participation. The basic tenets for Council practice are four in number:

- to speak authentically
- to listen with attention and receptivity
- to speak with brevity, aware of sharing the time with others
- to be spontaneous in speaking (rather than rehearsing, which precludes listening)

In addition, members of the group agree to observe the confidentiality of the circle.

The guidelines encourage honest speaking and active listening, and this more conscious practice furthers trust and capacity for creativity between its participants. There are many

sources in which to learn more about the practice of Council if you would like to know more (see Appendix).

The meeting space A supportive environment in which to meet is essential to the success of the process. It should be a welcoming room with good lighting (ideally with windows or doors connecting to the outdoors), in which you can gather a circle of comfortable chairs. It should be private enough that the process will not be interrupted or disturbed, and all cell phones should be turned off or left outside. Having a small table in the center of the circle will allow you to place items common to the group (the talking piece, microphone, a small bouquet).

Facilitation Generally the convener (or the convener and a partner from the advisory group) will facilitate the Council process. This involves introducing the group to the process and holding the space throughout the meetings. The same people will have been responsible for the design of the session (including the choice of questions to consider).

Structuring sessions Your Council process is in service of engaging with the basic questions, and the additional questions you develop to explore those central questions in depth with your group.

As each Council session approaches, the advisory group should consider the overall outline of a Council session and develop a set of questions to be raised. Questions should be carefully crafted; they should be *real* questions, in that they are open-ended (not rhetorical or leading), encourage reflection, allow fresh information to arise about both members and the issues, evoke the personal experiences and insights of the participants (rather than those of experts), invite people to reflect on their assumptions and to express their views, hopes, values, and uncertainties. Short, simple questions are preferable. Though they require care in the crafting, good questions will make all the difference. (Examples from the original Council can be found in the Appendix.)

The basic form of a Council meeting includes an **opening circle** (check-in), a **first go-around** in response to a question or prompt, a **second round** in which participants speak to emerging themes and connections, as well as new thinking in response to what was said in the first round, and a **closing round** in which final thoughts and questions are voiced. The basic sequence (following the opening circle) is repeated as each new question/prompt is raised through the Council session.

The initial Council should begin by going around the circle for introductions and a response to a question like *why are you here?* For subsequent Council sessions, begin by going around the circle for a *check-in*; people can simply offer a sense of how things have been since they last saw each other, or include the answer to a question like *what is still on*

your mind from our last session?

From there, you begin with your first question (see above).

The talking piece A symbolic and purposeful aspect of Council practice, the talking piece serves to slow things down, underscoring the process of speaking and listening underway. It should be an object of meaning and relevance to the group. (The original Council uses a small glass orb resembling Earth that was taken to outer space by a Wellesley alumna astronaut in honor of former President and Council member Diana Chapman Walsh!)

When a question or prompt is put to the group by the facilitator, the talking piece is passed to the first member who wishes to speak. They hold the piece until they have said what they have to say; other members listen. When the speaker is finished, they pass the talking piece to the next member, moving around the circle. After a first round, the convener may open up to process to whomever wishes to speak, and the talking piece passes among participants as they choose to engage, or returns to the center between speakers.

What emerges from the process A tenet of Council is that “outcomes” of the process not be pre-conceived, that we open to new ways of seeing and understanding, and that new possibilities for responding and taking action will emerge through the Council process. Members of the original Council are already taking the insights and support gained from this process into their work in a wide range of ways.

The joint projects that will emerge from the original Council are still to be finalized, but likely will include *a reader compiled from the writings of Council members and others*, a *collection of essays on the main Council questions*, and a *video project* including interviews with all Council members (and others) on *visioning our stories for the future*. Additional outcomes are anticipated.

Documentation You may wish to document aspects of your Council, with clear delineation of which aspects are “public” and which are held in confidentiality. In the original Council, we have videotaped the public events (including talks and conversations between speaker and Council members), and tape-recorded all Council sessions. The videotapes are available for distribution, while the recordings are being transcribed as a record for the use of the Council itself. Nothing from the transcriptions will be used in a public way without permission of the participants.

Other resources

We hope this guide has provided you with an understanding of Council and what it offers, and that you are interested in pursuing this further. Please contact us with **any questions** about this material or the process of launching a Council; you can reach UHF Project Director Sarah Buie at sbuie@clarku.edu.

Our **webpage** includes further information on **the public events** that have been prompts for conversation in the original Council, and **links to videos** of them:

<http://www.clarku.edu/higgins-school-of-humanities/initiatives/council-on-uncertain-human-future.cfm>

We are happy to do **consultations** (by phone or in person) about creating a Council and **assistance with facilitation** of initial Council gatherings is available.

For your convenience, **a guide for Council members** will be available in early fall 2014. An abbreviated version of this Guide, it will provide an overview of the project, basic information on Council practice, and access to the Mellon proposal. You can adapt and customize it as you choose.

Further resources on Council practice are listed in the Appendix.

Of course you will customize your Council in terms of members and schedule, and may wish to create your own public events or use other events as prompts. However, please note that to use the UHF name and be part of the network, we ask that you observe the basic set of questions and conduct conversations with attention to the Council practice.

*We must rely on what is happening in order to learn how to proceed...
we can dare to meet it fully just as it really is...
what is so urgently being called up in us flows naturally from
daring to welcome a hard reality.*

Susan Murphy, *Minding the Earth, Mending the World*

Appendix

The following documents are included here for your reference:

- *Mellon grant proposal*
- *Sample Council invitation letter*
- *References on Council*

Examples of Council session questions are available on request.

MELLON GRANT PROPOSAL (short version)

*The Northeast Cluster of the Humanities for the Environment Initiative, CHCI
Higgins School of Humanities, Clark University*

Toward an Uncertain Human Future: The Arts, Ethics and the Sacred

Funded by the A. W. Mellon Foundation
through the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI)

The changing climate of the planet poses grave challenges to human civilization and its survival. While our knowledge of the scientific consensus on climate and its wider contexts has grown substantially, as a society we are largely reluctant or unable to address the implications of what we face. Widespread collective anxiety about an uncertain future is palpable, yet largely ignored by social institutions and processes (government, business, religion, media, and even education). At the same time, a culture of denial transmutes anxiety into a bumper crop of apocalyptic and dystopian films, books and television shows.

A conversation that would begin to address our circumstances must both integrate and transcend the specific environmental, moral, political, and intellectual dilemmas posed by them. It will engage issues of perception, uncertainty, speculation, fear, values and agency. Such a conversation may take participants into fearsome aspects of imagination and psyche, through questions requiring both intellectual and spiritual courage. Given long-standing domains and practices, it rightly falls to the humanities to engage this conversation, framing an inquiry with the potential to illuminate the terms of the human condition at this time.

Can a trans-disciplinary group of distinguished humanities scholars, public intellectuals, writers and artists cross into this territory together, cultivate a shared capacity for this difficult exploration in an extended dialogue, and return to a larger public with insights, individual and shared? Initial questions would be: ***What is the nature and scale of the problem, seen deeply and accurately? What are the prospects for human survival? Given what we know and don't know, how does our state of knowledge shape our values, actions and inaction? How shall we as humans conduct ourselves in the face of grave danger and the unknown?***

The Northeast Cluster (based at the Higgins School of Humanities at Clark University) will invite a select group of senior humanists, artists, writers and related experts to participate in an ongoing *Council* aimed at doing this. Chosen for the significance of their work and their depth of inquiry, the small group (ten to twelve participants) will include an ethicist, scholars of literature, film and religion, a poet, an artist, a climate scientist, and others with related expertise (biology, journalism, public health). Diana Chapman Walsh, former President of Wellesley College and public health scholar, and geographer and climate scientist Susanne Moser will both participate and co-facilitate with Sarah Buie, project director.

Institutional partners for the project are the Higgins School of Humanities at Clark University (Sarah Buie, Senior Associate and Past Director, with expertise on the relationship of the environment to the sacred); the Humanities Institute at SUNY Stony Brook (Director, English scholar E. Ann Kaplan, studies trauma and loss, as well as science fiction films and literature) and the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (IASH) at the University of Edinburgh (Deputy Director and philosopher Pauline Phemister, a Leibniz scholar with special interest in philosophy of nature).

The *Council* will be held in a series of three two-day retreats over the course of 2014, with an introductory dinner in November 2013. Each retreat will be preceded by a public event featuring outside speakers (“resource people”) and/or one or two of the participants in a lecture or conversation on a related topic. Over the course of the retreats, each participant will make an informal presentation on the *nature and scope of the problem* from their related research or creative work to the group in one of the sessions. From the initial questions posed to the group members, they will further develop their own sense of the necessary questions and directions for the dialogue. The retreat process will be held in a council format supporting the emergence of creative insights within the group. Participants will continue their exchanges through written reflections between each retreat.

Video recordings will be made of the public events, as well as of selected aspects of the

council meetings, and a video to be shared online may be edited from them; developing a more substantial film may be merited. Participants will be asked to write an essay (or make a creative contribution) to a collection to be published at the conclusion of the *Council*. The book will be designed to be attractive to a larger public, and we will seek wide commercial distribution for it.

Outcomes of the project may include: a significant role for the humanities in foregrounding and addressing fundamental issues of the *Anthropocene*; the influence of new insights gained in the process on the scholarly and creative work of the participants, and the subsequent impact on their audiences; influence on the academic and wider community attending public events; coverage in the media; a video series of substantial talks and conversations on the topic with the potential of creating a film; an accessible collection of essays and creative works on the topic from esteemed humanists and artists.

Some members of the *Council* will participate in the national project meeting to be held in the winter of 2015. Development of subsequent publications and video will begin in the fall of 2014, and continue through 2015. The project director will participate in planning activities for international collaboration and future grant proposals over the course of 2015.

SAMPLE COUNCIL INVITATION LETTER

A sample of the letters we sent to the original Council members; customize as you choose.



CHALLENGE CONVENTION.
CHANGE OUR WORLD.

(Use your own institutional letterhead)

Date

Name of invitee

Address

Dear *Name of invitee*,

We, the project steering committee, invite you to be part of an uncommon dialogue on the future of humanity, given the spectre of escalating climate change. With the support of the Mellon Foundation, we seek to gather a Council of distinguished *women/people/scholars* to look clear-sightedly into our *Uncertain Human Future*, and consider how we might conduct ourselves in the face of it. *A sentence that includes a reference to their work that lets them know why you feel they should be part of this, and especially value their potential contribution.* It would be a privilege to have you join us as we approach this difficult and necessary terrain.

This Council is funded by the Mellon Foundation as one aspect of a larger three-year international grant for the Humanities and the Environment awarded to the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI). It is intended to serve as an anchor of deep reflection and exploration for the larger project. We are inviting twelve women (scholars, scientists, writers, artists, and other experts) to participate in the Council itself, and several other individuals to offer inspiration, insights and resources to the process.

We attach an abbreviated version of the proposal for the Council, which will give you a better sense of the context in which we propose this conversation, and some of the questions we are raising. The actual questions to be considered will be developed among those participating.

The council process itself is fundamental to the work we hope to facilitate. As you may know, this ancient practice of sitting in circle in the presence of a real question encourages deep and honest exploration, creativity and the possibility of collective wisdom arising among us. It provides support as we move into unknown, difficult and sometimes taboo territory. As we draw from individual strengths and skills as scholars and professionals, the responses of heart and spirit will be equally vital.

The Council will take place in three two-day meetings (in February, May and September) over the course of 2014, with an introductory dinner session to be held in November 2013. (*Change dates and additional information as appropriate.*) Each session/retreat will begin in the afternoon of the first day with brief meeting followed by dinner and a public event including talks by and conversations with one or two resource people (climate scientists, artists, etc.). The Council itself will be held on the second day. Although we cannot offer an honorarium for your participation, all event, hospitality and travel expenses are covered. The grant will also support documentation and initiating a book and/or video project from it.

Please be in touch with *Name*, Project Director, at this address (*email address*) if you have any questions. We are eager to know if this would be of interest to you. If so, she will happily provide more specifics.

With best regards,

The *Uncertain Human Future* steering committee
Names and titles

REFERENCES ON COUNCIL PRACTICE

Dialogos website, <http://dialogos.com/about/our-heritage/>

Joan Halifax, *The Craft of Council* in **The Wisdom of Listening**, Mark Brady, ed., Wisdom Books, 2003.

Ojai Foundation website, www.ojaifoundation.org

Bill Plotkin, *Council Work* in **Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche**, New World Library, 2003.

Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle, **The Way of Council**, Bramble Books, 1996 / 2009.