

Gathering Practice

by Aerin Dunford, 2007

Two years ago, when I began an internship with The Berkana Institute, I heard a clear message from friends at leadership learning centers: Berkana needs to bring the work home. At the gathering of learning center leaders that summer, people challenged us with the question: “What is *your* local work?” One of the distinguishing characteristics of the learning centers in the Berkana Exchange is that they are firmly rooted in the places where they are located; they may each be working in different fields, but all work with a fundamentally grassroots approach. At that time, I assumed that Berkana’s local work consisted of illuminating the work of the learning centers and seeking out potential learning centers in North America. I thought that our work on the ground would take the form of participating in conferences and events, writing about our work, consulting and hosting Learning Journeys. Of course, we do all of these things, and that work is important. However, I believe that it is time for Berkana in the United States to really start getting its hands dirty. I also believe that it is time for me personally to begin *living* some of the practices that we know make communities resilient and individuals whole, healthy, sacred and free.

For the past 11 months, I have been on a self-directed, one-woman learning journey to visit most of the learning centers in the Berkana Exchange community. I chose to embark on this journey for three reasons. First, I wanted to actually spend time *in* the organizations we work with—I wanted to understand more about what they are doing and experience first-hand what it is like to work or live at each of them. Second, I simply wanted to spend time with the people I have met through Berkana—to visit their homes and communities, to be part of their day-to-day lives. And last, I have been conducting interviews for my master’s thesis with people from the learning centers. My research is centered on the question: What are the conditions that allow a *trans-local learning community* to grow and sustain itself? We define the community of learning centers as “trans-local” because the network both spans cultural and geographic divides, and the solutions, programs and responses are not uniform or global—they depend on the local context of each center.

This journey began as a theoretical quest to determine the conditions needed to nourish this community. I am learning a great deal about the “big picture,” and will learn much more as I dive into the data I’ve collected through interviews with learning center leaders. On a more personal level, however, the purpose for this foray into the landscape of the Berkana Exchange has become about gathering practices. I feel I am traveling with a big basket strapped to my back, and as I go, I am collecting the ways of being in the world that I want to bring into my own life. I will carry these things back to a little house in New England. When the time is right I will take them out of the basket, wipe them off and actually start figuring out how to make them a reality. For me, the first step in identifying Berkana’s local work is figuring out how *I* want to live my life, using the practices I have learned from the network of learning centers and others I have encountered on this year-long journey. I also want to dive deeply into the inquiry with others at Berkana about what it might actually look like for this organization to be practicing things like feeding ourselves sustainably, upcycling, and self-healing in order to create more resilient communities at home.

Practice: Looking at the Waste I Produce

What are some of the practices in my basket so far? One of the areas that I am interested in exploring is the waste that I personally produce. In January, I participated in the School for Warriors Without Weapons program hosted by Elos Institute in Santos, Brazil. It was during this community-based building project that I began to actually see first-hand the detrimental effects of non-biodegradable waste. In just seven days, we worked alongside community members to transform a neighborhood dumping ground into a children's garden. At the beginning of the week, I began enthusiastically removing the trash in black plastic bags. By the end of the second day, I realized the futility of my attempts to totally rid the site of rubbish. What appeared to be piles of earth actually turned out to consist of more plastic and rubbish than dirt. Digging in plastic bags is one of the most frustrating things I have ever experienced. I also saw the damaging effects of plastic in India where the sewers and drains become so clogged with polyurethane bags that when the rains finally arrive the streets become flooded with sewage and other refuse. Now I plan to discard as little plastic as possible and to adopt the practice of ridding my life of plastic bags when I return to the States

Folks at Shikshantar, a learning center in Udaipur, India have become very creative in figuring out alternatives to creating waste. For instance, when they buy food from the street, they bring a metal container or cloth bags from home. Not only do they espouse these practices, they are also leading by example—all of the shopkeepers in the neighborhood, visitors and interns know of their anti-plastic bag campaign and some are changing their behavior as a result. I recognize that this practice may prove difficult at home because so many food items are packed in plastic, but I will do my best to avoid pre-packaged foods, buy from the bulk-foods department and directly from farmers, and eat homemade snacks.

Another chronic waste issue that has become visible to me during my travels is toilet paper. This was raised at our annual gathering of learning centers in Greece last May. When we arrived at Axladitsa-Avatakia, the newest learning center in the network, we built four composting toilets (another project I will attempt when I return home). We were dealing with our human waste in a creative way—producing compost to feed the veggies and flowers—but we just could not come to a consensus about the waste we used to wipe. Almost all of the learning centers in the Berkana Exchange network have some sort of an “eco-loo,” and they have different ways of dealing with the paper waste. During the learning center gathering, one group advocated for burying the toilet paper; another bunch said we should burn it; a third encouraged us to abandon toilet tissue altogether. Sadly, we never came to an agreement about what to do, and the paper went to the bins on the road, mixed with our other waste. I traveled directly from Greece to India, where water substitutes for toilet paper as the cultural norm. For seven weeks, I never once used the stuff. Now that I am getting ready to come back home I wonder: Might I be able to give up toilet paper in favor of the faucet technique forever?

Practice: Feeding Myself Sustainably

At each of the learning centers I have visited, people are either already growing their own food using principles of permaculture and natural farming, or they are interested in developing these practices. For many years, I have said that I want to have a garden,

yet I have never made it happen. On this trip, I have realized that one of the few things that we actually have control of in terms of what goes into our bodies is what we eat. It is time for me to learn how to produce my own healthy, organic food.

While in Greece I learned about the concept of “do-nothing farming”, where one works with what is present on the land without disturbing the natural landscape, removing “weeds,” or changing the composition of the soil. In India, I visited the plot of land that Shikshantar will use for its urban farm, using the principles of natural farming. I also worked to clear a plot of land and plant sweet potatoes on a rural farm owned by Panna Lal from Shikshantar. Panna Lal wants to sell the small plots of lands that he currently owns in order to start a larger organic farm, away from neighbors using chemical pesticides and fertilizers. At Abhivyakti, I met Sandeep, who has transformed the back of this learning center into a little jungle. With a pile of bricks, a couple pieces of wood, some dried leaves and sticks, regular kitchen waste, and a few seeds, he has created several soil-less, lightweight garden beds that were thriving even at the end of the dry season.

In South Africa, I worked with a group at the GreenHouse Project called the Organic Fresh Co-Op. Members from 10 different community-based organizations (CBO’s) around Johannesburg travel twice a week to work at one another’s projects. By the end of the year, they hope to create at each location an organic garden which will produce food for the people each organization serves, many of whom are children. The veggies will also be sold in the neighborhood as an income-generating program. As I write this, I am in Zimbabwe at Kufunda Village, where I am learning about permaculture from my friends Silas and Melanie. I know that I will not gain all the skills I need to create an immediately successful garden, but my journey has helped me to get clear about wanting to grow my own food and support local, organic farms. I also feel confident that the support I need to make this a reality is already present in the Berkana network.

Healthy cooking and eating is another major theme throughout the learning center community. What we eat has a huge impact on our health, energy levels, sleeping patterns, relationship with the Earth, etc. Many of us are engaged in questions and experiments connected to healthy cooking and eating: What would it be like to host workshops with only healthy, organic, locally-produced, oil-free food on the menu? What if I only ate raw food for a while? The national economy is failing and there are serious shortages in the stores—what would it look like if we practiced self-sufficiency in terms of our food for a while?

When I return home, I am going to take a close look at my eating habits and patterns. I will try removing certain items from my diet—wheat, dairy, eggs—to see how my body responds. I will see what it is like to actually prepare the majority of my food, limiting the practice of going out to eat to special occasions.

Practice: Upcycled Art

Not surprisingly, many of the items in my basket are related to the “practice areas”¹ that Berkana has identified as recurrent patterns in the learning centers’ work. These six

¹ The practice areas are: Feeding Ourselves Sustainably; Businesses We Believe In; Health and Healing; Beyond Schooling; Ecobuilding and Upcycling; Media, Arts and Culture. Click [here](#) for more information.

themes represent important acupuncture points in our journey towards healthy and resilient communities. As I have reflected on the practices that I want to incorporate into my own life, I have started to realize the many ways the practice areas interrelate and overlap. In this case, the practice of creating art out of waste seems tied to at least two of the six practice areas: “Media, Arts and Culture” and “Ecobuilding and Upcycling.” It has been interesting to see how one area feeds into another and how learning in one field—perhaps around how to deal with food-related waste (composting)—can contribute to ideas in another area, such as upcycling, which means making useful things from waste.

While I was visiting India, Abhivakti and Shikshantar hosted a community media workshop. The gathering was organized to provide plenty of opportunities for hands-on experience creating media. Workshops offered practical knowledge on everything from food as media and musical instruments, to computer animation and ‘zine production. I participated in a workshop on storytelling and bookmaking. I wrote a story based on an experience from my life, made the paper for the book, taught myself how to bind it, then used old magazines to collage the cover and handwrote the story inside. It was a powerful experience for me to make something tangible in the course of a four-day workshop.

I already do a lot of what I would consider *upcycled* art using old magazines, flyers and maps to create collages. However, this process still creates a great deal of waste. When I return home, I intend to begin experimenting with the waste paper produced from collage projects to make new, usable paper for books and other projects. I may also use the waste from these projects to make paper maché puppets and murals.

Also, I began experimenting with making jewelry out of plastic water bottles while at a Zero Waste workshop for children at Abhivakti. At first many of the kids were fighting over the beads used for making jewelry, but when they saw me making something out of garbage they wanted to try it too. We found that while there was a limited number of beads, empty plastic bottles were everywhere—the resources were plentiful when we made jewelry from waste. Learning centers in Brazil and South Africa are already making jewelry and accessories from waste. I want to continue sharpening my artistic skills and trying out new techniques.

At a recent arts workshop at Kufunda, I learned that art requires discipline, commitment, risk and decisiveness. I need to choose my art carefully and practice on a regular basis. I am committing to making art a regular part of my life as a way of expressing myself, relating to others and sharing my view of the world. And I am going to use waste as my primary medium.

The Way Forward

So these are three examples of the practices in the big basket I will wear strapped to my back when I come home. I have greatly appreciated the experiences I have had as I have traveled from one learning center to the next throughout the past year. And I am ecstatic about coming home! I cannot wait to settle down, get connected to a local community, and begin experimenting with what’s possible when I put into practice the many things I have learned from my friends and colleagues at the learning centers.

One of the things that I struggle with in the U.S. is how disconnected we are from the results of our actions. When we throw out the packaging from our gourmet sushi, we do not see where our refuse goes or know what impact it will have on the environment. When we eat food at a restaurant, we have no idea what kind of effort is required to ready the earth, plant the seeds, cultivate and harvest the produce, or even cook the dish. Many of us live in our own little bubbles. I am coming back from this adventure ready to burst those bubbles, not because sustainable energy, zero waste and organic, local food are the hip new things, but because they have become real to me, and I can see how to make a tangible difference to how we live on this planet.

I believe that the work we are doing at The Berkana Institute, particularly the work of connecting pioneering leaders and organizations around the world, is immensely valuable. I know that illuminating the work of the learning centers results in tangible changes in individual lives, especially in the U.S. and Canada. We are learning a lot about how to work together as a *trans-local* learning community and we are involved in exciting experiments together. But the past 12 months have made me see in a new way how I am not living the life that I want to be living. The practices in my basket may become the scaffolding for that life. And I want to invite others—both inside Berkana and among my friends and neighbors—to take a look in our collective basket of practices and see which ones we would like to start living. Perhaps this is what our friends from the learning centers really meant when they said: “Bring the work home!”



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