

Reflections from a Community Member: Philanthropy and Social Change

Ben Mates, The Robert G. Hemingway Foundation, June 2007

The Robert G. Hemingway Foundation is currently engaged in an ongoing inquiry around how to use limited resources to unleash human potential so that humanity can collectively and consciously co-create the best of all possible worlds for the utmost benefit of all. An integral part of our inquiry has been our ongoing relationship with The Berkana Institute, and our participation in three gatherings: the NOW Activism gathering in Oaxaca, Mexico (May 2006), the School of Warriors Without Weapons in Santos, Brazil (January-February 2007) and the Art of Learning Centering at Axladitsa-Avatakia Learning Center in Greece (May 2007).

While philanthropy is generally having some effect on the problems it proposes to address, there are challenges that persist as part of human experience. These problems affect every person on the planet to a greater or lesser extent. If humanity as a whole is going to move beyond experiences of scarcity, hunger, disease, environmental degradation, social inequity and the like, new approaches are urgently called for. We at Hemingway Foundation have been deeply listening for the emergence of approaches that might sustainably transform such experiences for the good of the whole world. It was in this spirit of listening that we chose to participate in these events.

From the moment I joined the group in Oaxaca, I was called to participate in a series of exercises that I had not previously encountered in such a rich and intentional form. Though unfamiliar at first, Open Space Technology, World Café, and harvesting were all terms and practices that I soon became familiar with. A combination of games, music, movement, artistic exercises, breaking into smaller groups, coming back into a large group to share the harvest, shared work, shared meals and shared experience—all of these methods of engagement deepened our connection to one another and led us to become more fully present to ourselves and what matters most to each and all of us.

I came to see that hosting conversations that matter is an art. The cultivation of this hosting can create the conditions for groups of people to become aware of the wealth of living knowledge and experience that is present as a resource and can be drawn upon to satisfy human needs. In a spirit of play and exploration, we allow each other to see who we are and connect with what inspires us into passion and action. Action was also an integral part of our experience in Oaxaca. We were given the opportunity to experiment with life-affirming practices, such as cooking, water catchment techniques, solar ovens, composting toilets, sustainable building, organic gardening and more. This was an integral part of our experience in Oaxaca. I felt all parts of my being stretched, exercised and stimulated in my time there.

I took home some important realizations. The convening of conversations of people who would not normally exchange ideas can be invaluable in enhancing the lives of all who participate. People share what is working for them and what they are struggling with. Perhaps they give and receive support, perhaps they examine what is hindering them, perhaps they open their minds to new ways of being, perhaps they return home to experiment from a place of expanded awareness.

It is neither possible nor desirable to include every person in every conversation. Thus it is important to include key people who can return to their circles of friends and family empowered to share what they have learned and perhaps convene their own similar conversations. Organic growth of conversations that matter can thus occur. Contrary to the imposition of static replication based on abstract theory, each group will surface a unique confluence of life-affirming ideas and practices appropriate to that particular time, place and community of people.

This approach of empowering key initiators was used with extraordinary success in the School of Warriors Without Weapons in Santos, Brazil, in January and February of 2007. The School itself deserves a far more detailed description than I can give here. Briefly, 54 youth from 14 countries came together and bonded in a spirit of fun and deepening connection. Simultaneously, they engaged the challenge of working to assist a disadvantaged community to envision the world they want, and took action to begin creating that world. They worked on two project sites together with the community: a cultural center and a children's garden space. These spaces were transformed from community eyesores into pleasant gathering places—a source of pride for all. All participants were left with an appreciation for what is possible, even in a short period of time. The youth have returned to their homes inspired to take on new challenges and to share their successes in their circles of influence.

Following the close of SoW3 (as we came to call it), individuals from Elos, Berkana, Hemingway and five other learning centers in Berkana's network—the Shire (Canada), Kufunda (Zimbabwe), Unitierra (Mexico), the GreenHouse Project (South Africa), and IDSP (Pakistan)—met for 10 days to consider how SoW3 might be offered at each of these learning centers. We adapted the U Process (as described in *Presence: Exploring Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society* by Peter Senge, et al.) to explore the depths of our commitment to our communities and all life. After seeming to diverge wildly and chaotically at the beginning, we came to surprising and easy agreement on the last day, and I left full of the hope of continuing to deepen the relationships and the initiatives that were founded during our time together.

The Art of Learning Centering in Greece was an opportunity to participate more fully in using process tools to become aware of the depth and richness of our connection as it is expressed in diversity across the planet. Representatives from 11 learning centers, staff and board members from The Berkana Institute, and learning partners from various organizations came together for 10 days to discuss and share their strategies and methods in their own communities of practice and how those communities collaborate through the Berkana Exchange. It was impressive to see the group care for itself and take turns hosting various conversations and activities. Once again, we progressed from wide diversity to some surprising common insights, and that wheel is still spinning.

Due in large part to our growing relationship with Berkana and its larger network, we at the Hemingway Foundation appreciate that convening and hosting conversations, especially of groups of key initiators, is essential to co-creating a world we would choose to live in. We have come to believe our highest purposes will be realized many times over through encountering each other in our common humanity, through dreaming dreams of a world where all life thrives, and through committing to take playful, life-affirming and loving action to live those dreams.

What we have learned during and since these three events (as well as through Berkana's integral part in co-hosting an event in late March 2007 as part of our ongoing Symposium for Conscious Co-Creation) has affirmed our trust that Berkana's work has an essential part to play in helping us fulfill our mission in the world. Certainly the methodologies and structural framework of our encounters have an essential part to play in our learning. But the real juice comes down to getting to know the unique expression of being in each person—the passions, the struggles, the commitment to opening to new possible worlds. As others have been inspired to share themselves, so I have been called to reveal the depths of who I am. In knowing and appreciating each other, we have forged relationships that enable us to strengthen the expression of our deepest desires for the world. We have found friends and collaborators, and our growing friendship continues to draw others who share a vision of a world that works for all. And so, our initial inquiry continues to deepen and find resonance in the hearts and spirit of good people across many lands and cultures. We look forward with anticipation to what is yet to emerge from the rich soil of our relatedness.

Books suggested by Berkana that have proved valuable to us:

[*Solving Tough Problems*](#) by Adam Kahane

[*The Spider and the Starfish*](#) by Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom

[*The Answer to How is Yes*](#) by Peter Block

[*Presence: Exploring Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*](#) by Peter Senge, et al.

Ben Mates is Operations Manager for The Robert G. Hemingway Foundation. Ben is a long-time student of holism, metaphysics, and spirituality. He is a vegetarian, bicycle enthusiast, gardener and has been a member and organizer of local food co-ops, food buying clubs and CSAs. He holds a vision for a world of sufficiency, harmony and the fullest expression of what it means to be human.