

## *Southern Africa Learning Journey: Art of Change*

Kufunda Learning Village in Zimbabwe, the GreenHouse Project in South Africa and The Berkana Institute in the United States organized a week long retreat for community activists and artists from South Africa and Zimbabwe. It was an amazing journey.

This story begins to recount our time together

### **Beginning at Kufunda November 26, 2007**

“The future is working if we stay in the present,” Silas whispers, as we begin our morning check-in circle. “The future is working if we stay in the present.” Words spoken on a cool Zimbabwe morning after the night of the rains that finally came. I arrived late last night, some 30 hours after leaving my doorstep in Spokane. Back to Zimbabwe. Back to Kufunda.

Others had arrived late Saturday afternoon and had a leisurely Sunday of exploring Kufunda and getting to know each other. People come from the INK area in Durban, from the South African Fisherwomen’s Association in Cape Town, from Soweto Mountain of Hope, LaPeng Family and Child Center and Green House Project in Jo’burg, from Uhuru in urban Harare and, of course, from Kufunda.



As I joined people in the kitchen Monday morning what I noticed first were the smiles and the laughter. These people were strangers to each other just two days ago, and already there is a spirit of community. They started to tell me how good it feels to be at Kufunda—it feels comfortable and familiar, they said. Something is present here.

The design team decided the question for the morning check-in was “What is familiar here?” People were not at a loss for words.

*We are sharing the same ideas.*

*Resonance.*

*Laughter that lets me bear the pain.*

*I don’t have to pretend to be anyone other than me.*

*The child within us has come out in some way we have forgotten.*

*The challenges we face don’t seem as great anymore.*

*Fewer words; more hugs.*

*What is unfamiliar is that the Kufundees just go ahead and do what needs to be done for themselves.*



We broke into teams of origin to spend a good chunk of time inquiring about the gifts each has to offer and the things each wants to take away. And then we came together again.

Such a pouring out of wealth on three particular levels:

1. There are things we have to share at the level of the earth: permaculture and other gardening techniques, herbal knowledge, ways of being with children, better building, zero waste, organic food cookbook, bringing in more art.
2. There are things we want to share and learn about how to be in relationship beyond money—where the work that wants to be done provides the motivation rather than funding. How does this work, anyway? How does money cut across passion and induce poverty? But what do you do with people who will not claim their space? The kind of commitment people have here is amazing; how do you keep that going?
3. How do we each organize? What is needed to maintain and nurture the relationships? How do you keep the communication flowing? What structures do you have, and how do they help?

Lunch, and the space opened after lunch. Time for helping in the herb garden, and in building a cob house, and to decide the age-old question: Who is better at football?

Quiet conversations in the afternoon. More conversations over cooking and over dinner. People coming to see each other's gifts—and their own.

### **Mondohro Village November 28, 2007**

Usually language is acquired, other times it is force-fed. When a 13 year old delivers a speech about her impoverishment, she speaks the words of someone else. "Impoverishment" is not the term any of us who are whole, healthy and free would use to describe our condition. It is the language of development.

Our visit to Mondohro began with village singing and swaying to the music as we arrived. The only "catch" was the small speech we heard about impoverishment. It stood out as a distinct contrast to the rest of our time and as a reminder or both how far Mondohro has come and of the journey yet ahead.





I stayed the night at the home of Ellen, who also is the leader of the child care center for orphans and other young children. Six and a half years ago, when I first came to Mondohro, the predecessor of this space was a area of about 12 square meters enclosed by tree limbs stuck in the ground, side-by-side. Now it is a lovely, large moldalvo where orphans and kids who still have living parents play. In Zimbabwe, customs keep orphans from being adopted by relatives or other families. Children continue to live in the home of their parents, and relatives come by to check on them. The child care center gives them someplace to go during the day.

But back to Ellen. She and her husband and four children live now by farming. They had a bottle shop and general store for many years, but were forced to close it two years ago when it just became impossible to run—another casualty of hyper-inflation. Now they farm. On each side of their farm are the farms of Ellen’s husband’s older brothers—both now deceased and the farms vacant. I saw apple and mango and avocado trees planted where arbor-loos once stood. The trees grow much faster, Ellen says, than the others they have planted without the manure of the arbor-loos! The permaculture garden is very productive, provide a small surplus beyond what their family needs.



In the morning we returned to the child care center for a bit of a learning program. The changes since my last visit are incredible. Permaculture and arbor-loos are simply part of the normal vocabulary. Everyone knows what they are. But what was most impressive is that this has become a village that depends on itself and talks with itself. Multiple people spoke in our circle—art of hosting, making peanut butter, making handbags, permaculture gardens, arbor-loos. People are engaged in experiments that are improving their lives and they are talking with each other about the work. They’re connected, aware and on the move. It was exciting.

**Plans and Connections**  
**November 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>**

The visit to Mondohro moved everyone on the journey. Many of the South Africans commented on the resiliency of Zimbabweans:

*They don't complain.*

*They don't wait for someone to tell them what to do.*

*They just figure out the next step forward.*

*It is impossible to call this poverty.*

The visit to the village inspired everyone to look back into their own lives and to see how they could do more with less. We returned to Kufunda with even deeper resolve.

After dinner after our return to Kufunda, we had a circle to reflect on our time in the village. Once again the electricity was down, so the circle was by candlelight. One after another people spoke of how the people of Mondohro impressed them with their quiet dignity and resolve. It was an amazing circle.

In the morning, we began the work of drawing the pieces together. After checking in with a song from Sofia, we sent people off a period of quiet reflection on what they were present to and what was emerging inside them. Coming back, people grouped in twos and threes and shared their experience with each other. And then it was spoken into the circle.

*In the speed of things in Jo'burg, one loses the chance to talk with people; there's not enough time for talking and learning with each other.*

*The spirit of creativity has been revived by getting outside our little cocoons; we can discover what is possible.*

*What is my purpose in being? What am I bringing into the world?*

*We've lost continuity and we need to regain it. Legacy, transitions, growth and movement all come together in a present moment if we regain continuity.*

*What are the changes I wonder, that actually build self-reliance?*

*Who's going to be holding all this and how do we harvest it to benefit us and the world?*

*This has been a gathering of hearts and of herbs.*

*I've been part of a lot of networks, but they have not been organically linked. Linking in words is not enough. How do we assure that practical links get made?*

*What are the common values of this community and what is the space that holds those values?*

*We move through three stages here: inspiration, support and sustaining.*

The afternoon was another time for walks and work on the land and for a journey into downtown Harare to see what things looked and felt like in the national capitol of a country said to be slowly dissolving. And back for a quiet evening with conversations and song and music. More things to cook.



The next morning began with meetings in organizational groups—GreenHouse, Kufunda, LaPeng, SOMOHO, Uhuru, Fisherwomen, INK to talk about what they would like to offer to others and what they wanted to learn. An incredible feast is being prepared.

The region is alive. Vibrant. Pulsing. Moving. Going Deep. Dancing.

There will be a host of Exchanges in the region over the next year. They will share what they know about permaculture, herbal healing, ecobuilding, child development, women empowerment, call to arts. They will exchange in teams—people from multiple centers visiting one and doing actual work on the ground together.

These action-learning exchanges will form the backbone of a set of small communities of practice working in southern Africa and sharing with the rest of the world. There's a great consciousness of needing to share more with each other and with others as well. Uhuru will undertake an ambitious program of harvesting and story telling, including creating an e-newsletter to keep everyone linked.

A decision council determined that this community will gather again in a year, likely in CapeTown, hosted by Fisherwomen. If not there, then in Durban. The team is assembled and will have its first organizational call in two weeks. It will bring together people from the organizations that were here—and others, inviting others across the welcoming boundary

There is energy. There is commitment. There is seeing each other. A powerful possibility has been birthed through the gathering of these kindred souls.

It was a wonderful gathering!

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