

Stories from an African Learning Village

By Marianne Knuth



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Kufunda is a learning village (a learning center) which seeks to support people and communities in discovering and recovering practices and social systems that actually work for them. What ‘that actually work for them’ means is part of what this article is about.

Our overriding question is the following: What does it take to support people in reclaiming their sense of wealth and possibility, and in that beginning to forge their own learning paths towards a more nourishing and sustaining way of life?

From a letter to my friends, Harare, Zimbabwe, June 19, 2001

I have a dream . . .

We have a small farm of 327 acres, 23 km south of Harare, which we bought in 1984, when our family moved to Zimbabwe (my mother returning after over 15 years abroad). On it we grow maize and groundnuts, cabbages and seedlings for sale, and milk for ourselves and the people in the surrounding area. My mother, sister and I hold a vision of something more – for this to be a place where we do things with and for the people of Zimbabwe. Our dreams intertwine, and I hope to see them co-exist on the farm. For now I have decided to get started. While I do not come with solutions or the way forward for sustainable community, I do come with the belief that together we can figure it out. The answers that people need are in their midst, and if we come together we can discover them.

I hope the centre will bring together community organizers from across Zimbabwe regularly to learn from each other; to deepen their understanding of their situation; to become more conscious of unconscious assumptions that may hold them back (both inherited and cultural); and how they can work with those. It will be a learning community of those people who are working with and for the most disadvantaged Zimbabwean people. The centre will also be space to support young disadvantaged people who have not managed to finalise their formal education. It will be a place to help them grow more fully into themselves, and who they are; help them figure out what they want from life, and how to get there. And the farm will become their home while they were there.

My desire is to challenge their inherited notion of success (from colonialism and the west) and develop, and work with them to recover knowledge and insight from their

own culture. I am inspired by Gandhi, who said that absence of the British does not constitute independence (which officially Zimbabwe gained in 1980), rather independence, or freedom, is the recovery of the self and of the civilisation in Zimbabwe.

I picture a life of simplicity, self-sustainability, and being in tune with nature, a place where, as Tagore said, “education necessarily becomes the preparation for a complete life of man, which can only be possible by living that life, through knowledge and service, enjoyment and creative work.” I speak here not only of education, but of creating a learning community in *which we live that life which we believe to be possible*: we create a microcosm of another way of being and doing together.

Kufunda Village Today

Three and a half years later, Kufunda Village has become a reality, and much of the above is being lived out and experimented with. Some of the ideas have changed form and shape, but the core remains the same. The vision and intent are focused on creating healthy and vibrant communities through supporting people as they unfold in their own way in their communities.

Our starting point is that all the communities we work with are unique and special. We recognize this and work off their current wealth, however limited it may seem. Thus, we start from a place of wealth, and “enoughness,” instead of from a place of poverty and scarcity. Recognizing that most of the people we work with are deeply connected to their villages and communities, we focus on helping each community expand its sense of what is possible in its context.

We aim for holistic community development working with a cross sector of the community. This means that we don’t come into a community to fix a problem. We empower and support people to develop their leadership and capacity to solve their own problems in their own ways. Through our work with a community we have typically focused on:

- broad based learning related to sustainable community;
- re-imagining their community together and
- developing basic action plans and projects to move towards their new vision for the future.

Throughout this, although the community is central to our work, we recognize that we are working with individuals. We take the time for storytelling, to know each other more deeply, to listen to – and integrate – the fears and concerns, and dreams and hopes of individuals, as a way to move towards something that is collective, but which builds on the people themselves.

It has been our experience, that the specifics of the projects that communities choose to engage in together are almost irrelevant, though not quite. Where I am sensing deeper change is in the process of people actually learning to work together successfully, collectively. The realization of what is possible when we come together brings momentum that can go beyond any initial project, be it on sanitation, agriculture or reforestation.

Examples of the visible landscape

The group from the Mhondoro community of Rwizi (an area comprising 14 villages and approximately 7500 people) returned home in late February, 2004, with a few simple but ambitious goals:

To plant one million trees

To each family one compost toilet

To support each family and homestead to shift to organic farming and gardening.

Less than a month later lots had already happened: Two model compost toilets had been built at the Kwari AIDS orphanage, in addition to several of the participants having built their own at home; a model permaculture garden at the orphanage; and 250 leukina trees that have been planted collectively, plus those planted by each individual in their homestead. Additionally new income generating co-operatives have been formed by people who returned from Kufunda.

They seek to involve and educate the community to be able to join them in the work, and through their example to realize the power of working as a team. *"I don't know how to express how precious this learning is. Everyone is saying 'Come to my place. Show me how to make the arborloo [compost toilet].' I am willing to work hard for my community, for something which makes our community brighter."* — Juliet, Rwizi

The group in Zvimba has put a special emphasis on coming together around a collective compost toilet project. They have so far built 44 toilets in the community, involving the local headmen, chief and primary and secondary schools. They are running a community garden project together, as a model for what is possible without using expensive chemical fertilisers and pesticides. They have started a pre-school for children in the community. Several small projects have been started providing for needs in the community as well as generating income (school uniform projects, knitting projects, making fuel efficient clay stoves).

In Rusape two pre-schools have been started. A small knitting school has been started for widows in particular, a nursery project has over 5000 trees, a mix between exotic fruit trees for sale, and indigenous trees for reforestation. They are exploring the possibility of starting a community currency for their area.

In each of these communities, in addition to the practical outcomes, the importance of working together is expressed time and time again.

"I have learned that we need to share the little that we have and that working in a team that we can have a better tomorrow." — Community organizer from Zvimba

"I used to be selfish. I only wanted to work for myself. Now I am experiencing the benefit of working together." — Aquiline Makorovodo

What does it take to reclaim our sense of wealth and possibility?

Telling our story

Initially it was a surprise to me that the story is more important than whatever training people take part in. But when the stories go deep, the learning occurs.

Anna first came to Kufunda in February 2003, for our first community organizers programme. The change that has occurred in Anna's life since then is remarkable. I remember Anna well from the very beginning. She is a beautiful woman, quiet and modest, small and graceful. She works incredibly hard. When she came back to Kufunda for the second time, she and her fellow women community organizers from Rusape surprised us all by how much they had done at home with the inspiration and ideas that they had acquired from Kufunda.

According to her, before Kufunda, she used to sit and wait for change to come to her. That is now a thing of the past. She can't give enough credit to Kufunda for what she, and the women she works with, have accomplished, and yet they have done it by themselves. It seems that it began with a shift in perspective. A shift and realization, more importantly, in their view of themselves. Anna says, "I thought that because I was one of the poorest people in my community I had no role to play. At Kufunda, I learned that each one of us has something special to give. I used to think that because I had no cell phone . . . I could not mix with those more wealthy."

Anna said that when she began to value all of herself, she found the courage to spearhead initiatives which before she felt unable to do as a simple poor woman. And she is very clear that it was her first two week experience at Kufunda that was the beginning of the shift, though it was affirmed and accentuated by the response she received in her community when she began to show initiative and leadership.

Anna places great emphasis on the power and importance of meeting through our stories and of getting to know each other and taking the time to hear and see each other – with respect. "I felt like I was someone when I was at Kufunda. What I said and what I thought was taken seriously. I was helped to see myself as a person first. Not as a poor person."

The community organizers programme that Anna was a part of spent the first two days on an exercise we call "the tree of life." Using the metaphor of a tree, people spend two full days telling their story. From the roots (ancestors and grandparents who have influenced their lives), to the trunk (their life story, often one full of hardship), to the fruits (the gifts and talents they have) and the leaves (their dreams for themselves and their family).

Those two days are always magic. The journey from the roots to the fruits is always one of hardship and suffering. Parents dying early, children passing away from AIDS, not being able to finish school, getting stuck in the middle of the political drama unfolding in the country at this time – whatever the story, almost everyone has a hard tale to tell. If we stopped there, we would know that we were not alone in our suffering, but that would be about it. The move further up the tree to the gifts shows how people have mostly somehow managed to take their suffering and turned it into something rich. The women's ability to listen to and counsel others; the youth's ability to write poetry describing her life; the talent of nursing and caring for the sick; the ethic of hard work . . . and on and on. Often those things that people take for granted – that they do not look upon as gifts or anything special, are small diamonds that have grown out of a life of hardship. They are diamonds and they do need to be recognised and appreciated. And so we spend two days before going into what some may see as the real work, simply in meeting and seeing each other. There is space to speak the pain, but there is a commitment to looking for the beauty too.

Appreciating what is . . .

I have often seen people shift enormously in those few days of storytelling, visibly straightening up in their posture as they tell and retell their story from different angles and perspectives. From being a poor person, laden with problems, you begin to pay attention to and appreciate the gifts and qualities you are also carrying in you. Silas spoke very clearly to it in our conversation: "Realizing who you are. . . . Being poor means you want to be someone, but then you're not looking at what's here; who you are."

Focusing on 'what is *not*' will only cause us to increase our sense of inadequacy. As we invite people to focus on what is working – in every community and person there is some-



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thing that works, that is what we choose to focus on – we are inviting them to expand their sense of wealth and possibility. Silas continues “The poor can be materially poor and spiritually rich. We all have something to share. I no longer see myself as poor. If I can give a listening ear to Dumí, then I have offered something. I am not poor.”

In this lies a realization of our own wealth. After having focused so single-mindedly on what we don’t have, it can be difficult to acknowledge what we do have, or discount it for being worth little or nothing. As Dumí reflected: “I used to think that I don’t have anything to give. Marianne is the only one who can give. Why doesn’t she give something?” In this there lies an expectation that those who have more should support those who have less. It would be wonderful if the world worked that way, but unfortunately it doesn’t. If those who have less are focused on what they feel they deserve, waiting – as Anna was – for something to change, for someone to help, it can easily turn into what we know in this country as victim consciousness. It is not a very generative or resourceful place to be stuck in. Instead it is a giving up of our power and self to the other.

But Dumí continues, “I am realizing however that giving is always done in many ways. In the form of money, sharing ideas, natural resources. In fact we used to think that our natural resources were not good enough to share. If I gave mangai (a traditional food) that would not be good enough. I did not know that Mangai is actually better than the white bread and jam we choose to serve visitors instead. We did not know that our traditional foods have all the nutrients. Now we’re realizing that we should go back to our roots. Not just with food.” I asked where this conviction that their own food was inferior might come from. The answer

Assumptions of Appreciate Inquiry

- In every community something works.
- What we focus on becomes our reality.
- Reality is created in the moment – there are more than one reality.
- The act of asking questions influences the community in some way.
- People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.
- If we carry forward parts of the past, they should be what is best.

was that those with money don't choose them, and so that which can be bought must invariably be better than what is grown at home. Sikhethiwe said that to her "our own type of food is an example of our poverty. Poor people usually eat traditional food. The rich can buy the processed foods. To show that we have something, and to show respect to our visitors, we then have to buy the expensive, though often less nutritious, foods."

It is not only about food, but it is a good example of the loss of self that has occurred. The shift in the people who we work with, who have reclaimed their pride in their mangai, their local herbs, their community, and their culture, may have come partly through the questions – following the very simple but potent appreciative approach – guiding them to uncover specifically the wealth, treasures and wisdom that they do have as individuals and communities.

. . . Being truthful about what isn't

Appreciating the good is central, then. And yet it is not an excuse to cover up that which is not working. For Anna having the space to speak the pain was just as valuable as the practice of looking at what she had to offer the world: "You may teach many things, but if people are full of problems they are not able to learn."

It has been my experience that people keep their pain, problems and sorrows to themselves. They do not wish to burden others with them. It is a collective and communal culture, but it is much easier to share the joy and laughter here, than that which is not so beautiful and light. I remember a circle at Kufunda. It was a small group, mainly women, mainly widows. Through the conversations of the days before it had become clear that people were under more financial stress than normal after the government had more than tripled school fees in an attempt to keep up with inflation. I forget the exact question I asked. It was along the lines of: "What is your situation and what are your concerns?"

It turned into a circle of grief, and tears. It was a long hard witnessing of what people were suffering under. What struck me most was how afterwards people expressed deep surprise that they were not alone in their suffering. I would have thought it so obvious in today's Zimbabwe that everyone is struggling, and yet the experience of sharing openly the pain and concern was apparently so novel and so comforting to people. It was perhaps a unique circle in the way it opened up the field of collective grief and sharing thereof, but the on-going practice of sharing what is on our heart and mind, seems to be an important release for many people.

The conversation was generative in that it spurred us to set up an educational fund to support the widows and orphans. I believe that even if we had not moved into problem solving

mode from the conversation, the process of sharing in itself brought a significant level of release and thus healing.

Removing money from the pedestal upon which we have placed it

In our questions to people about their learning paths, and their relationship to Kufunda, another aspect emerges very strongly: The realization that money and the material are not in fact the most important aspects to life. This seems to strike young people particularly strongly through their relationship with Kufunda.

Looking back at her young life, Sikhethiwe shares how money was a central part of her concerns from early on: “When I was at school it was a wonderful life. But when you grow up you have to work and make money. Things are hard these days, in terms of the political situation. Even I don’t have enough for myself. I worry about my baby’s life. If things continue to be hard, am I going to be able to send him to school?” But though things are hard, Sikhethiwe has changed fundamentally in her relationship to money. “Yes we need money but it is not as important as yourself. *You have to love yourself and the way you are first, not just rush for how you can get money.*”

Sikhethiwe goes on to speak to the same sentiments that many others have shared with us. That the experience of fun, love, community, doing what we love, being engaged in meaningful pursuit, that these bring an experience of happiness. In the midst of the same poverty that was always there, an experience of happiness is a strong reminder to what really matters, and money is not the only factor in bringing on joy and meaning. Tracing the source of the realization takes us to being together with others; being in relationship – whether that be through circle, in projects, in exercise, in work or play. *As we lose our intense focus and worry about money, we can work with it in more detached, and perhaps healthier ways.*

Aquiline used to worry about money intensely. She no longer does so, and everything has changed. Her business is picking up, she is doing better than before, and she believes that relaxing around the issue was a key factor: “The worry used to stop me. If it was really bad, I could just sit at home, too worried to do anything. Now I just focus on my work.”

Dumisani speaks to the same thing, though a little differently: “I used to think that money was the only thing that could solve things. Now I am doing things without money. Organic gardening, sewing. I didn’t have the idea that I can have a garden and get some money from it to start my own projects. Now the garden is beginning to do well. I sell my produce at the local market. In our culture there is an assumption that if you are not married you cannot earn a living. But I am learning that I can do things on my own.” Dumi left her husband in mid-1990 after he had taken a second wife, because Dumi had not borne him a son.

What I hear in these and other stories is the gradual realization that you can be happy, and that you can do something, without money. This allows us to disentangle ourselves somewhat from the grip that money holds on us, which is when we find the space to do more, even with little. Dumi continues: “Before Kufunda I just wanted something that would benefit me in my own life. Now I feel like I am a part of the community. You yourself are responsible for improving your community. I used to think that if we got some donors we could improve. Not us by ourselves. But we actually can. I see that now.” The community coming together, realizing the wealth in experience that is available to it, appears to release the energy to no longer view itself as entirely unable. It is like when Silas said that “Being poor means you want to be someone, but you’re not looking at what’s here; who you are.” When we do look at what’s here, we find there is more than we were aware of.

Sometimes we're afraid to look though. We're afraid we won't measure up to others. Our insecurities keep us hiding our heads in the sand. Fidelis' learning from his years at Kufunda seems to be to stop comparing himself to others, to learn to trust himself. Even if he has less than others: "People judge you based on what they see. Sometimes because you don't have money they don't recognize you. I have learned that the greatest contribution is to give them love. And to be an example, to show people that I believe in myself, even if I might not look like much of anything." He smiles. "In our group there were lots of people who were educated. In the start I was feeling very insecure. After working together for a month I realized that we might be different, but that was not the same as some being better. Some were good at music, some at carpentry, some at farming . . . different than, not better than."

Paying attention to the needs of others

An important part of that shift is also beginning to see that *others are suffering as much, if not more* than ourselves. From that point, we of course do have something to offer, and the focus shifts on how we can help, which is a much more generous and generative place to operate from.

Sikhethiwe spoke to how the deeper sharing that happens in the circle at Kufunda was a real eye opener for her in terms of how others had greater needs than her. "When you're with other people sharing stories, you realize that some people have problems harder than yours. You can learn something from others." Dumi speaks to the exact same aspect: "Being with others brings comfort, but it also brings a realization that others are suffering more than me." And Ticha says, "In life I know there's never enough for everyone, but now I feel like we need to share."

"But now I feel like we need to share." From a place of scarcity to a realization that you are needed. Others need you. Your community needs you. *I don't think we can underestimate enough the power that can be accessed in this shift.* Others need me. People are finding that they do have enough to share. In traditional development approaches, all the poor are seen as poor, those to be helped. We choose to see what they have to give, and in the process that means connecting more deeply as human beings, and discovering that they have more than they were aware of.

I remember a session where we were reading a poem, which invoked that there is a future that is wanting to happen, and it is waiting for us to play our role in co-creating a better, stronger future. Fidelis literally laughed out loud, his eyes were sparkling, "What if the future is waiting for me?" he asked. His life took on a different meaning when he held that possibility.

I don't want to pretend that I understand this aspect entirely, or that I have it all figured out. Absolutely not. People are still struggling; they are still concerned about lack of material access, and yet there is a shift happening here, which is releasing energy, possibility, and removing the focus on what is not. I return to Silas and Anna, repeating their earlier remarks,

Striving for village self-reliance

One of the exciting trends I see, spurred by what is going on in Zimbabwe, is people realizing that they need to become self-reliant, and that the migration to the cities might no longer be their best option (unemployment is supposedly at 70%). Dumi speaks to this, *"I am seeing some of the children out there finish their O levels without a job. The only way they can survive is to return to their rural area and start their own projects, working with their hands."*

Kufunda is reminding us that it is not bad to work with our hands. It teaches us to rely on what we have.” Not that it is always easy. There is still the mental framework around work that is looked favourably upon, and that which is not. The simple projects that we support people in getting underway with are not always looked upon with excitement. But they are simple and they allow a community to go a little further in caring for itself. Instead of having to buy synthetic jam and white bread, they can produce more local produce that is both cheaper and healthier.

Taking time to still the mind

Meditation, as we practice it at Kufunda, is simply the act of observing your incoming and outgoing breath, and your bodily sensations, often changing in response to the stream of thoughts that come and go. We learn to watch ourselves with equanimity, and over time begin to realize experientially that change is the only constant. Being attached to one sensation over another becomes a futile exercise, as it too will also change.

Aquiline is a widow of 49. She was married to a policeman who died suddenly in 1984 after a few days of serious illness. She was not at all prepared for widowhood. In living with the stress of having suddenly to look after herself and their 3 children, she developed ulcers in 1986, which she has lived with until very recently.

When we spoke, Aquiline was very clear about where her improvement came from. “Meditation has cooled my heart. I always thought too much. Thoughts were always flowing. Worried thoughts. I was an unhappy person. Now I feel a little more like a free person, meditation clears my mind. I have learned how to see reality as it is. And then to simply face things. The first time I came to Kufunda my eyes got opened. I used to cry much. Thinking about the past, my husband, my life. Now I am much better. I don’t worry so much about the future. I work with what I have now.” Aquiline stopped taking her ulcer medicines one month ago, and she believes this was possible through the opening that has occurred in her mind through the meditation practice.

Others speak similarly to the subtle power of the on-going practice of meditation. In a culture that does not have much space for time alone, the way which meditation appeals deeply to many of the people we work with, especially the older women, initially surprised me. Now it makes sense. What has come up a lot through the conversations on meditation is how strongly it has released the worries and concerns people used to carry. It seems to link to the other emergent theme of not focusing so intently on that which is not working. Meditation simply observes and pays attention to what is – regardless whether it is good or bad. In holding it all lightly in the mind through meditation, its hold on us is weakened. In paying attention to what is, we become more able to respond more freely both to opportunity and to conflict. Perhaps this is why Aquiline feels that her business is better now, though nothing has really changed, except that she no longer worries so much. I feel this area needs more research. Suffice it to say that it is a key component of our work, and of what we are discovering about what it takes to build healthy community.

Cultivating the ground of community

Every time we ask the question of what has made our community work; what has made people’s experience at Kufunda special, or what has been a key learning, the circle comes up. And the circle is indeed a key part of the ground of Kufunda. People seem to connect to fully with it, perhaps because it is a part of the traditional culture.

The Circle

Four Agreements for Circle:

- Listen without judgement (slow down and listen)
- Whatever is said in circle remains in circle
- Offer what you can and ask for what you need
- Silence is also part of the conversation

Three principles serve as a foundation for the governance of the circle. These principles are:

- Leadership rotates among all circle members.
- Responsibility is shared for the quality of experience.
- People place ultimate reliance on inspiration (or spirit), rather than on any personal agenda.

At Kufunda, this is not simply the practice of sitting and meeting in circle. A core set of intentions at Kufunda are related to hosting the space and conversation *where everyone feels included, where each voice is treasured, where there is deep respect for each person and each contribution, and where we actively seek to nurture our ability to listen more fully and less judgementally*. I have found the circle to be a place that can hold and nurture these intentions among a group of people who are in community together. However it is important not to lose sight of these intentions when we place our attention on the circle. The circle can hold them, but the circle alone without them might not be as powerful or nourishing as we have found it to be.

I remember the first time I called a circle at Kufunda. It was the very first programme we ran, and I was sitting with a group of 15 young Zimbabweans. I had arranged the chairs in circle, and prepared myself to introduce the talking piece. Butterflies were swarming in my stomach. Would they think me mad?

It worked like a dream.

A circle is not an event. It is a process. During our programmes, we meet in circle each morning for a check in. During our everyday life at Kufunda, we meet in circle once a week. The circle brings us many things. I have made a clumsy attempt at a distinction:

1. the circle as container – the way a glass surrounds and protects the flame of a lamp, allowing it to burn more brightly – holding the collective intention of a group or community. As such it is where we can bring our problems, ideas and whatever else it feels necessary to bring to the group.

2. presence – there is the quality of presence that the circle brings to us in the moment, when we are seated together in circle.

The results, so far, have been wonderful and refreshing – we have heard men express intense surprise at how much they have been able to learn in honest conversation with women (in the Shona system men and women often confer separately), and of elders being surprised at how much they have been able to learn with and from youth in the circle. Our circles here may differ from how things would be done if they were done in the traditional way, and yet we open the space for the community to co-create their agreements for how they wish to be together and for where they wish to place the emphasis of their collective learning. When going through this consciously as opposed to just continuing with the status quo –

equality, respect and support for each other, almost always get brought forward as important to the group. And then the practice begins.

Conflicts do occur; storms are inevitable in any group. The circle can be seen as a safety net. It does not prevent us from falling, but it gives us somewhere to land.¹ I recall several incidents where the strength of our container was challenged and as we lived our way through it, it strengthened the group. It is like the old saying, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

What are we learning?

It is clear to me that there is much at work in our methods of working with people. And yet it seems to me that there is a more fundamental level, at which our beliefs and the way we connect with people (influenced by our beliefs) touch people. Touched, they are more open to the learning and the co-creation that we seek to engage together. What follows is a brief summary of what the journey has taught me, which speaks in part to this also.

In the beginning is the meeting.

How we meet people determines all else. It appears to be so obvious that I hesitate to speak it for fear of being condescending. Do we meet people assuming the best we can about them? Do we meet each person curious about the miracle of a human being that we are about to connect with? Or do we meet a poor person that we are about to help? When we meet the miracle, the unique woman, the mystery of the youth, or the depth of the elder, however poor materially, then those aspects of people respond to us. I can truthfully, and with great joy, say today that I am deeply inspired by each of the people we are working with, because it is their beauty and power and potential that is opening up to us. That is not to say that they are all super human beings, or that they are not fragile and with problems of their own. It is simply

Aquiline's Story

Aquiline was facing the chaos of picking up her life and continuing after the death of her husband. Her mother suggested using his pension to buy a sewing machine, so that she could sew and make a living through that way. She has been sewing ever since. When I tried to understand what has then shifted with her learning and work at and with Kufunda, she responds: *"Before Kufunda I was not really serious about what I was doing. I thought I was, but now I see I was not. I tried to do budgeting and accounts, but not well enough. I was a little bit stuck. I also simply waited for the customers to come to me. In 2000 I was doing this alone. The local school asked me to make the traditional outfits for the traditional dance group. I then started working with my mother and a third woman.*

When I came back from Kufunda I came back with the idea that working together with others is good. I started hunting for those women who have a sewing machine. Then I realized I could even work with, and teach those who don't. We are now 15 women working together. Some of them only do the tuckings and gatherings, and myself and a few others do the sewing itself. First I was thinking of myself only. I was not thinking of others. Just thinking of money. I was the one who landed the contract, so I did not want to share. I realized that it was not actually fair. Those doing tuckings and gatherings were also contributing. So I suggested that we took an equal share. They were all surprised. From then I became more serious about teaching them. We are one. We are still starting so we don't have so much yet, but I am changed. I have been trained many times before [Red Cross, Sisters of Mercy, adult literacy] but I have never been touched so deeply by those who trained me as has been my experience at Kufunda. Those other experiences did not change me. But this has.

Most importantly I have cooled down. I have learned to take everything as it is, to be myself. I don't cry anymore. I see things as they are and then receive them and respond to them as best I can."

to say there is so much more to most people than we often allow ourselves to experience.

I met Anna Marunda again yesterday. We had a conversation about the wonders she had discovered about herself in the past year. Here is some of what she had to say

“I have learned that I have been an my example in my community for being a widowed woman who overcame severe hardship I have learned that I am a strong woman. I have learned that I can find peace of mind within myself. I have learned that I am healthy – the sickness was in my mind [Anna had an HIV negative result recently]. I have learned that I am a good listener, and I am trustworthy and so people are coming to me, inviting me to join different community organizations.”

I don't wish to take the credit for Anna's learning, or for her gifts. Who Anna is, is who she is. I do want to emphasise that *we met her in her wisdom*. We met her in her wisdom. Not in her poverty. Through this she has started seeing her gifts.

We need to acknowledge what is – both good and bad – and then choose consciously what we move forward with.

When we started Kufunda, the desire to bring Appreciative Inquiry to life here was strong. Reality is very different depending on which angles we look at it from. We have seen first hand the power in becoming more conscious of which story about ourselves we choose to carry with us.

However sometimes Appreciative Inquiry can focus so entirely on the good, to the detriment of a full view of a situation. What has become clear to us is that when we bring in an appreciative approach it needs to go hand in hand with releasing that which has been painful, or that which feels limiting. Working appreciatively is not about closing our eyes to that which we do not wish to see. In the tree of life we follow the tree from the roots, up the trunk and the branches. We allow for all the pain and hardship that has been to be expressed. In fact we invite the full story, because often people are not used to sharing these sides. And then we invite them to move beyond. We invite them to now pay attention to the gifts they have harvested through their journey. And it is always invariable a rich harvest.

In our experience, the two have to go together- to acknowledge and express the pain (disappointment, anger, worry), and to embrace and own the beauty. In this we can choose what no longer serves us, which we wish to let go of, and what we wish to step into more fully and move forward with. Only being allowed to speak of the good, can leave us with a gnawing feeling of not being fully truthful about what is.

A friend and trustee of the village has spoken of the idea of Authentic Inquiry as opposed to simply Appreciative Inquiry, making space for the whole – shadow or light.

Great energy is released when we stop focusing on what we don't have; when we stop operating from a place of fearful scarcity.

It has struck me the most just how much seems to be released when people stop focusing in fearful and contracting ways on the fact that they were short on money, or whatever their focus of lack is. When people stop focusing on what they don't have, they seem to be released into being able to do more with the little which they have. It connects with the above point. It is not about ignoring the hardship or the very real lack that may be. By all means, let us express, let us bring it out into the open. But then let us move on. Let us look at what we do have, and what opportunity for movement is available to us with that. We always have choice and we always have something to give.

In fact, the greatest shift seems to occur when people see themselves as being needed by others – the orphans, those poorer than themselves, those who don't know about what is possible with organic fertiliser, and so on. Then new reservoirs are discovered. And then as we begin to give generously from what we do have – be it in the form of knowledge or in kind – our sense of self shifts until we are no longer 'a poor person.' We are no longer a victim, but an agent – and often a positive force – in our own life and in the lives of those around us.

Great energy is released when we stop focusing on what we don't have, and begin to pay attention to what we do have – which others also need for us to share and give.

There is happiness – and support – available to us in community.

There is pain and stress in poverty, and in not knowing where the money for next term's school fees is going to come from. Increasingly the reaction, in a monetary economy, has been towards contraction, hoarding, looking out for oneself first, dropping out of Nhimbe (community work), and so on. What I feel we are relearning here, together, is the relief, strength and happiness that are available to us when we come back to more traditional ways of working together. Mushandira Pamwe: together we can do more. One is not alone. And in our togetherness we can find the happiness that is most readily available in community and in relationships – working together in the fields, celebrations when we harvest the fruits of our work, shared worship, preparing food . . . these, in community, can bring us a simple but deep reaching sense of belonging and joy. I have seen it, and I have experienced it. What if we could acknowledge it as a more central aspect of so-called "development": The richness that community can offer? I am convinced that there is so much wealth and value in learning to harness the creativity and spirit of the collective, that we have yet to truly discover.

We need basic structures and principles to hold the container of our togetherness.

I still recall Sikhethiwe's surprise at her ability to live in community with people... It is not something that we simply do. It takes work, and in our experience it requires the presence of a strong container in the form of a clear and shared intention or purpose; shared agreements that are alive; and a process through which we continue refining these, and improving our way of working for and with them.

As I have seen the Kufunda community grow, this is my strongest and deepest learning. As we have had to protect and nurture our togetherness, our team – together – we have grown. Each person has grown in that. When it was just me imposing my idea of collective leadership, and what a learning community was meant to be, there was something that wasn't quite right. Now as we work at it together, it is a lot more messy, and quite unpredictable. But it is also more alive and vibrant.

There is a model of the chaordic path put forward by Dee Hock which I increasingly see as an important part of this work. The word *chaordic* is created by the marriage between chaos and order, and the idea is that there is a field on the edge of chaos with just enough order. Not too much order, which is on the side of control, and not with too much chaos, which can simply lead to despair. In this field creativity, and innovation can occur. It is where we can invite in collective intelligence. But to go there we need to be willing to relinquish our control of a set outcome, or a set way, and also be willing to being surprised.

It is a path that I feel we are learning to walk. Sometimes I do slip back into a place of too much control, as do some of the community organizers that we are working with. However

we are in the journey of learning what the basic structures and principles are that create the required level of order, which is neither limiting, nor too little, but rather generative. Just enough to be that glass around the flame, allowing it to burn a little brighter.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marianne Knuth was born in Kenya to a Danish father and a Zimbabwean mother. She grew up in Denmark. Her family moved to Zimbabwe when she was 12, and although she returned to Denmark soon thereafter – at 16 – to continue her education, Zimbabwe has been home since those early teen years. She was a co-founder of the global youth leadership group Pioneers for Change. She returned to Zimbabwe in September 2001 to start what has today become Kufunda.

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Endnote

- 1 Metaphor from Christina Baldwin, *Calling the Circle*.