

Seeds of Hope in Zimbabwe

A Conversation with Marianne Knuth

Lyn Hartley



*It is a dark time for Zimbabwe
And yet it is a time in which seeds of hope
Belief in a different way of living and being
Are being planted*

*I have sung and danced,
And thought and wondered
And cried and laughed
With women and men of rural Zimbabwe*

*We have a long walk ahead of us,
But it seems to me that we cannot fail.
—Marianne Knuth*

Marianne Knuth is a striking young woman with gentle eyes and a welcoming presence. Her inviting demeanor makes a lasting impression and just might be one of the reasons behind her success. It appears that wherever she goes, Marianne is planting seeds of hope and creating community.

You may recognize Marianne's name from her work with Pioneers of Change, a global learning community of committed young change agents which she co-founded. Marianne, who is of Danish and Zimbabwean background, started the Pioneers of Change after completing a masters degree in International Business and Economics at the Business School of Copenhagen.

Despite the success of Pioneers of Change, something was calling Marianne to return to Africa. She recalls, "After being one of the leaders of Pioneers of Change for three years I decided it was time for me to return to my roots and my beloved Zimbabwe. Two and a half years ago, I returned to Zimbabwe from Denmark to live out my dream of creating a learning village."

Currently, Marianne is focused on supporting this unique community in Zimbabwe, called Kufunda Village. Situated on a farm of 327 acres just south of Harare, Kufunda is a center of learning, training, and experimentation. Its overriding mission is to work towards the development of self-reliant and sustainable vibrant communities.

"I think I must have been born with the passion and love that I feel so deeply for this continent and her people," Marianne reflects. "I know that Africa has many gifts to offer both herself and the rest of the world, and so in a way Kufunda Village is part of a dream and a vision I have for an awakened Africa. A dream of a strong and healthy participant in the rest of the world."

In 2002, only a few months after she returned to Zimbabwe, Marianne came to Halifax to co-host a core module with Toke Moller at the Summer Program. She had heard about the event through her friend, Meg Wheatley.

“Meg had been the year before and she *raved* about it when she returned. It sounded incredibly special, and I was especially attracted to the fact that it sprang out of a Buddhist community and philosophy, but was about being in this world authentically—as opposed to being about going to sit on a mountain. I was honored and excited when Toke and I were invited to come and host a module.”

And while at the Summer Program, Marianne helped to form yet another community within the larger gathering— a dialogue group of young “emerging” leaders. Marianne’s work made a strong impression on two of these young leaders, Sera Thompson and Claudia Chender, who decided to travel to Zimbabwe and participate in the Kufunda project. Marianne comments, “Sera and Claudia’s participation and contribution to Kufunda have been unique and substantial. For one thing, when Sera came to Kufunda for two months we started a daily meditation session—only 15-30 minutes each afternoon, for those who chose to join. Now during our programs, it is not unusual for 80-90 percent of participants to join us for a 6:30 am yoga session before the day starts. The fact that these are rural Zimbabweans has no bearing. They love it! Some women have reported that they continue with the yoga back in their villages.”

Marianne has found that the Institute continues to influence her work in Zimbabwe. “The Summer Program has affirmed and strengthened elements of how I work and how we now work at Kufunda. A holistic and integrated approach to our learning and living at Kufunda is key. ”

And what is ahead for Kufunda? Marianne remains excited about the potential for the future and has plans to sow more seeds. “We are at the beginning of an incredibly exciting year for Kufunda. Our new strategy involves working directly with five chosen communities and focusing our effort and attention on them. I believe this will launch us on a new learning curve and bring accelerated results to the communities we are working in. The programs are aimed at supporting the community in finding new (or old) ways of moving forward together. The participants are people from any age group or background who are committed to contributing to the development of their community.”

Marianne Knuth and Toke Paludan Moller will lead a module on “Convening Strategic Conversations” at the 2004 Summer Program. For more information, see http://www.shambhalainstitute.org/2004/module_mollerknuth.html

For more information about Kufunda Village, please visit <http://www.kufunda.org/>

For more information about Pioneers of Change, see <http://www.pioneersofchange.net/>