

Reweaving the web of connections

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Several years ago, I heard a woman minister offer this wonderful question for assessing our work: "Is what I'm about to do strengthening the web of connections, or is it weakening it?" This question came back to me as I sit here in the hot summer of our discontent, observing the ruinous rubble of broken and discarded relationships, wondering where our nation is headed, increasingly despondent of weaving the web to be strong again.

In the midst of this fractured time, I still hear many people saying:

"We're all in this together." From high-level leaders to local school board members to teen-agers offering service, this seems to be one of the mantras of our time. This is a good thing. Perhaps we're finally seeing what has, up to now, been ignored: community, the web of our interconnections, the safety net of caring that we extend to one another when life is hard. Perhaps more people are discovering that humans only persevere through difficulties when we're together. I don't know if this is what people mean when they recite the mantra. But I do know that humans cannot get through difficult times alone.

Everything I've learned about the power of community comes from working through The Berkana Institute in the Global South. Communities in many different cultures have taught us that, in spite of the worst external circumstances—war, famine, abuse, societal collapse, ecological devastation—human beings can get through anything as long as we're together. People with little or no material resources get through desperate and difficult circumstances

by uncovering the resources they really need—each other’s companionship, each other’s knowledge and wisdom.

Sometimes people in these communities forget their collective strength, sometimes they get seduced by the lures of modern materialism. But time after time, when they reconnect with each other, they find again their capacity to persevere. I’ve seen this in many places, but perhaps most powerfully in Zimbabwe, as all systems collapsed and people suffered from brutality, terror, hunger and despair. Berkana has worked closely with friends and colleagues at Kufunda Learning Village near Harare for many years; there, we’ve witnessed the power of bringing people together to develop skills, create possibilities, strengthen relationships and reclaim imagination and vision for themselves.

People at Kufunda are skilled practitioners of circle. They know how to sit and reflect deeply together, they know how to hold one another’s grief and anxiety. And always, their conversations suddenly erupt into singing and dancing. (We at Berkana have longed to be able to bring this transformation of grief into joy, sorrow into dance into our own meetings, but we’re not Africans, and it doesn’t quite work for us.)

As the situation in Zimbabwe deteriorated, as individuals faced intimidation and threats, as their families suffered from hunger and all-consuming fear, the Kufundees spiraled away from each other. They descended into their own troubles and sorrows, feeling overwhelmed and powerless. They were occupied elsewhere and stopped sitting together in circle. And then they remembered the power of being together. As they again came together, they were able to reclaim their sense of self, they became less anxious, more capable of getting through continuing hardships. This cycle continued for years: they would drift away and feel lost, then reconnect and rediscover their strength and resolve.

As our pressure-cooked lives drive us apart, as our political rhetoric condemns and blames, as we’re distracted by stress, anxiety and

exhausted by overwhelm, could we still be the ones to reweave the web?
Let's just keep asking ourselves this question: "Is what I'm about to do
strengthening the web of connections, or is it weakening it?"