

**Life Affirming
Leadership --
Excerpted from**

After Now



*When we
cannot see
the future
where do we
begin?*



Life-Affirming Leadership

Our exploration of life-affirming leadership was center stage at the first Art of Hosting workshop in Japan. We began to talk about the attitudes and conditions that help any organization or system begin to fully realize its potentials.

I shared stories from The Berkana Institute where, over the last decade, we had worked with many networks, colleagues and friends to identify people, places and organizations that were creating healthy and resilient communities. At Berkana, we worked especially with people in the so-called “Global South” — the part of the planet often described in terms of its needs rather than in terms of its assets. We sought people who were learning how to build community with their own resources. And we found them. We connected with people from Pakistan, India, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Senegal, Mexico and Brazil — as well as people from Greece, Canada and the U.S. They helped us develop a new understanding of how to build community. This group became known as the Berkana Exchange. Over several years, as members of the Berkana Exchange gathered to learn from each other, we were “Alive in Community,” which became the title of a publication that our key staff member, Aerin Dunford, and I wrote about this work. In the Exchange, we were all doing different things and sometimes had conflicting ideas about what was important, but beyond and through those differences, we felt a sense of camaraderie — we knew we “fit” together and we started looking for the texture and pattern of that fit. Together we surfaced and articulated the core values, principles and practices present in what we called “life-affirming leadership”.

Through this work, I learned about the texture, aroma and color of resilient communities. In these communities, people are connected

15 At Berkana we looked for leadership that affirms life. “Life-affirming leadership” described our way of thinking and talking about leadership as power-with, rather than power-over, and our way of inviting people to look at the extraordinarily generative powers of life.

through relationships, churches, clubs and affinity groups. They have done stuff together and generated enough trust and knowledge about each other that they know who to turn to. They know each other's stories. People step forward when it is their turn to offer their leadership and step back when their turn is over. When times are rough, they find their first step, then the next and the next.

Many of us find ourselves called to work in what might be called unconventional ways. Rather than joining large corporations or universities or nonprofits, we choose to engage at local levels. But can any of this local work really make a difference or are we just playing around doing nice things while civilization as we've known it collapses?

For me change is local — if something new doesn't happen somewhere on the ground, nothing is really changed. Transformation is translocal. And transformation is the prize. How can local actions lead to transformation? We spent years inquiring into this question in the Berkana Exchange. Together we articulated the values, principles and beliefs that guided and connected our work.

It's easy to toss around words like self-organizing and emergence, but what can guide us in working with community in all its messiness? How do we work well with an amalgamation of decentralized, distributed, complex and sometimes chaotic people, patterns and possibilities?

The perspective I brought to Japan was informed by this decade of work with Berkana. I started sharing the principles of life-affirming leadership right away in Japan because it was clear that people needed a different paradigm — a new world view — that could help them make better sense of what to do with their lives.

The worldview we articulated together at Berkana had these principles:

Every community is filled with leaders.

What a radical thought! Our normal view of leadership is that only a few special people are leaders and they have a right to power, prestige and respect. But we posed a different point of view and set of questions:

- What if a leader is anyone who wants to help?

- How could we organize our communities to encourage each of us to step forward, offering our gifts?

When there's a crisis, if we instinctively work by the principle underlying these questions, we can create a fluid dance of leading and following that gets the needed work done. Egos, grudges, fears are set aside as people step forward to do what's needed.

I saw this in Tohoku right after the disasters and I still see it today. It happens naturally every time and in every place where there is a disaster. The stories in Chapter 8 are filled with this kind of leadership. We can — and must — create the conditions for each of us to step forward when we are called to do so.

Whatever the problem, the community has the answers.

I remember when my friend, Maaianne Knuth, told of visiting a rural village in Zimbabwe in 2001 as the country was entering a severe downward spiral. She had just started Kufunda Learning Village¹⁶ to address “how people could recover their sense of pride, wisdom, and capacity in working with their own knowledge and deepening their resourcefulness.”

When she arrived, she noticed that there were no gardens and she asked, “Why aren't you growing food? People looked uncomfortable, but no one responded. Maaianne asked again, “Why aren't you growing food?”

Finally, someone spoke up and said they had not received seeds and fertilizer from the World Bank in the spring. Maaianne asked, “Do you expect you will?” People reluctantly answered, “No.” The next question was pretty obvious, “What did you do before the World Bank gave you seeds and fertilizer?” People said they didn't know. Maaianne said, “Let's go ask the elders.” And they did. They started to learn and

16 Kufunda is a special place of learning in Zimbabwe. Started in the early years of this century, Kufunda helps people in Zimbabwe and around the world learn about participatory leadership and dialogue, permaculture, raising children, healing ourselves and other themes. Much of its current focus is on youth and women's leadership.

grow crops as the village did in the old days — perhaps, not surprisingly, like what we call permaculture today.

This is just one example; there are hundreds, thousands, like it. In any community, there's someone who knows something about the problem or opportunity at hand. You can depend on it! Working with communities to discover what they know creates a foundation of knowledge and a basis for action. When the limit of that local knowledge is reached, the community can seek knowledge beyond its boundaries.

*Magic happens when we encounter each other
with respect, curiosity and generosity.*

I actually didn't use these three words in the days of the Berkana Exchange. They became visible to me only through my work in Japan. When I started doing my work with Art of Hosting in Japan in 2010, I started to understand the Japanese idea of BA — the space that hosts our relatedness. I now know that we can encounter each other with the totality of our being. We can arrive with a deep openness that is filled with curiosity and respect for each other. We can move with a generosity of spirit in which we know that the more we give freely, the more we have. This is the way in which a generative, appreciative future is created.

Self-reliance and interdependence work together.

The reality is that we have what we need to begin building the communities we want. Just as it takes many people with diverse perspectives, skills and strengths to make a community, community itself becomes stronger when it is consciously nested in a weave of reciprocal relationships creating a fabric of interdependence with other communities. We stand on our own *and* we stand taller when we hold hands with others. It is true of individuals and it is true of communities as well.

Sometimes we think about this as the two economies of community. One is the internal economy — the goods and services that can be exchanged internally within the community. Transition Towns in Japan have often started as local exchanges of goods and

services — “I’ll cut your hair if you will fix my plumbing.” The other economy is the external one where what’s produced in community is sold or exchanged elsewhere, bringing external resources into community, such as when one community produces fish and another produces saké. They’re delicious together and so both communities benefit from the exchange.

Thriving resilient communities pay careful attention to both economies — to what they can do to be self-reliant and to the ways in which they are interdependent with outside communities.

We must live the world we want, today.

If not now, when? If not here, where? If not us, who? How long must we wait to give birth to the life that is growing inside us? The people I worked with in the Berkana Exchange, said, “Let’s do it now.” This is exactly what I hear from people in Tohoku.

In the last five years, I have heard many people in Tohoku, and then the rest of Japan, talk about happiness. They say that the disasters have made them think about what’s important in their lives and to see that there is no reason to wait. Over and over, they speak of how they used to think and live before the disaster. One resident said, “We had a dream, but we said, I need more money or my children need to be older before I can do something else, and we go back to sleep in lives we don’t really like. Six years later, we wake up with no more money and children who have lived with an unhappy parent for most of their lives.”

Wake up to the world that is around you. Begin today.

We don’t have to wait for external help. We have many resources with which to make things better now.

We have what we need to build the lives we want. The Triple Disasters were a big awakening for people everywhere in Japan. They realized that government or some other authority did not have the power or ability to come in and fix everything — they had to do it themselves. And they had to do it working with the resources at hand, looking around and finding a place to begin. There are many examples of this in towns in Japan, such as the residents of Kesenuma making

canvas bags from ship's cloth or making dried flowers in Otsuchi.¹⁷ It was our earlier work in the Berkana Exchange, where people were making beautiful purses from discarded rubber tires in India and discovering how to plant crops without the World Bank in Zimbabwe that helped me see these new patterns in Japan.

We turn to each other and we look around and see the resources and knowledge we already have.

*We walk at the pace of the slowest,
listening even to the whispers.*

We are on this journey together. When we are creating a new future together, it takes time. Frankly, this principle annoys me some times. I'm an activist. I want to get things done *now*. I see a problem and immediately jump to the solution I already see. But that means I'm skating across the top of Otto Scharmer's U.¹⁸

I need to slow down enough to actually see the world around me with new eyes — ones that are really open. We can and must learn how to slow down in order to go far, or as my friend Christina Baldwin puts it, "move at the pace of grace." We must learn how to listen to the quiet voices that see different possibilities. Some of us must learn to restrain our forcefulness and our sometimes conceit that we know what everyone should do.

*We find a clear sense of direction AND we
take an elegant, minimum step forward.*

Master plans work in situations that are relatively straightforward. We no longer spend much time in that world. Mostly we live in a world confounded with various levels of chaos and complexity. How then do we proceed?

When we sit together and listen deeply to and with each other, a future begins to appear. The quiet voice of that future calls us. When Maaianne began Kufunda Learning Village in Zimbabwe, she had no

17 See Chapter 8, "Use What We Have," for more detailed stories of how the residents of Kesenuma began making canvas bags from ship's cloth and the people of Otsuchi started making dried flowers.

18 The basic structure of Theory U is introduced in Chapter 7. See *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*.

idea where it would be a decade later. She had a sense of where she wanted to go; she found where to place her first step. It was the same when Taka Nomura started FutureSessions in Japan; he had a sense of direction and he found where to take the first step. These first steps are close-in. They are most powerful when then are done with a measure of beauty and elegance. I remember when I first talked about elegance in Japan: we looked for a Japanese translation. Finally, I said it is how your mother looks when she steps into the room in her finest kimono. People got it immediately. We invite beauty in with a flower arrangement in the middle of the circle. We stand in a posture of pride and confidence as we begin. We step away from sloppiness.

We begin.

*We proceed one step at a time, making
the path by walking it.*

We take a step, and then another step, and another and another. Along the way, we need to frequently pause to listen to ourselves and listen to each other. Occasionally we are amazed by overwhelming success in a step that we take. More frequently, what happens is not all that spectacular. Many of these steps don't quite take us where we wanted. Often something goes wrong. In all cases, we pause and learn.

I remember a story I heard years ago when I visited the village of Curvela in Minas, Brazil. A young educator had put an advertisement on the radio saying, "I think there must be a better way for our children to learn. If you think so too, please come sit under the mango tree on Thursday afternoon." I can't imagine a better setup for a good story — a new story. When I visited, his organization, the Center for Popularization of Culture and Development (CPCD),¹⁹ it was 25 years

19 The teachers' invitation led to a pre-school program built around Paulo Freire's principles. As the children grew older, new offerings and dimensions were added. Now, the young women and men who complete the crafts school in metalworking, woodworking, fabric design, herbal medicine and business management are among the most sought after workers throughout Brazil. The Popular Center for Culture and Development uses the principles that guided the formation and evolution of this continuum of learning as the basis for supporting a network of community workers — called *caring mothers* throughout the province

into a practice of what I call “emergence with rigor.” They were able to create a powerful enterprise because they had gained a sense of direction, they started, they experimented, they learned, and they found the next, next step.

*Local work evolves to create transformative change
when connected to similar work around the world.*

This final principle is crucial in moving from change to transformation. It is easy to get puffed up and enthralled by different theories and ideas. It happens to me all the time! But we need to remember that all change is local. These ideas don’t mean much until they show up on the ground, in a place, and are owned by the people there. *And*, even that alone is insufficient.

How do we take what we’ve learned and created to shift entire systems? What do we do to create transformative change? What can we do to amplify the changes we find most desirable while damping down those we don’t want?

We live in a time when everything is changing. Our future is no longer clear. But much of the time we continue to act as if we know what will happen, holding on to our plans and assumptions about what should happen next.

When disasters happen, our present is shattered and we must re-envision tomorrow. This re-envisioning is not theoretical. It must be based on new experiences that are almost always local and often isolated. When similar work is connected at wider and wider levels of systems, those who are doing the work are connected, inspired, and informed by each other and conditions are created for deeper innovation and change.

One of the big needs after the disasters in Japan, were these kinds of connections. Many of us worked to make them happen. They happen naturally over time, but we can nurture systems of connection and learning and speed things up by working with these life-affirming leadership principles to seed transformative change.

Visit WWW.AfterNow.Today