

swapathgami

april 2012

making
our own
paths of
learning
and living



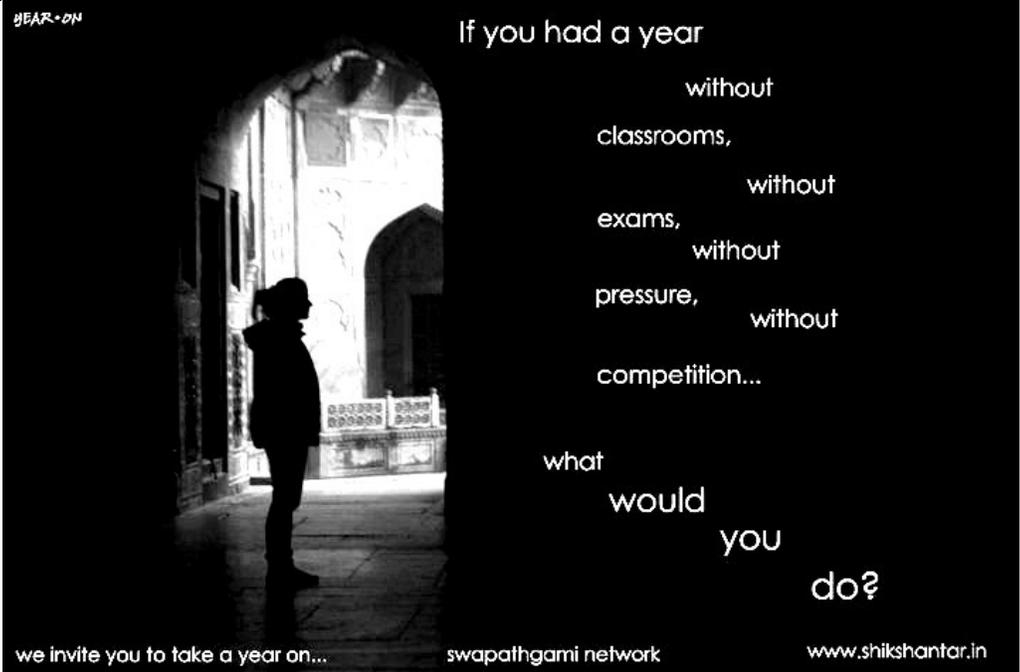
Year On

In all three cases, it was the gap year which gave my three children the time they needed to think and decide wisely. Compare them before that to kids drowning under a regime of academic studies poured relentlessly down their throats, almost choking them. After the gap year, they were no longer gasping for air and had learnt to fly on their own, with marginal assistance from their parents. In fact, compared to other parents in similar circumstances, we emerged un-indebted to any banks or money-lenders. Encouraging the children to grow needed only the very modest means available to ordinary middle class families in this country.
~ **Claude Alvares, parent and founder, Other India Press and Multiversity**

"This year will always remain most special to me, because it broadened the definition of life as nothing had done before. If I live a more fruitful, more giving life in the future, it will always be because of what that year gave and taught me. To all those who wonder about 'wasting' a year in doing what you like and finding out what you want to do, I will push them to go for it! You will never repent doing what you love, you will add many years to your life, and not waste on. Profitable mathematics, I think!"

~ **Sagar Atre, Year-On Taker**

Take a break. Gain a year!



YEAR-ON

If you had a year
without
classrooms,
without
exams,
without
pressure,
without
competition...
what
would
you
do?

we invite you to take a year on... swapathgami network www.shikshantar.in

Principals all over India are realizing that a 'year on' is essential to one's education in the 21st century...

The fact is that most humans do not know what they want to do career-wise or, indeed, education-wise. The concept of a 'gap year', which can be taken at anytime either after school or after graduating from college or after years of time spent in a career, throws up fresh perspective.

~ Kiran Bir Sethi, Riverside School

I am all for students in India taking a gap year! In this fast paced life, it is important that our students find some time where they can just stand and stare, reflect to assess where they are and what actually they would wish to do with their lives, rather than following the herd mindlessly.

~ Dr. Mahesh Prasad, The Heritage School

A Gap Year fosters independent thinking since the students must think about how they would like to learn, what they would like to explore and where a space for integration exists between practice and theory. The year off (or rather, the year on!) shows a growth in the maturity of the student; their ability to look at what they have learned in terms of its application in the real world.

~ Gauri Bhure, Mahindra World College

<http://yearon.wordpress.com>

The Prem-Patra Project

Somewhere amongst the stuff stored in our attic, there is a box full of letters. In it are all the letters my parents wrote to each other while they were 'courting', as my mum likes calling it. Crumbling postcards, faded blue inlands, and some lovely handmade papers filled with lines inked eons ago. They speak of emotions as faintly intense as the aroma of crumpled flowers pressed between their pages... My mother always promises me that we'll sit together and read them, on a rainy afternoon when there's nothing else to do. Unfortunately, although many rainy afternoons have gone by, we've never found one suitable for opening this box. There's always something else to do.

Someday, it'll arrive. Till then, I have begun making my own little box filled with some interesting paraphernalia. A couple of pages torn out of a school note-book, written in pencil in my own squiggles. It is a letter to my parents, admonishing them for always being late to pick me up from my grandmother's, but I've also added a story (an original creation) about a 'theaf' and a girl he kidnaps. It is especially written for them, as a token of my love. As I read it, I can feel the pang of nostalgia, remembering the evenings spent staring at the clock, waiting for the minutes to pass until I heard the sounds of my dad's scooter coming down the lane, to take me home.

Underneath is a pile of letters my mother has written to me, one for every night she was away from home. I remember the excitement of finding one each night, her friendly handwriting feeling as if she were in the room, talking to me... In those days when Windows was still 98, and the Internet and cell-phones were unknown entities, these letters would be the closest things to connection. For me, they still remain so, even after my life has become an open Facebook and the cell-phone an extension of my hand.

I love writing and receiving letters. The romance of it all! The excitement of opening a thick, long-awaited envelope... the satisfaction of writing till the very end of the page... the nervous thrill of dropping a sealed envelope in a red letter-box... "Will it or won't it reach?" Writing a letter is like putting a part of yourself in ink and paper, folded neatly and sealed shut. It is a part that will remain encased in those words, on that paper, no matter how much you change or life changes. I wonder how many such parts of me lie in their various-sized envelopes and with whom.

Recently, a small number of us friends decided to keep in touch mainly through letters and the postal communication. I wrote a letter to one of these friends and dropped it off at the post office. Two weeks and my friend still hadn't received it. I cursed the lethargic pace of the Indian Postal System and wondered what would've happened had I just sent him an email. It would

have taken less than a second to reach, and we might have exchanged fifty such emails in the span of fifteen days. And here I was, waiting for my first letter to reach. But then, as another friend reminded me, how else could I have experienced this bittersweet pain of waiting and the jubilation of finally hearing it was delivered?

We talk about how everything has become fast-paced today. Food, communication, business, even love. And yet, our 24/7 plugged-in society is experiencing a void. First of all, there is a lack – nothing is enough. From not enough sleep to not enough time to the bane of our existences, not enough money. And increasingly, not enough connection. We boast of 1000+ friends on Facebook and Twitter, and yet we feel lonely.

I'm not saying that all electronic 'lightning-fast' communication is bad. It has immense potential. But in my life, for my relationships to be more meaningful, I felt the need to start conversations beyond computers, the Internet and SMSes. Conversations which are heart-to-heart, bilateral, and REAL. Communication that is slow, thoughtful, creative, personalized, requiring patience, and ultimately, everlasting.

The Prem-Patra Project (<http://prempatraproject.wordpress.com>) is a small effort to encourage people of all ages to experience the joy of letter-writing and receiving. What began as an individual project of writing at least one letter a day to someone is now a tiny movement that makes use of public spaces to generate awareness about 'slow' communication and create open spaces for collective letter writing. I've organized such 'letter-writing parties' in two cities and wish to do many more!

I have an uncle who hates keeping any kind of paper junk in his house. My mother jokes that if you give him a card on his birthday, you'll find it in the dustbin the next day. She, on the other hand, loves collecting every card, note or letter that anyone has ever sent her, and so do I. Somewhere down the road, it will end up in the bin anyway, my uncle says teasingly, and why leave *raddi* for someone else long after you're gone? But perhaps that's the very reason my mother, I and all the other hoarders stash away our letters! That one day, they'll be all that's left of us. A few lines written on crumpled sheets of paper; a signature at the end. But those who read between the lines will find us hidden amidst those words, and for that moment, we'll be alive again. I invite you to write and post a letter, and experience the wait for it to reach.

And do write to me at:

Sakhi Nitin-Anita
1-Surabhi,
Old Gangapur Naka,
Gangapur Road,
Nashik- 422013, Maharashtra



from global to local

I had a natural assumption, as many others do, that international development programs lead to direct improvements in lives around the world. Decreasing rates of under-five mortality from malaria? Absolutely. Improving lives in the wake of unimaginable destruction from natural disasters?

Without question. It was under these obvious assumptions that I entered the workforce as an international development specialist in a large government agency, confident that my work was in line with my values. Initially, the world travel and large grants I signed dedicated to wonderful-



sounding efforts convinced me that I could feel good about my work, knowing I was contributing to good in the world.

However, sometime during the seven years I spent in this line of work managing development projects from India to Tanzania, I began to feel uncomfortable. The impact of my work seemed less and less in sync with the reasons I had gotten into this field in the first place. Slowly, I realized that instead of empowering people, cultures, languages and local solutions to development problems, I found myself furthering a Western approach to what progress looks like and applying it to people in all parts of the world regardless of their own values. With time I saw clearly that in addition to building health clinics, schools, and green revolutions, I was in some cases unknowingly contributing to the creation of a Western monoculture and the destruction of beautifully diverse cultures and languages that hold immeasurable value. My walkout-walkon journey had begun.

In retrospect, there was not one conversation or one moment that began this change in perspective and started my walkout-walkon journey; rather, a combination of conversations and observations that built up over time. I began to see a disconnect between conversations shared with local people in the countries we served, and directives given from headquarters in Washington, DC. I began to realize that development programs did not typically value the vast storehouses of ideas, creativity, practice and knowledge that indigenous communities held. Traditional healers in Africa, for example, were rarely consulted on their treatment of ailments using medicinal plants; yet their ancient practices would provide important insights that might be incorporated into the design of health projects. I wondered why we Western development workers assumed that we knew the needs and solutions of indigenous communities better than the community members themselves.

Why did you walk out of international development? . . .

Our failure to take local insights into account seemed to have dire consequences. I spoke with a farmer in Bolivia, for example, who mourned the loss of his sacred coca crop in order to plant quinoa, a much more desirable crop to his Western donors. A local leader in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh similarly told me of the slow destruction of his language and culture from “international development.” These conversations, along with the work of inspirational leaders such as Dr. Luisa Maffi and Helena Norberg-Hodge, helped me come to the powerful realization that this was the source of my deep discomfort: development cannot be sustainable, meaningful or respectful when it does not embrace cultural and biological diversity.

I ultimately decided to walkout of this development paradigm, despite the vast improvements in quality of life that many development programs may have. I had to ask myself tough questions about my values and what I would be willing to compromise. In the end, despite the risk and insecurity that comes with leaving a secure job, my questions about this approach to development proved too fundamental, too consequential, that I could not dedicate the rest of my professional life to the field.

- **Jamie Beck, Washington, D.C.**
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the walkouts-walkons network

The Swapathgami Network is a collection of people engaged in exploring pathways outside institutionalized structures. As *Swapathgamis*, we trust our own creative intelligence over the prescribed lives of the readymade world. By ‘walking-out’ of unhealthy and isolating lifestyles, we are ‘walking-on’ into endless possibilities. Anyone can be a *Swapathgami*, and all are invited to join us for:

Celebrations/Gatherings/Public Dialogues - to explore critical issues and to build deep relationships between people with common concerns. Possibilities for future collaborations and partnerships often evolve during these events.

Communications - print, film and web resources to share experiences of walking-out and walking-on.

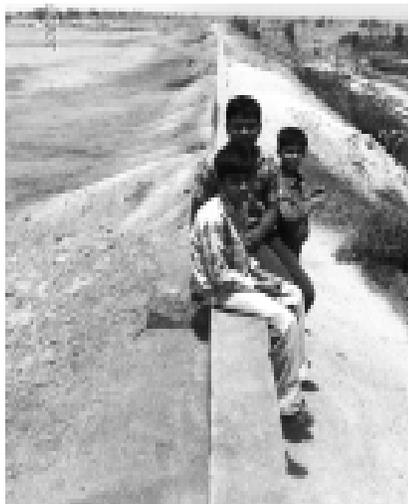
Communities of Practice - collaborative explorations and sharing of skills. Past groups have focused on a diversity of projects including (and not limited to) film-making, theatre, eco-livelihoods, self-healing, Oasis Game, organic farming and upcycling.

Learning Journeys - to connect individuals and groups engaged in exciting thinking and doing.

For more information, explore our website:
<www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/walkoutsnetwork.htm>

The Secret Life of Metals

It all started by an offer from an Oriya activist, Samarendra Das, to look in depth at what's happening around aluminium and write a book together, *Out of This Earth*. I started by walking through massive bauxite-capped mountains of south Orissa: learning through my feet, through chance meetings, talking around fires, and dancing in remote tribal villages where people share delicious food with us with dignity and equality. The adivasi men, women and children who were so passionate about their land and culture, and grassroots activists facing danger and harassment on a daily basis, opened my eyes to a wider reality.



Often the things adivasis say touch a chord deep inside: "They even destroyed our gods." from a woman who'd just seen bulldozers obliterate the sacred stones in her ancient village. "Niyamgiri's not a pile of money standing there! It's our Maa-Baap and gives us life!" from a courageous Dongria leader, approaching a mike with an axe on his bare shoulders. "His Karma, Our Dharma!" from a Kond elder outside India's Supreme Court, hearing how an Hon'ble Judge had just sold off his mountain. What I unlearned was the contrast between tribal wisdom and equality against the arrogance and narrow-minded ignorance of many NGO people who claim to be educating and uplifting adivasis! The dullness of that foursquare world and the stupidity of its enticements made me very angry: predictable concrete buildings conjuring a foursquare mindset, so different from the soft-moulded, clay-painted textures of traditional homes.

"Without aluminium there would be no fertile earth." says a book called *The Secrets of Metals*. Aluminium is basic to the earth's moisture-holding capacity, and to the whole world of colour! All those beautiful shades of clay, and the natural exuberance of flowers, insects, emeralds and rubies depend on aluminium's subtle combinations with oxygen and silica! Which is why, before aluminum became basic to the world of aerospace and bomb technology, wars were fought over Alum instead – the clay used for centuries in fixing natural dyes.

At the top of those vast bauxite-capped mountains, one feels on top of the world in a vast sacred space. One's feet make a hollow ringing sound over the bauxite. Then one looks at all those tetra-packaged products and aluminium-rich skyscraper/hi-speed trains with different eyes. Not just the vast waste – but also the dangers. As a US expert put it in 1950. "No war can be won without using and destroying vast quantities of aluminium."

The levels of danger struck home seeing boys flying kites on a huge expanse of a Vedanta company site, a dried red mud lake in Korba, Chhattisgarh, while the radioactive, highly-toxic stuff seeped down into streams. But even aluminium from packaging is NOT safe like they say – tiny quantities leach into our bodies from pans, packaging and even water supplies where aluminium's added to make water look clear! It builds up in our bodies and contributes to several horrible diseases.

My multi-level quest made me stop taking metals for granted. It also made me question the 'science of economics' at the most basic level, seeing how aluminium factories always get electricity and water at a massively subsidized rate, with every ton of manufactured aluminium consuming over 1000 tons of water, undermining farming lifestyles and sparking 'water wars'. I understood how countries have mortgaged their water and mountains to aluminium production, and how the 'leverage' of debt is used to control key government policies. Derivatives, the arms trade, global heating, cultural genocide and resource wars – the metals we take for granted have many hidden costs.

Confronting mining companies opened my eyes just as much back in my hometown of London. I watched top traders at work in the "Bullring" at the London Metals Exchange – which I never knew existed growing up there, let alone the influence it exerts over adivasi lives. From financial derivatives, to the arms trade, to cultural genocide – the metals we take for granted have many hidden costs.

Tribal people in many parts of the world see mountains as 'Devatas', and the minerals in them as 'Sources of Life' rather than 'Resources'. They know that mining them out destroys a mountain as a storehouse of water. Some of my most blissful moments have been bathing in the streams and waterfalls of Odisha and Chhattisgarh. But if they're going to run dry soon, there needs to be a massive waking-up! Can we de-addict ourselves from high aluminium consumption? Can we start to learn from our adivasi friends, what it means to live sustainably, and to share equally what we have?

Too long, intellectuals have written and spoken in a posh, jargon-filled language remote from real communication. I do believe that organic intellectuals have a vital role to play, but they need to reach out widely, in common, inclusive language. Instead of the compartmentalized 'expertise' that university-knowledge promotes, they need to give people a holistic view, that shows connections between things, returning to fundamental questions that Western philosophy long ago dismissed as semantically unanswerable: Who are we? What to do with our lives? Why are we here?

- Felix Padel, Orissa
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The Walking Talking Business

I was born to Rajasthani parents into a clan of people known as Rangrez. We've always dyed cloth for a living. Since we moved to Calcutta and started dyeing in factories, the romance was taken away from the craft. I did not enjoy doing that, so I moved away and started exploring other businesses. I dabbled in several projects before this, but none of them agreed with me. But each failure was important to teach something or the other. I started with a cyber cafe, then selling CDs, then working for an event management company, followed by a Pepsi distributorship. All were good while they lasted, but they did not make me happy.

I stumbled upon the idea of Walks of India when I was hosting some friends from the U.S. and Turkey. We'd hired a local guide to show them around, but she was focusing on the monuments of the city and did not really exude any love or enthusiasm for what she was showing. Also, we saw that travelers coming to Calcutta were shepherded around in a cocooned manner from air-conditioned flights, to A/C airport, to A/C cars and hotels. We thought this was too protected a setting for anyone to get a real travel experience. And hence, we decided that we must get them out and get their hands dirty, for them to get a real feel of what our city is all about.

I found out people who were doing walks in India and outside, met them and did some walks with them, and finally settled with a model for Calcutta Walks. Some of the cities I walked included London, Singapore, Shanghai, Ahmedabad, Bombay, Goa, Varanasi, etc. I realized that I already knew and loved most parts of my city, and that these tours would have to be an extension of my personality. I've followed that model so far and been pretty successful.

A walk is led by a person in love with the city/locality and showing it with enthusiasm. We call our guides 'Explorers', simply because we do not claim to know it all and want to present ourselves as lovers and explorers of the city. The less rehearsed the lines are the better. In fact, we don't even want to have fixed routes. Whenever a new person joins us as an Explorer, we tell him/her to learn a locality as well as they could, and then lead a walk however they want. But yes, they must have enough fodder on the tour to go on for hours on end. They should not use all that information in one walk - instead, tease the travelers with bits of information on various things. One also needs to make some pit stops along the way - at interesting workshops, markets, food stalls etc. The idea is to make it a treat for all of the travelers' senses.

Our walks are continually evolving. When we started out, we were told that no one would walk with us, listen to our chatter and pay us money for it. But it has so happened that in the last five years of our existence, we've doubled every year. From a few walks in a month, we have now begun to operate more than one walk every day. We now intend to create walks based on the life of Calcutta-greats like Tagore, Bose, Vivekananda, etc. There are also photography walks as well as literature walks on the anvil.



It has been an interesting learning experience for me. I've come to appreciate the different points of view that people come with from around the world. I used to be more rigid in my thoughts but like Gulzar says:

*Acche bure ke farq ne basti ujaad di,
Majboor ho ke milne lage har kisi se hum.*

Since I've never been a history buff in school or college, I picked up my facts on the job. Of course, I always enjoyed reading novels and that made my knowledge deep and varied. But there has been times when some things I'm not too sure of are caught by some walkers. Once, I showed a World War airstrip which is now a major road of the city, and mentioned that fighter jets used to take off and land there. There was an American pilot and flying enthusiast in the group. In the middle of the walk, he took me aside and said that jets weren't even invented until the end of World War II. We laughed out loud, but kept this secret from the other walkers. On another occasion, I had a group of three Jewish people from America and Australia, and I went on and on against the Israelis and the atrocities they committed against the Palestinians. They went back and we had long email conversations after that, in which we debated our points of view. It was challenging but fun.

Through 'Walks of India' <www.walksofindia.com>, I have encouraged and mentored walking tour operators in a few cities so far. We intend to have walking tours in all major and minor cities of the country. The sharing of culture is one of the most beautiful exchanges in the world and left me transformed.

- **Iftexhar Ahsan**, Calcutta
<ifte@walksofindia.com>

It is elusive.
Fingers grasping through
muddy water
always come out empty.
The water
is only left hazier
than when the searching began.

Have patience.
Watch.
Watch, as mud takes itself
from clear water
and in an instant
the mud reveals itself as mud
and water as water.

- **Manasi Kartik**, Chennai
<manasi142@gmail.com>

Green Full Basket meets GrateFul Soul

Who would have guessed it! I, Neesha, don't want to leave Mumbai... yet. I am going to set up a company (not just an organisation). Whoa! And I am working with people who are privileged, yikes! I never would have thought any of these possible but I'm doing all of them. And the part that never ceases to amaze me – I love what I'm doing! All of it. For years I'd wanted to feel more grace and integrity in my being. I'd gone through the gamut of activities - do yoga, volunteer, teach, write, and cook healthy. And inside I was still dissatisfied, restless, unhappy. Now I'm doing things I never wanted to do and I don't resent them, not one bit. Only because they are for our community-supported-agriculture project. Only because I see meaning in them. Because for me, *Hari Bhari Tokri* <<http://mofca.in>>, literally meaning 'Green Full Basket' fills way more than a basket.

Unlike anything else I've ever tried, I was drawn by both the people and purpose. From one-off conversations to increasingly regular ones, we soon had our very own network that included both farmers and non-farmers. All of us were eager to make sustainable and ethically grown food a bigger part of our lives. *In Mumbai!* That, in itself, was amazing. At last, I would be able to serve *my* people.

The how of it was a bit of a gamble. We needed to convince 150 consumer families to support 6 farmers. But this was Mumbai – the economic and media capital of the country. People here could buy whatever they wanted, at the price they wanted. How in the world would we convince anyone to pay a premium for a mystery bag of veggies? We couldn't even guarantee what they would look like. All we could say was that they'd be local, seasonal, and organic.

But Mumbaikars needed something more palatable, something more convenient. We decided to water down the original model. They wouldn't completely share the risk – they could pay each week, as and when they picked up. Convinced that we now had a workable model, all we needed was to *sell*. That was not a word I was comfortable with but again I surprised myself by the amount of fun I had doing it! We scrounged 150 members from the millions. And had our first winter season. A 14-week harvest with irregular, insufficient yields, inconsistent consumers, some wastage, considerable just-in-time salvage, significant financial losses, but a hugely happy, bonded, spiritually-satisfied weekly work team.

Where did we go wrong? Was it not enough that all of us were giving our time, our energy, our space and our monies to make this work? And then it became apparent, albeit gradually. In worrying about surviving in megalopolis Mumbai we'd created a *consumer* supported agriculture project instead of a *community* supported agriculture project. Although we talked a good 'abundance' talk we were still fearful (God knows I was!) that people were not committed enough, not generous enough.

So we took a tough love stance. No more simply signing up consumers. No longer could they think of us as the bhajiwala, or worse, a bhaji delivery service. At the very least we wanted the kind of relationship that families used to have with their family doctors – implicit faith and trust. No more diluting a model that's tried and tested. People had to commit. People had to pay 'in advance' for a season and share the whole risk. And it was not just the 'consumers' we were asking, the farmers and organisers had to commit as well. We all had to be accountable – to each other.

It worked. It is still working. It's an improvement in some ways; we're still figuring it out in others. New partners still have the initial settling-in period where they get used to eating from a surprise basket, eating unfamiliar vegetables, eating the same vegetables week after week. Farmers are learning to rebuild their soils and, reluctantly, even if shrewdly, testing a fickle urban market. Those of us in the middle are constantly learning how to be inclusive, share work, build consensus, and take decisions.

One of the biggest challenges is trying to find a structure that works for us (and make sure that we're on the right side of the law.) We've gone from volunteering and paying out of pocket to keep things running, to accounting for resources to the extent possible. I guess we aren't very organized yet – we postpone, forget stuff, goof up, and change just as often as we plan, implement, and get things done. It's a constant juggling of group and individual needs.

It's easier to work now that we have a community of people who are choosing care over convenience. We've gone from wrapping everything in newspaper (bad because of the ink, good because we were recycling) to using brown-paper bags and occasionally plastic. So we are definitely not perfect. Heck, we aren't even good yet. What we are, though, is grateful.

Grateful is what I'm being taught to be. I'm grateful to those who grow the vegetables, who sort and pack them, who transport them. For those who work with the farmers, document and plan the growing, for those offering space and *tokri* sitting. I'm grateful for those who talk, those who do, those who don't talk, those who don't do, or any combination thereof. I'm grateful for those who dream and decorate, for those who criticise and those who congratulate. I'm grateful for folks who bring back the brown paper bags to reuse and for those who are reminders that we still need alternatives to the plastic ones we use. I'm grateful for parents, spouses, and children, who indulge us and eat vegetables they've never cooked nor eaten before, and tell us exactly what they think of them! I'm ever grateful to those who try my patience, who test me, who tease me and who, every step of the way, teach me. To the Earth and its non-human communities. To the Universe for filling my soul.

- **Neesha Noronha**, Mumbai
<neesha.chris@gmail.com>

Tales of a Trans-Local Upcycler

What is one thing that is found in abundance in nearly every corner of the planet? Garbage. Until now, we've been taught to hang our heads in shame for polluting the earth with our trash (which we should). But what if we suddenly stopped thinking about garbage as this gargantuan global problem and started thinking about it as a valuable resource: the most abundant resource on earth? Could this kind of thinking crack open new possibilities for us?

I had never considered any of this before I discovered *upcycling*, the practice of making things that are more beautiful, useful and durable out of materials formerly known as garbage. For me, upcycling is a radical shift in the way that we have been taught to look at waste. I started upcycling six years ago, inspired of friends from Soweto Mountain of Hope in South Africa, I transformed some soda cans into earrings, a necklace and a bracelet. Since that time my passion for this practice has grown in leaps and bounds. I have expanded my repertoire of upcycling materials from aluminum to cardboard, glass, paper, egg cartons, bottle tops, can tabs, chip bags, packing materials ... even a broken toilet and umbrella.



Since 2008, I have stewarded a virtual upcycling portal, cataloguing interesting experiments in the creative reuse of waste from around the world. The Upcycling Portal <www.trunity.net/upcycling/> highlights everything from working ships built from PET bottles to jewelry made from microchips and e-waste.

As I move from being a recycler to an upcycler, (I do still separate and recycle because I don't yet have the capacity to upcycle all of my waste, but recycling isn't the ideal option) my attitude about consumption is also shifting. By upcycling I actually deal with the garbage I produce, rather than throw it 'away' or send it off to some mysterious place to be recycled. When I recycle, I am still relying on someone else to manage and process *my* waste. Dealing with my own refuse, helps me to ask myself whether or not I need to buy something in the first place. So nowadays, before I throw anything in either the garbage or the recycle bin, I always ask myself: might this thing I'm about to send to a landfill or recycling plant have another purpose?

"Nature does not know the concept of waste; the only species capable of making something no one desires is the human species."

- Gunter Pauli

The upcycling mindset also foments creativity. If I look at cardboard box and, instead, see a lounge chair or, if I see a pile of plastic bags, and know that I could make boots out of them, my mind actually expands. The next time I'm faced with a challenge, my response will be more innovative.

I have noticed the way that people's creativity naturally emerges in upcycling workshops. One of the most inspiring, spontaneous upcycling creations I have witnessed was at a festival where we had an upcycling booth. We laid out a bunch of 'garbage' on tables and made signs inviting people to see what they could make from it. In 20 minutes, a young boy named Carlos threw together an incredible puppet from a coconut shell, half a plastic bottle and some scraps of cloth. And its not only kids, either. In 2011, I hosted an upcycling workshop with 90 hairstylists from the UK. Though the project was to make little baskets, bowls and beads from magazines, I was amazed by their creativity.

Knowing that I have many friends out there in the world who are upcycling their waste motivates me to keep saving bottle tops and straws (even when I don't have the slightest idea what they will become). My trans-local community of fellow upcyclers offers me a sense of solidarity and the feeling that I'm part of a much bigger movement.

How can one nurture an upcycling spirit? Cultivate patience, let go of attachment to outcome, and practice, practice, practice. Upcycling is not a 'quick fix' – it takes time to make things from our trash, whether it's a complex construction project or a simple decoration for our home. When we upcycle we have to be willing to try and fail. Not all our projects turn out as we expect. What I do when I fail is simply persevere, continue upcycling and trying out new things, big and small, from my trash.

Finally, make a good space to store and organize your trash so it is easy to access and use. It can often take a long time to get together the amount of waste that you need to do a big upcycling project. If you simply start treating garbage as though it were a valuable resource, you will soon begin finding innovative purposes for your trash. Garbage will begin to seem to you beautiful, useful and inspiring.

These days, I am in the early stages of launching the Upcycling Initiative Oaxaca in collaboration with San Sebastian Teitipac, a local Zapotec community. It will be organized as a locally-owned upcycling cooperative. The initiative will support local people in learning how to transform their waste into valuable products, and support the sales and distribution of their upcycled creations.

- **Aerin Dunford**, Oaxaca, Mexico
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My day on the ghantagadi

Every morning, at about 11, I used to hear a familiar sound out on the road. The jingle of the bell and the rattling of the tractor announced the arrival of the 'ghantagadi' (the garbage collecting truck). I saw the people working on it every day, covered in filth and handling our refuse without any qualms or disgust. The ghantagadi is a daily part of our lives, and yet we attach nearly no importance to it. We never wonder where our garbage ends up. Confronted by these questions, I met Mahadev Khude, the local union leader of the ghantagadi workers, and asked him if I could work on one of the ghantagadis for a day. He arranged a trip, although he was quite amused that a student and journalist like me wanted to ride on a ghantagadi!

On the 2nd of November, 2008, at 6.30 am in the morning, I reached the rendezvous location, shivering in the cold. Slowly the other workers started trickling in. I was allotted Ward No. 27, along with the other guys - Sunil (aged 27), Pankaj (19), Tukaram (40) and Nivrutti (42). After introducing myself, I stood there listening to their intriguing conversations while we waited for the supervisor to arrive. At 7 am, we started our journey in an affluent area. In the first five minutes, I saw the efficiency and creativity with which these people worked. The skill with which they handle the garbage is amazing. They deal with the appalling lack of hand-gloves and other safety equipment by using shovels and gunny-sacks. It was hard for me at first, but under Sunil's expert guidance, I caught up. We collected garbage from a lot of well-known people. The funny thing is, I had visited these houses before, as a reporter from a daily English newspaper. The treatment which I got from then was drastically different from what I was receiving now. Many of them didn't even recognise me as I handled their garbage.

Next, we visited the older and significantly filthier parts of Nashik. I realized that the work till now had been easy. The people in the more crowded area were much friendlier. They were chatting with the others, staring at me and asking, "Is he new?" Sunil was busy chatting with people and collecting Diwali bonuses, while the rest of us gathered dung, plastic, old clothes, vegetable peelings, and rotten egg shells. Suddenly, we received a call from the supervisor; some dog had died in a street near us. We were told to go and pick it up. This kind of work officially doesn't come under the ghantagadi's scope, but the Municipal Corporation was understaffed in the Diwali vacations. With nothing but plastic bags on his hands, Sunil and Tukaram lifted the carcass and put it in a gunny bag, I tried to volunteer, but Sunil signalled me not to mess in this.

After this, we entered an area where many local political leaders lived. Ironically, it was here that the workers had the toughest time wheedling out Diwali bonuses! We picked up nearly 20kgs of garbage from a house, most of it comprising of garlands. We later found out that that house belonged to a politician who had his birthday yesterday. On the way back, I asked Sunil how much Diwali

bonuses he'd collected. "Just Rs.285, no one wants to give more. Not even these rich people who spend 500 and 1000 bucks on a garland," he said. We had managed to collect only Rs.285 from nearly 700 houses!

As the day ended, we sold some of the recyclable trash and started driving towards the garbage depot. The depot was near a beautiful mountain called *Pandavlene*. The height of the mound was nearly half the size of the real mountain besides it! The Municipal Corporation claims that the garbage is consistently processed into compost. I asked Sunil if that was really true. He just laughed, I got my answer. Nashik alone generates 200 tonnes of garbage daily. Nashik's tagline "Clean Nashik, Green Nashik" seemed like a big joke after seeing the situation. All the Corporation did was to pile up the garbage in one spot, and keep people completely oblivious to it. "The mountain just gets bigger and bigger, nothing else happens here." Sunil said.

At the post-work tea and vada-pav party, Sunil said to me, "You did a great job today. We could finish our work earlier thanks to you. If you feel like doing this again, call Tukya and we'll arrange a pick up." I didn't know what to say. These people were thanking me, while it should've been the other way around. In response, all I could do was grab and shake Sunil's hand.

I reached home and suddenly felt exhausted. I realized how tough this job was, to collect loads of garbage and trash in the blazing sun, to inhale and be amidst so much dirt and filth, and all this without any protective gear. Expectedly, my mother drove me straight into the bathroom for a bath. She could not stand the sight of a filthy son! However, even though I was unclean physically, emotionally I was unimaginably happy, for reasons unknown to me. The camaraderie and warmth of those four young guys who were with me all day, the happiness they sought in their work, the difficulties they faced bravely, everything was priceless. Although I was physically dirty, my soul and mind were cleaner, purer and free of many misconceptions about the people who work for us. Even today, as the ghantagadi rings on the road below, I remember my day on the ghantagadi, and it brings a smile to my face. I don't know why, and probably, I don't want to know why I feel like smiling. I feel I am better off not knowing.



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The impeded stream is the one that sings...

Tonight, above us, the stars were in conversation, seemingly silhouetted against the gently cascading hues of the night sky – blissfully oblivious to our own conversations. We held our hands, my wife Ej and I, and walked to our home within the University campus, speaking with whispers and smiles. Ej noticed it first: bold metallic yellow letters written on the street. They together said 'Slow Down'. We stopped, dead in the middle of the street, staring at the sign. "Another epiphany?" asked Ej, peering into my eyes. I smiled.

Young, 'successful' in the academic world, PhD candidates with impressive résumés, and just about to get married, we were burdened by the festering reek of the narratives of an increasingly suspicious system – a cancerous wound.

You see, we were children of the establishment – handpicked to be new masters of our respective societies. It could have worked – our lives as the establishment would have wanted them – but something happened on the way to heaven. It all started to go 'wrong' when we first met each other. With Ej, my world ceased being merely a sexless, platonic gift in grey wrappings. My search for a world of forms, the dimension at the end of the rope tethered to my intellectual prowess, caved in – opening new pathways into playgrounds of possibilities, where truth is the poems we tell each other, and heresies say more about us than about the 'nature' of reality (whatever 'it' is). Everything became charged, alive. There were no colourless regions, no twilight zones, no easy ways out. Love became political, the 'good' became what we see only in retrospect. And evil? Well, even evil has a story.

We are striving to enact those possibilities our hearts tell us are possible. Understanding what it could mean to decolonise our lives and how we might transit into new dreams haven't always been intuitive or clear. There have been beautiful moments: last week we cleared our backyard and started a small bio-organic farm; we hope we can plant a number of crops and make compost from our waste. A few months ago, we made the decision to eat more vegetarian meals (not an easy choice for most Nigerians I know!), learn more about Gerson's Therapy, and avoid aerated/carcinogenic beverages, fast-foods and canned meals. We are learning to see through the ethics of success and the compulsion to achieve our society creates, by unlearning our definitions of well-being and the good life – by talking about the story of never-enough that force us into the anxieties of self-preservation. Though we are still constrained to behave in ways that reinforce the systems that accommodate us (the university system, our financial context, and etcetera), we are learning to simply **be with each other in creatively energised ways.**

We know that our little acts of subversion may not be significant to mainstream consciousness, but they are, in remembrance of Gandhi's words, important.

In all this, we have no vision statements or convenient blueprints – except a desire to live slow lives in a world that encourages you to catch up; except a desire to be more

vulnerable in times when independence and self-sustainability are 'easier'. Riding on the tidal waves of uncertainty, our experiments at decolonizing ourselves from the Yellow Brick Road are really an attempt to be in community, in sacred interdependence, in performance with others enacting the seditious idea that we are not concrete selves isolated from each other, but relationships inhabiting possibilities.

So, in 2011, Ej and I dreamed of ways we can be in community with others. We think that one of the most compelling imperatives of our time is the call to revitalize our indigenous traditions and re-enact conversations long silenced by the one-world perspective. *We think that we will never really unleash humanity's potentials for compassion and community until we transit from the monocultures of usury/debt-money to locally generated currencies that celebrate our interconnectedness.* Called Koru, the process we envisage is a way of bringing people into decolonizing adventures of their own as they co-create conversations in communities of choice, learn about new ways of being, and enact the possibilities of today's amorphous moments.

Koru is a network of people around the globe, a coalition of voices and volunteers who will help re-enchanted indigenous spaces with the sharing of stories, and co-articulate local economies and locally energised ways of exchanging value. When we close our eyes, we imagine everyday folk initiating Koru projects by accessing the Koru portal (to be launched October 2012) on the internet. A Koru project can attract other persons who resonate with a project. Together these small groups will engage communities of interest around the world, interacting with them, learning from them, and co-creating new values in local exchange, educational praxis and indigenous well-being.

What's more exciting is that Koru is an art form, a poem for a time, deriving its strength from the crises and possibilities of today. I think it is part of our decolonization from the result-oriented milieu we occupy to understand that the things that we find truly important do not necessarily have to produce 'results', be big or last forever; life is playful. Yet this playfulness is not puerile, but sacred, so that it is not that some things are sacred and others, not – but that everything is sacred.

Tonight, in a few minutes, we will go out again. Will we probably see new signs from the universe? We probably won't. Will we sight an unidentified flying object? Will we find new ways of being free in each other? Will we boldly confront the paradoxes of our being together? Will we learn something new? It doesn't matter – so long as we are holding each other's hand.

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Restorative Circles

I was once on a train, and a woman pulled the chain to stop it. The cops came, and she explained that her husband was left on the platform. When the train began to move again, the woman saw that her suitcase was on the platform, so she pulled the chain again. This time, the cops were angry with her, until she said she was a minister's daughter. Then, they were super polite and helped her carry her luggage. I was disgusted, so I commented, "Is that all your 'desh-prem' (patriotism)?" Hearing me, the cop threw me out of the train onto the platform.

I was reading on forgiveness that time, so, I was not inclined to complain about the cop and get him punished. At the same time, I didn't want to just go back home without doing anything. So, when I reached my destination, I went to the Station Master, shared the incident, and requested that he arrange a meeting with him. He was confused and asked, "Why do you want to meet him? If you want, you can write a complaint. That's the language he will understand." I insisted on arranging a meeting with him, and they finally called him over.

The railways staff asked him to apologize, but I requested them to leave us alone. I then asked him, "Why did you throw me out of the compartment?" He said, "I was already stressed and felt attacked by you." I could sense that he was hurt by my words; no one likes to be seen in the wrong. Seeing his vulnerability and humanity, my pain melted away. I told him how important it is to me to respect the dignity of all the people around us. I felt connected to him in the end. Interestingly, initially my back was hurting from the fall, but when our conversation was over, my back pain had disappeared.

More than five years later, I came across 'Restorative Circles' (RC) which is inspired by the idea of restorative justice. Initiated by Dominic Barter in the slums of Brazil, as a way of conflict transformation, it is now being embraced all over the world. Unlike the existing retributive justice system (where we look for the wrong and right and give punishment and rewards), RC intends to create a safe space where people can bring their conflicts out of the closet. The facilitator does not hold any special power, does not tell anyone that they are right or wrong, or give any solutions. Yet, the community of people involved can find ways of restoring connections during the process.

I enjoy the way the circle or the community is constituted. If an act or harm has happened, any member who is part of the system is empowered to contact a facilitator in order to call a circle. During the pre-circle, the facilitator asks each person, "Who else you think needs to be there?" For example, if three people are named, then the facilitator goes to each of them, shares what's happening, and also checks with them about who else they think needs to be there. I like that each person has the space for inviting people to be in the circle and form a community which they think needs to be there.

During the circle process, there is a conscious attempt towards mutual comprehension. Whenever someone expresses themselves, the facilitator tries to ask another person, preferably to the one to whom something has been said, to reflect back what they heard. Then, they cross check with the first person if that's what they were meaning. When people's deeper meanings are heard, miracles begin to happen.

I was recently sitting with a group of my old friends and their wives. I had met them after 25 years. They were talking of some recent disconnect amongst the group. One woman was trying hard to convince everyone to sit and talk with other people, and everyone was telling her how it won't work. I was not sure if I should intervene, but I went ahead to ask her, "Are you in pain? Do you want more connection among the community?" She said, "Yes," and tears rolled down from her eyes. At that moment, I sensed we had moved from the head to the heart. Everything that happens in a circle, be it anger or silence, has meaning behind it. Once, when I asked one young man to reflect back what he had heard, he responded by, "I DON'T CARE!!" I could have been triggered by how he raised his voice and what he said. Instead, I chose to reflect the deeper meaning, "So, it seems you are really angry." He said, "Yes. I have been saying it for so long, and she doesn't understand me." He made his point; we moved on.

Presently, there is a conflict going on in my family. Some of us are almost not on talking terms and that pains me. With a court case going on for the last four years, the connections are getting worse. We are talking to lawyers instead of those whom we grew up with. I know that there was once love and care amongst us and now there is hatred. For me, real solutions will come once we hold each others' needs with care. I am longing for something like a restorative system in our family but am lost as to how it will come. I myself am less triggered by anger that is directed towards me these days, as I am able to see harsh words as just a way to communicate someone's deep pain and hurt to me. I am able to be little more empathetic towards them, even though I still get disturbed some times.

The more I see the increasing distress in my family, the more I have the desire to deepen my understanding of restorative systems. I dream that one day we will be able to hear each other's story, to share our hurt and pain in the presence of a community of people who care for us, going beyond the blame game, beyond judging something or someone wrong and right, where we will not ask for apologies from each other, and where we will feel safe to express our stories without being judged or sentenced.

To know more, see: www.restorativecircles.org

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Field notes from the Occupy movement

On September 17, 2011, a small group of people started a revolution. Occupy Wall Street soon bloomed beyond a simple economic theme and led to a drastic overturning of conventional wisdom, becoming a champion of progressive values and presenting a radical questioning of America itself.

I believe myself lucky to be in the US in the midst of this exciting upheaval. I had been in the US in my first year of college since August. My first two months were spent surveying the void in activist-culture on my campus and waiting for any event that would prompt an underground radical scene, if at all it existed, to come out of hiding. That day was October 5. While walking to give a sociology midterm, I saw someone posting a flyer on a wall, calling on students to join a walk-out in solidarity with Occupy College. At first, I couldn't believe that this was really happening on the North Carolina State University campus. But it really was, and within a few days, I met the local student dissident voices. We formed OccupyNCSU.org as a student coalition, and since then have not let there be a lull on campus.

By the end of October, there were about 2,300 occupied zones around 2,000 cities worldwide, including Raleigh. Our Occupation began on October 15, and for a couple of months had to deal with some of the toughest resistance against any Occupation: we were not allowed by the police to set up an encampment anywhere. Even with such difficulties, we persevered, living 24-7 on the sidewalk in front of the North Carolina Old State Capitol grounds and surviving two raids.

Our community at Occupy Raleigh had people from all walks of life. It was the first time in my life that I got to know and spend a considerable amount of time simultaneously with people across the entire economic spectrum, gender spectrum, etc. Bonding with homeless people as well as people from the LGBTQ community opened my eyes to intricacies and depths about people that a bare theoretical understanding of these things cannot give you.

Another learning experience for me has been the process of direct/participatory democracy. Adapted in its purest form from anarchist modus operandi, being a part of a true direct/participatory democratic process with its General Assemblies (GAs) has been a complex experience – reinforcing my beliefs that harmonious existence within humanity is definitely possible, while demonstrating the many pitfalls that can be faced along this route. Facilitating GAs for OccupyNCSU was a challenging experience: moderating three hours of intense discussion was a bootcamp for my communication skills.

I had also had a chance to visit Zuccotti Park in New York, the site of Occupy Wall Street, and was blown away with optimism on seeing it: a community run entirely on power from bicycle generators, a community where no one went hungry, a community where celebrities came, behaved like, and were treated simply as people among other people. Most essentially, bolstered by all the art and freed culture, was the tremendous positive energy of the place. The one thing

that has kept me with Occupy over the months is this uplifting power, and the awareness that I am putting my time here on this planet to some use.

How exactly is Occupy making a difference? The answer to this question is one that Occupy itself has had to learn as the movement has progressed. Its lack of being definite and formal has also been used as the biggest criticism against it. But, due to Occupy, there is now a growing doubt of whether the government is in reality serving the people or not. The idea that big corporations aren't neutral, or even benevolent, is slowly working its way through mass consciousness as well.

Occupy has also broken taboos at a deeper level, whether the majority of the public recognizes it yet or not. An Occupation is essentially an act of taking back the commons. This is our land, and as dignified human beings, we shall live on it without the shackles of any authority. The People, the Occupiers, have realized this in its full potency through the movement. When the people rise up and start to create a world in which they don't depend upon any power but that within themselves and that presented by their space and time, the dominant powers feel threatened. There is no other reason why the Occupations, overtly presenting little other than a purely anti-capitalist or reformist message, have been attacked over and over again by government forces.

One of the most distinctive experiences, and accompanying learning, that I have had was that of being one among the masses. I did not and do not consider myself much of a person for marches and protests, and question the utilitarian value of such tactics. However, I cannot deny the spirit of solidarity generated by a large mass of impassioned people. Whether it was standing outside the Magistrate's Office on October 15th, waiting along with dozens in grim defiance and jubilant support for the nineteen people arrested on the first day of our Occupation, or whether it was marching through the streets of Oakland with thousands to shut down the port system of the West Coast, the nearly transpersonal feeling of meaning, power, and joy emerging from becoming one with the collective was unparalleled.

Over the months, I've understood that the Occupy Movement is not just a reformist campaign opposing financial inequality. It is a revolutionary movement, seeking to create a better world, not tomorrow, not in the ivory towers of academia or the obstacle courses of government houses, but today, out in the open for all to see and participate in. That is why I think of words like 'recreate' or 'reclaim' when thinking of 'Occupy', rather than 'tax' or 'bailout'. To Occupy is to be in the present reality with full heart and mind, and if necessary, to fight for it.

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A Glimpse Into Janasatyagraha

After spending a few frustrating years looking for a 'home' for my second career, it felt like I hit the jackpot after completing a six-month internship with Ekta Parishad, a non-violent people's movement in Madhya Pradesh, who is preparing for a Jansatyagraha - a non-violent movement involving 100,000 landless on a *padayatra* (foot-march) from Gwalior to New Delhi over a one-month period starting from 2nd October 2012. They will walk, eat, sleep, bathe, sing, and dance on one side of the National Highway for the entire month. This seemed similar to the historical Dandi March for me. So I came back from Canada with a lot of inspiration and anxiety to understand and witness how Gandhian principles were being translated into action.

A Jansamwaad yatra is currently being carried out in preparation for this larger action in 2012. A team of people, from different parts of the country is traveling under the leadership of P.V. Rajgopal (Rajaji), a senior Gandhian activist, through 350 districts of India over one year. The objectives are to interact with local groups carrying out struggles on issues of land and livelihood, and to encourage local groups to cross ideological barriers and come together for a decisive national struggle. I have been traveling as much as I can with the yatra for the past several months.

I see Jansatyagraha as a non-violent action that seeks to raise critical moral questions for wider society and invite the government to formulate a comprehensive land-reform policy: *How do we correct the severe imbalance in allocation and control of resources in the country? Why is it that adivasis, dalits, fisherfolks and other marginalized communities are the one who always have to sacrifice their access and control over land, water and forest for wider good (i.e., 'development') of the country? What is 'development' and how can we call a process that displaces millions 'development'? Who should be involved in the decision-making process regarding 'development' and how do we ensure their involvement?*

In Tamil Nadu, we met a group of 17 adivasi families who were displaced in 1980 due to the Forest Conservation Act and were re-settled in a colony, who now plead for permission to go back and settle in the forest where their ancestors once lived. In Maharashtra, there were many examples of people losing their agricultural lands due to industries and highway expansion. In Chhattisgarh, in almost every village we visited, adivasis were complaining about exploitation of forest department officials and their resistance to give land under the Forest Rights Act. In Silpunji village near Rourkela, 30 young men were accused as members of an armed group and were arrested. They were kept in prison for over two years and were released recently as there was no case against them. As I met them, I struggled to comprehend the trauma they faced.

The yatra has clearly deepened my understanding of people's challenges in getting access to land, water and

forest as well as the bigger picture portraying how these commons get hampered under the name of 'development'. Seeing the effects on marginalized sections of society and the pace at which resources of this country are being sold off to corporations, I feel a deep fear and anger swelling up inside me. There is a growing sense of urgency as the situation is going out of control and we seem headed off a deep precipice. I have come in regular contact with many inspiring local activists who are waging heroic struggles against this process of globalization. We are advocating for a situation where communities will have equal say in matters affecting them. Farmers and marginalized communities are responding positively to this call, because they have seen how they are losing out either because of land acquisition or due to lack of access to land. I can sense a deeper shift in my commitment to this struggle for people's control over land and livelihood resources.

I am deeply privileged to closely observe the operation of a non-violent movement and am trying to make connections between what I am seeing and what I have learnt theoretically. I am particularly curious to understand how the spiritual component of non-violent action really works. Rajaji says it requires immense inner work to channelize the anger and frustration that arises when one comes face-to-face with the suffering of millions into non-violent resistance. Developing this kind of spirituality, I find, is extremely difficult, but I have taken a step or two in this direction. Typically, I found myself being moved by stories of displacement and people's loss of their agricultural land due to land acquisition for 'development' and not as much by peoples' struggle in getting ration cards, lack of bore wells, getting government support for building their homes etc. The former issues are typically seen in rural areas whereas the latter are typically found in urban/semi-urban areas. Even though I know rationally that both the kinds of suffering are equally severe, it was interesting to notice how I gravitated to one over the other. This shows me the success that our society has had in making me insensitive to poverty in urban areas.

Observing Ekta Parishad's work, I have realized that responding out of love does not have to necessarily be warm and fuzzy but can be firm and strong as well. Seeing the connections between our choices as consumers and the violence marginalized communities experience and the growing inequality in our society is making me question my consumption patterns and decisions, such as, the social practice of buying gifts which has overtaken many of our ceremonies and rituals.

I would strongly encourage anyone who is toying with the idea of doing something to change society or work for the betterment of society to spend at least a few days with the Jansatyagraha movement <www.ektaparishad.com>.

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The Body Knows

*It would be so much easier for me to just
dance this for you right now.*

*And through my body's movements, you could feel my
story. Because my body knows more than my mind. She
is wise. She remembers the stories of ancient past. She
carries the knowledge, which has been passed down to
me from generation to generation, connecting me to my
roots, to where I come from, to who I am.*

My body is my temple.

She is the gateway to my soul.

*When I listen to her, I am so much more aware of my
emotions, of my needs, of the things that excite me, that
make me afraid, that give me ease, that feel good, that
feel unnatural, stressful, painful, violent, and freeing.*

*She teaches me what I need to know in order to be in
harmony with my mind and soul.*

She teaches me how to follow my nature.

From my earliest memories, I have always been a dancer and an actor. These forms of expression have been integral to my being and to the ways that I express myself. Have a conversation with me, and you see my hands flailing trying to communicate the intangible things that words fall short in conveying, and you see my face, contorting in all different ways to articulate the fascination, joy, sadness, pain and anger I feel. If I don't allow my mind to intervene, my body enacts the story I am telling. If I follow my body, I can be one in the moment, present, transparent, vulnerable, courageous and real.

My body feels most at home in the lands of my ancestors – in Latin America, East Africa and India. In these lands where my roots lay, my body feels more relaxed, grounded and at ease. The body remembers. When I live in Toronto, Canada, the city where I was born and raised, time seems to be slipping away and we are expected to 'do' so much every day. The fast paced lifestyle of the city begs us to ignore the wisdom of the body and leads to dis-ease.

I was in a relationship with a man whom I loved very deeply but with whom I was struggling to be. Increasingly, I began to feel a sharp pain in my lower back, like a knife was stabbing me. It became worse, and though I stretched, it wouldn't go away. One day, in my spirituality and schooling class, my professor began talking about the shadow self. She reminded us that each one of us has a shadow side – that side of our spirituality where we hide the parts of ourselves, which we don't want to acknowledge for fear of what we might find. I asked myself, "What is my shadow self?" What I discovered was the realization that I had much healing to do from pain which had been caused in my relationship and that continuing to be with this person was causing me further pain. My mind tried its best to rationalize that I should stay, that I was happy, but my body was unrelenting. The pain in my back persisted, and tears began to form in my eyes, causing me to incessantly cry, without me even fully understanding why, until I had to

face the reality and end the relationship. I felt the blade of the knife in my lower back gently slide out. The body knows.

Interplay is a powerful technique that I have found to enable me to unlock the wisdom of my body. It came to me via Prashant Olalekar in Bombay and co-founders Cynthia Winton-Henry and Phil Porter, at a time when I was finally ready to unlearn the rigid structures of dance education. Interplay is improvised movement, storytelling, song and stillness that is done in community, through various 'forms' that encourage you to *follow* your body and let your body move *you*, as opposed to *you* moving your body. It's a playful way to connect with what the body wants. In my experience, Interplay has helped to surface issues which were most present for me at that moment, questions which are on my heart and mind, re-occurring fears, pain which needs healing and directions in which I wish to grow.

Interplay is based on eight body wisdom principles:

1) Easy Focus. Let go of the mind's focus – that which wants to zoom in. Easy focus is like blurring your vision and taking in an entire experience rather than its separate parts.

2) Notice Body. Paying attention to our bodies is like collecting bits and pieces of data. Knowledge of our body's patterns helps us make wiser choices.

3) Internal Authority. You can believe what you notice. You can trust the wisdom of your body. You don't have to articulate your experience in order to have it.

4) Physicality of Grace. This is the opposite of stress. Notice the good and have more. Sing, dance, quiet, story.

5) Exformation. The opposite of information. You can move out the excess energy.

6) Body Wisdom. To change your life, change your practice.

7) Incrementality. Go at the speed of your body, one step at a time. The body moves incrementally whereas the mind and soul have a tendency to fly. You get into trouble in tiny steps, and you get out of trouble in tiny steps.

8) Affirmation! Affirmation! Affirmation! Notice the good.

In order to radically change the way we are in this world, we need to wake up, and I feel that the most powerful way in which I can sound the alarm bell is by using my body to physicalize humans' repetitively destructive behaviour. It is transformative for me to feel my history running through my body and I hope it will impact those who see it on an embodied, mental and emotional level.

To give my body a voice, I honour the Divine in me, my feminine spirit, Mother Nature, my ancestors and my experiences of life. In doing this, I heal the wounds of the body, mind, spirit split, dividing past, present and future, creating borderlines within me, between you and me and across Mother Earth. I move towards wholeness and I come closer to being me.

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Playing throughout our Lives: an interview with Swati-Agyat

How did you first get interested in the idea of play as way of learning?

In early 2000, our 'teacher' Vishwas Parchure, who had just returned from a conference of AEE (Association of Experiential Education) in the US, told us about a group of people who do crazy stuff. The moment I heard about 'cooperative games', I was sold to the idea. It took Swati and me less than five minutes to say yes! The name of the initiative was Play for Peace (PFP).

What is cooperative gaming, and how is it different from other games?

Cooperative gaming is an inclusive process to help people connect with each other. It is non-eliminating. It enables people to see that they belong to the whole and complete the whole, so there is no struggle to protect your identity or fight for it.

Most of the games and sports played today are competitive. Competition is obviously a process to enslave people, designed to keep motivation as an external factor. When I was in 10th Grade in a public school, there were other 'intelligent children' with whom I had to be 'competitive', if I wanted to keep my record of being 'First'. And I just could not find it in myself to compete. I remember thinking, "I have stood first so many times, let others do it now". I did not know it then, but my heart had seen through the farce called competition.

How has your understanding of play deepened, grown, and changed over the years?

My first few experiences of playing with children only reinforced my belief that this is a process that draws everyone in. Play for Peace is a community peace-building process that works in areas having a history of communities in conflict. And yet, after 30 minutes of gaming, when a child held on to my hand not wanting to let it go, it was a message for me about the process.

It may sound ironic, unreal, I don't know what, but the day I started playing cooperative games is the day I started learning about cooperative games. After 11 years of playing with 5- to 60-year olds, cooperative gaming is engaging, evolving, liberating, and empowering. It's a critical right for children, a learning process that involves both left and right brain. It is key to emotional growth. It is as much about enabling critical thinking as it is about peace building. No degree, but now I am a theoretician in this subject because of my practice.



What have you learned and unlearned while experimenting with play in your lives?

The first session where I played with children, was about being what I never was. From the start of being an adult, let's say, when I was 16 or so till my first session, I had never interacted with children. But on that day I was childlike. No fear, just engaging with the game, laughing, making faces, jumping, etc. That day I learnt the importance of being nobody. When you play cooperative games, it helps you let go the sense of 'self' that draws the line between your self and others.

How do you see play as a tool for bringing conflict resolution, peace, social change and social harmony?

Assuming that we want to live in a peaceful world! Our way of looking at things makes us distinguish between 'us' and 'them', and this is the source of conflict and inequality. Where do we begin to change this? The moment we start talking, we are fueling opinion. So that's not a good place to start. That's where play comes in – to connect, relate, engage in an environment of no consequences. So play is not a standalone process, but it can energize intention, fuel efforts and kick-start connections that then need to be sustained by other efforts. We started PLAY (Peace Leadership And Young People) with this vision.

How do you financially manage to survive with PLAY? By trusting our instincts and creating an 'intent'. We don't draw a monthly salary; we rely on whatever people give us for play sessions. If there isn't any work for the last three months, it's a sign that something new is around the corner! The universe is listening. Our bags are packed, reservations are always available, though sometimes there is a waiting list, so have patience!

How can someone new get involved in PLAY or into cooperative gaming?

Awesome! Get a group of six or seven people and start playing. You don't know any cooperative games? Well, try converting the competitive ones into cooperative ones. Competitive games are meant to exclude. Think about how you can tweak them to be inclusive. Wherever you are, there are children who need these games, so go find them! For some games to try, check out <www.fundoing.com>. Also go to www.playforpeace.org and apply to start a "play for peace club" in your community.

- Agyatmitra and Swati, Pune
<swatiagyat@gmail.com>

“In the logic of play, people are invited to break rules, experiment, innovate and be original. Can you remember how you played as a child? If you were like most children, you delighted in opportunities to be off balance, to relinquish control, to be surprised. You pushed the edge just to see how far you could go - and it was no big deal when you toppled over. In fact, the more errors you made, the more you learned how to solve problems - like maintaining balance. You tried things out for no other reason than because they were new. When you got your hands on an object, your first question was “What can I do with that?” not “What is it for?” As adults we like to categorize things: a paperclip is a paperclip; a box is a box. For a child, a paperclip is a lock picker, a cherry-pit remover, a booger-hunting device, a lightning rod for elves. Play returns us to a state where we can see what’s possible - not what’s so.”

- Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze, *Walk Out Walk On*, 2011

an invitation

The power within *Swapathgami* comes from our own practical experiences and relationships. We invite you to share your essays, poems, cartoons, photographs, stories, quotes, films, books, websites, etc. We print both English and Hindi editions. Contact:

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thanks! thanks. thanks & thanks ^ thanks...

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learning webs: the power of play

Ultimate Camp Resources

www.ultimatecampresource.com/site/camp-activities/camp-games.html

This site features hundreds of cooperative games that you can use in your communities. It is maintained and updated by real people who run summer camps. Enough stuff to keep you playing for a long time!!!

The Levity Project

<http://thelevityinstitute.com/the-levity-project/homepage/>

The Levity Project is a social movement creating change through public acts of play, laughter and celebration. They have lots of cool videos and ideas for micromovements you can start in your community.

Teampedia

www.teampedia.net

In the spirit of real gift culture, this is a collaborative encyclopedia of free team-building activities, community resources, and tools for teams that anyone can access and edit.

Innovation Games

<http://innovationgames.com>

This site features online and in-person games that enable groups to solve problems, by using collaborative play to tap into deep innovation.