

The Berkana Institute

Alive in Community

Designing and Hosting Transformative Gatherings

Aerin Dunford and Bob Stilger

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Foreword

By Aerin Dunford

We stand in a wide circle amidst thatched buildings. To the west is a preschool built from compacted earth, to the south a circular open-air meeting space, to the east the composting toilets, and to the north permaculture gardens and an herbal lab. In the distance tower the ancient, mammoth rocks that distinguish this place. This is Kufunda Learning Village in Ruwa, Zimbabwe. The 60 people from 11 countries standing here tonight have come together for the Art of Learning Centering, the annual gathering of the Berkana Exchange community.

Our circle marks the beginning of an evening of ceremony and celebration that brings this year's 10-day gathering to a close. In the dim evening light, I look around at my community: Asif and Noureen, the newlywed activists working with youth in Balochistan, Pakistan; Patricia, the soon-to-be mother and social entrepreneur from Brazil; Sahra, the community organizer from Cape Town who started a collective of fisherwomen; Mukesh, an organic farmer from India who produces bio-gas with cow dung; Sophia, the soft-spoken healer who grows and processes medicinal plants at Kufunda to treat herself and others infected with HIV.

We have many differences. Over the last 10 days, we have connected deeply with one another in an environment of friendship. The gifts and offerings from the diversity of the community have been welcomed and woven into our time together. There are no plenary sessions, no keynote speakers, no experts here. Our days have been filled with tears and laughter, many more questions than answers. We have had time to be silent and reflect, and we have lived as a community by cooking, gardening, cleaning and building together. This evening, it is the fire of gratitude that burns at the center of our circle.

What is the Art of Learning Centering?

The Berkana Exchange began hosting the Art of Learning Centering in 2005, when 20 of us first came together in Canada for three days. Since then it has grown in length and size to the 60-person, 10-day gathering that happened in Zimbabwe in October 2008. Along the way, we've gained some insights about what it takes to host powerful gatherings that can strengthen a community's relationships, resilience and capacity to act. In this article, we share what we've learned about how to design and host transformative gatherings.



Patricia Sogayar from Brazil sharing a laugh with Silas Lusias, community member of Kufunda Learning Village at the 2008 Art of Learning Centering

The Berkana Exchange formed in 2004. Today it is an ecosystem of learning centers, grassroots-based initiatives, individuals, regional learning groups and movements all working to create healthy and resilient communities at home. Within the Exchange, people from all over the world—Brazil, Canada, Greece, India, Israel, Mexico, Pakistan, South Africa, Turkey, the United States and Zimbabwe—share their ideas, dreams, skills and practices with others working from similar values, principles and beliefs. The Art of Learning Centering is the annual gathering of the Exchange. Participants learn about one another's local work, share experiences and stories and engage in the challenge of learning in a culturally diverse context. After being together, participants return to their communities feeling inspired and rejuvenated, ready to continue their work.

Art of Learning Centering annual gatherings have become the heartbeat of the Exchange, where our community has come to see itself more clearly, where lifelong friendships and partnerships have formed and where collaborative projects are envisioned, planned and realized. Face-to-face with a community we trust, we share our truths, successes, fears and uncertainties. We leave knowing more about who we are and the journey we are on, taking with us greater strength and clarity around our individual and collective work.

These gatherings are powerful personally and collectively. In what follows, we explore how to intentionally design and host face-to-face gatherings that profoundly transform the quality of our experience and identity as a community. We will consider such questions as:

- What helps move us from having a memorable time together to having a transformative experience?
- What conditions invite cooperation, creativity and synergy into a gathering?
- How can we make the most of our precious time together?
- What justifies the time, expense and carbon footprint of our gathering?

It is both deeply rewarding and incredibly challenging to design and host meetings that engender trust, weave individual and cultural differences into collective insight, support people in developing their own sense of identity and create new possibilities. If, like us, you seek to catalyze change in your community of practice, in social networks or in distributed organizations, we offer our learning to you.

Why Gather in Person?

The first questions we ask when we begin planning a gathering are: What is the purpose? Why are we calling people together? Clarity of purpose is the fertile soil in which gatherings are grounded. It gives us a point of reference to return to if and when the process of designing or coordinating the experience ever becomes confusing or unclear.

For the Exchange, Art of Learning Centering gatherings are an opportunity for our community to build relationships and learn together in ways that are not possible at a distance. Face-to-face, we have been able to establish deep, trusting relationships which increase the likelihood that our long-distance work will be successful. These gatherings have helped us strengthen our identity as a community, share our learning and surface collective intelligence as well as stay connected to one another as we step into meaningful action at home.

In 2005, when the Exchange community was just beginning to form, we gathered in Nova Scotia for a meeting we believed would be about governance and decision-making. Over the course of that weekend, we discovered that the opportunity to simply *be* together was the most important reason for meeting. Participants longed for practical exchanges of knowledge and skills, supportive networks of solidarity, new ways of sharing resources and making their work more visible. The following year we declared a new purpose for the Art of Learning Centering:

> Our purpose is to consciously, deliberately and collectively create a field of shared learning around the art of learning



Vanessa Reid from Montreal talks about her local work with other pioneers at the 2006 gathering in Oaxaca, Mexico.

centering, which is the practice of hosting local spaces where people gather to create the conditions for communities to become healthy and resilient.

Many leaders in our Exchange community have been pioneers, somewhat isolated in their own communities and not necessarily connected to people with similar values and outlooks. For many of us, there is almost always a combination of allure and pressure to move on to the next great project, the next horizon. But in order to create new possibilities in our work, we must pause and reflect. These gatherings are an opportunity to stop, see what others are doing and learning and to be witnessed.

Identifying purpose isn't something you do once and declare complete. Purpose evolves and even dramatically changes over time. In preparing for any gathering, questions of purpose need to be regularly revisited, like tilling

a garden to nurture its growth. Here are the questions we return to again and again:

- What is the greatest good that might come from this gathering?
- What pressing opportunities and challenges are present in our community?
- What is most *alive* in this community right now?
- What's happening in the larger world?
- What are the common interests of this particular group of people?
- What practices or skills might participants have to offer? What would they like to learn?

This evolving clarity of purpose informs and grounds all other work in the preparation and design of the gathering.

Who Is Invited?

Powerful gatherings create a field of learning long before the participants arrive. The first step is a well-crafted invitation. During the early stages of planning, it is easy to get caught up in the design, logistics and expectations for the event, allowing the quality and nature of invitation to fall by the wayside. The sooner you have a clear idea of who will be there, the easier it is to design and plan a purposeful gathering that will meet participant needs. Invitation is best done through conversation and mutual discernment about who should attend and why. We invite at least two people from each initiative or place. Sharing the experience with a colleague from home helps us absorb and retain our learning. This adds richness to the gathering and supports the integration of learning at home.

It is helpful to have a mix of veterans and new participants at gatherings. This creates continuity and invites in new perspectives in addition to building intergenerational bridges. For Art of Learning Centering gatherings, we often welcome a broad community of support, such as board members, funders, family members, partners and friends. This additional layer of cross-fertilization enriches the experience and spreads our learning into other systems.

Where Shall We Gather?

How do we make the best use of place as a means to deepen our inquiry and learning? We notice a difference when we stand in an ancient cathedral or shrine, climb a mountain on a sunny spring day or walk the corridors of a prison. Each place we choose to gather has its own energy, including the hotel conference room. It's worth considering how this energy influences our experience and which environments will best serve our community.

Wherever we are geographically located, our gatherings are most powerful when they are hosted by our community members, in one of our communities. This is where our work is most real. In our first two years of gathering, we held the Art of Learning Centering at retreat centers—someone else's place. While these sites were beautiful and offered us a break from our busy lives, our hosts were not members of our community. They were paid staff people who cooked our meals and cleaned up after us. The relationship was essentially a transactional one.

In 2007, the Exchange decided it was time to gather at one of the learning centers in the Exchange. We chose to go to Axladitsa-Avatakia,



Axladitsa-Avatakia in Pelion, Greece, the setting for the 2007 Art of Learning Centering

a new learning center in Greece. This was the first large gathering hosted on the land. We were responsible for planning our meals, buying and preparing our food, collecting water and cleaning our toilets. This entirely changed the nature of the Art of Learning Centering. We were no longer simply *talking* about building healthy and resilient communities; we *were* one.

In choosing a place to gather, we've learned that it is useful when the hosting place accommodates all participants; when we all stay together, the community feels unified. Seeking out meeting places that break the cycle of "business as usual" helps us slow down, step back and breathe as well as think more clearly. Whenever possible, it's also worth choosing a place that feels aligned with purpose.

Working with Local Hosts

These gatherings have their greatest potential when there are strong local hosts—when someone invites us to be with them in their community, to learn by their side. Kufunda invited us to come to Zimbabwe for the 2008 Art of Learning Centering gathering. In the early months of the year, as election violence spiraled out of control, it became increasingly clear that it was unwise to continue with our scheduled gathering in May. In the end, we decided not to go. It wasn't an easy decision. Kufundees had called the community to gather; they wanted us to come and stand with them.

We decided that we would hold the gathering later that year in Southern Africa and we would wait to decide on the specific country. Over the summer, things only worsened in Zimbabwe. Most of us were thinking that the Art of Learning Centering would take place in South Africa and researched potential venues around Johannesburg. But after all of this work, Dorah Lebelo from The GreenHouse Project in Johannesburg said, "The Kufundees want us to come, and we could make contributions to their community. We could make this other place work for us, but it would not be the same: it is not part of who we are."



Morning circle at Kufunda Learning Village, Zimbabwe

With Dorah's wake-up call, we decided to go to Zimbabwe in October 2008. It was the clarity and sincerity of our hosts' invitation that lay a firm foundation for the gathering's success. Despite the challenge of planning a gathering in Zimbabwe's chaos, we ended up having a productive, unforgettable experience. This required courage from everyone, making our commitment to building healthy and resilient communities in the midst of systems collapse even stronger.

Wherever we meet, hosting is always a two-way process: gifts are offered and received. It is wise to have a conversation early on with hosts, owners and community leaders of a potential gathering place to explore what the place has to offer and what value local hosts would like to receive from the gathering (perhaps beyond money for services rendered). How can we leave each other richer than when we arrive?

How Shall We Prepare Ourselves?

We've shared a great deal about the gathering itself. Now we'll address the scaffolding on which gatherings are built.

Managing Logistics

The amount of logistical preparation that needs to be done for a



The hosting team gathers one day before others arrive to design the Art of Learning Centering in Oaxaca.

large gathering can be daunting, especially when it involves people from many countries. We've found it works best when there is one main logistics coordinator working with a core team, which must include individuals on the ground in the place where the gathering is held. It is helpful if participants themselves shoulder some responsibility, partnering with the core team on visas and flights. Skillful attention paid to logistics is what makes a successful gathering possible. If any of this is unattended, people may get cranky, which means the gathering could start off on the wrong foot. (See *Logistics Checklist* at the end of article for recommendations on budget, visas, booking travel, sleeping, food and more.)

Forming a Design and Hosting Team

In the early stages of planning, we form a design and hosting team. This group clarifies the gathering's purpose, creates its architecture and begins defining key themes and processes.

We've experimented with many different approaches to design. And we're certain there's no single right answer. We've brought

in hosts from outside and hosted ourselves. We've had closed design teams and open ones. After five years, we've learned that thoughtful design requires that a community continually inquire into what's needed now. Our design and hosting teams today are comprised of a "core team"—a well-defined, committed group of individuals—and a "welcoming boundary" that invites input from others.

We check in with the entire community to see who wants to be involved, asking people to step forward who have passion and vision for the gathering, who have some experience of past events or who have meeting design skills. The design team must include a local host. His or her knowledge is essential.

Designing a Powerful Gathering

The design and hosting team is the energetic center of a gathering. This means that direct, clear and 100 percent honest communication is essential. The levels of trust and connectedness within this group lay the groundwork for the rest of the group's experience. Unresolved tensions and issues between people on the design team inevitably end up affecting other participants, so it's worth taking the time to talk through any challenging issues that arise before or during the gathering. To create an experience based on deep, trusting relationships, this same spirit of listening and cooperation needs to be present among the core group.

The first task of the design team is to connect with one another and the broader community to explore participants' hopes and aspirations for the gathering. Design teams for the Art of Learning Centering have used surveys, phone interviews, conference calls and face-to-face meetings in the months beforehand to explore what people would like to contribute and learn together. The design has an overall rhythm and many moving parts. Helpful elements to consider in the design process include:

- **Length and Pace.** Powerful gatherings require spaciousness. Participants rush in from their busy lives, and it takes time to fully arrive. It takes

time to meet and greet old and new friends and to begin to hear each other's stories. Creating an environment of learning that is based on respect, curiosity and friendship—and which embraces diversity—takes days, not hours. For Berkana, this has meant extending our Art of Learning Centering gatherings from three days to ten. We've learned not to pack the time too tightly or plan gatherings back-to-back. Breathing room is essential.

- **Metaphors and Images.** Sometimes we work with an overarching metaphor or image for a gathering. These have given gatherings a sense of wholeness and consistency. Often the metaphor connects to the purpose or is relevant to the context of the gathering. In Greece, we used the metaphor of a family reunion: "We gather together the diverse threads of our tribe. Imagine 60 family members creating a meal together, each community offering its unique flavors to create a sumptuous banquet."
- **Flow.** Connected with metaphor is what we call the *flow of the gathering*. It is the overall



The design and hosting team is the energetic center of a gathering.

pattern of the design, one that attends to the evolution in energy and focus of the gathering as it unfolds. Naming the flow is a way of creating coherence and providing landmarks for participants. In Greece, our flow went like this:

- Day 1: Greet each other
- Day 2: Prepare the space
- Days 3-4: Bring forth our gifts
- Days 5-7: Share a meal
- Day 8: Digest/reflect
- Days 9–10: Clean up and move on

- **Establishing a Rhythm to the Days.** It's helpful to create a consistent, daily rhythm throughout the gathering. This adds stability and helps participants feel comfortable working with emergent design. A typical day at an Art of Learning Centering gathering includes: morning practices (such as meditation, walks, martial arts); group sessions that include "check-ins" and "check-outs" as well as dialogues and other learning processes; opportunities for engaging in hands-on work together; reflection time; spacious evenings for music, movies, conversations, campfires and whatever else emerges.

"Hosting" Our Community

What do we mean by 'host'? Those who invite us to gather in their place are certainly our hosts. But we also consider the people who invite us into conversations, collective work and other activities to be hosts. Others use the term 'facilitator' or 'organizer'. But hosting has an added element of hospitality and friendship. How do we create the conditions for our guests (participants) to feel comfortable engaging with one another in a meaningful way during each session or activity?

The Berkana Exchange community is rich with hosts. Over the years, we have learned to create the space for each participant to offer his or her skills and ideas. The Indians have brought us hilarious community-building games. The Brazilians delighted us with

their circle dances. All of us have something to offer the group—a new way of seeing things, a chance to learn with the body, a process that gets right to the heart of the matter at hand. The key is finding a healthy balance between inviting in the diversity of hosting skills and maintaining a sense of cohesion within the hosting team.

Designing in Real Time

At Berkana, we've always worked with an emergent design process. The most important design work takes place immediately before and during the event. In advance of the gathering, the host team spends significant time identifying community needs and creating a framework for the event. What has worked well for us is laying out the purpose, flow and rhythm of our days beforehand, arriving early to design the first few days, and then meeting daily to reflect on how the design might unfold. Sometimes the design of the gathering requires fine-tuning; other times it needs a major overhaul. This requires hours of inquiry, listening and discussing the *minimum, elegant next step* for how to best engage the community in the work we hope to do together.

During the gathering in Zimbabwe, our seven-person design team met every morning or evening to talk about what happened that day and make decisions about what we should do next. We began our meetings with silence and then checked in about what was working and what needed more attention. We created a collective sketch for the following day. Often, there were several different ideas for how best to proceed. Our challenge was to hold that tension long enough to allow clarity to emerge.

How Do We Learn Together?

At Berkana, we believe the deepest learning takes place when our whole selves are engaged. Learning happens when we:

- Work side-by-side—weeding, cooking, cleaning, building
- Speak our ideas, dreams, hopes and fears—in circle, in small groups, around the fire, with a friend

- Sit in silence together
- Make art, dance or sing together—expressing joy and sorrow through movement and sound
- Share with each other what we've created—films, writing, photographs, art, etc.
- Create and engage in ritual

A robust learning environment emerges from a wildly diverse set of activities, some of which are carefully planned, others which arise out of our respect for one another, friendship and curiosity. Here are testimonies from participants at the Zimbabwe gathering:

> I learned the value of doing things together: making medicines, walking in the bush to look for plants. I was motivated by being appreciated, by having my skills accepted and acknowledged.
>
> *—Sophia, Zimbabwe*

> I had insights about how isolated we are in North America and in my own life... I don't live in community, so I have to have a self-contained village in my apartment. I have to have my own pots and pans, kitchen stuff, leisure things, tools, project equipment. I see what community can bring. It made me realize that I can have more community and less need for stuff.
>
> *—Dan, Canada*

> Cooking with Shammi was really revealing. We just went in there and did what we could with what we had. . . . Every day we had to eat, and every day we had to go and do the same thing over and over again. In the end, I didn't feel so intimidated by this process. It became the norm, not an emergency or some huge challenge. It's the idea of working with what you've got in a place that faces great scarcity.
>
> *—Daniel, Guatemala*

These kinds of insights occur when we realize that learning happens everywhere and when we design in time and space for multiple ways of engaging people.



Participants from India, South Africa, Pakistan and the U.S. prepare lunch for the others.

Sharing in the Daily Work

When a community works together, learning is inevitable. When people cook together, trust within the group arises much more quickly than when meals prepared by others appear magically. Our understanding of the importance of working together has evolved over time. We quickly discovered that we wanted to cook for ourselves, but that was just a point of departure. In order to be true to our values and beliefs, we knew that we needed be conscious about where our food came from and where our waste went.

To organize our work, we relied on a "matrix," a simple chart that listed all the work needed daily for the community to prosper, and people signed up. This self-organizing system is messy. No one is in charge of ensuring work gets done; no one is in charge of an equitable distribution of the difficult tasks. But as a community committed to learning together, we trusted one another to look for what needed doing and step in.

Sometimes we think our time is so precious and the cost of gathering is so great that we must fill every minute with purposeful conversation. Conversation is important, but sharing is much more potent when people are able do real work

together. By building composting toilets, preparing herbal medicines, planting permaculture gardens, upcycling our waste and engaging in various forms of artistic expression, we learn in many ways. The learning never stops, but sometimes it takes place with fewer words.

Creating a Space for Deeper Connection

Designing sufficient free time into a gathering offers participants the opportunity to deepen relationships. These connections often develop into long-lasting friendships and partnerships, especially when they emerge informally. In these open spaces, we learn about ourselves, cultivate compassion and overcome unconscious prejudices that we often hold about people very different from ourselves. A longtime member of the Berkana Exchange explained why this is so important:

> We have created the conditions where we could extract ourselves from our everyday lives: engaging, learning, getting to know each other better and cultivating friendship. The most important thing for me is the quality of the connections that are formed between people. If this happens in an environment of friendship, it makes it even more powerful and allows you to really get to a deeper level of learning with clarity.
>
> —*Sergio, Mexico*

When we make space for activities that invite aliveness—singing, dancing, telling stories, practicing martial arts or sitting in silence together—we invite different qualities of engagement with each other. At Berkana we have learned to include time and space for our hands, hearts, minds and spirits. All are invited, all are required.

Inviting Conversations that Matter

We come together in person so that we can genuinely listen to each other. The quality and depth of conversations—in pairs or small groups, or within the community as a whole—all contribute to the community's vitality. We know that thoughtful design and hosting

of larger group processes leads to deeper conversation and learning.

On the fourth day of the Art of Learning Centering in Zimbabwe, participants ventured into Harare for an afternoon with youth, activists, artists and community organizers at a local coffee shop. We huddled in small groups around tables to discuss opportunities and challenges in Zimbabwe during this period of collapse. We used a modified World Café (**www.theworldcafe.com**) process in which hosts did not impose fixed time limits or insist that people change groups at a particular moment. The conversations that resulted were profound. We moved organically into an evening of celebration through dance and song. One participant described her experience of that afternoon:

> Meeting artists who had been tortured and wondering about how artists work with pain in my country opened up new ways of looking at how people heal. The courage and perseverance of the people we met was inspiring to me... and intense. I have never met anyone who talked about being tortured and it was done in an accessible, gentle way.
>
> —*Vanessa, Canada*



Engaging in deep, authentic conversation is an essential part of Berkana gatherings.

Our way of being together at Berkana has largely been influenced by the Art of Hosting (**www.artofhosting.org**), a global community of practitioners using participative change processes and tools to engage groups in meaningful conversation. According to the Art of Hosting, essential principles of meaningful conversations include:

- Focus on powerful questions that matter to your community
- Enter into conversation by listening deeply to each other, beyond words
- Allow all voices to be heard so collective intelligence can surface
- Choose a process that allows everyone to learn about themselves, each other and the purpose for being together
- Do not fear chaos; it is a creative space where the new order can be born

Working with Difference During the Gathering

Every community is diverse. When we consider how to include the contributions of our many cultures, backgrounds, generations, life experiences and individual ways of being in the world, our gatherings are richer. But creating the conditions in which this diversity is *truly* celebrated and everyone's gifts are valued isn't easy.

One challenge we've faced with Art of Learning Centering gatherings has been working with difference while creating an environment of deep trust. Assumptions about what's important to us given our particular cultural perspective may manifest as offense, rather than as acceptance of otherness and willingness to experiment with our own boundaries and discomfort. Here are a few things we've noticed in working with the diversity of the Exchange community:

- **Time.** Some cultures value promptness over spontaneity or one-on-one conversations and vice versa. What's our community's relationship to time? What agreements will we make about start times, end times and the duration of activities?
- **Dress.** In some places modest dress is part of the cultural or religious tradition. What compromises can we come to as a community about what is appropriate attire for our gathering?
- **Touch.** Certain cultures are very physically affectionate and expressive, whereas in other traditions it is considered taboo for individuals of the opposite sex

to have physical contact. How might we adapt our gatherings so that everyone can participate without violating cultural boundaries?

- **Language.** It is likely at multicultural gatherings that some participants will be non-native speakers of the primary language. It may take these folks longer to express themselves. How can we accommodate varying language levels, while cultivating the patience to hear what everyone has to say?

- **Expression.** Some of us gravitate towards verbal forms of expression, while others feel more comfortable with movement, music or writing. We must make space for this diversity of expressive forms, knowing that some people may feel discomfort with any given mode of expression.

We have had to acknowledge and accommodate these differences, at times agreeing to disagree, at times allowing our opinion to be radically changed. We've all worked at being flexible and understanding with each other, but people may still feel offended or excluded. For instance, during our Mexico gathering, we translated many sessions into Spanish. The following year, group activities were hosted primarily in English, leaving participants for whom English is a second language struggling to express themselves. We are constantly learning how best to invite in the broadest participation, inclusion and gifts of our members.

Another very real challenge is how to address economic disparity and the financial limitations of attendees. Not all members of our community can easily finance their participation in a multi-day gathering. What is a fair financial arrangement for people? How do we decide who gets support and how much? What unspoken expectations and obligations might recipients of subsidies feel? We try to deal with financing in an open, transparent way. We've also learned that when participants pay a portion of the costs for their participation, they take on more responsibility for their own



Sergio Beltran and Elena Letona share their harvest with the rest of the community.

experience. Therefore, we ask participants to "pay what you can and a little bit more."

"Harvesting" Our Learning

Harvesting is the practice of making our learning visible. During Art of Learning Centering gatherings, this means creating images and written records that become part of the community memory. At one Art of Learning Centering, we invited a skilled graphic recorder to create images of the essence of each group session. As we matured as a community, we turned to our own group for harvesting rather than bringing someone in from the outside. We've experimented with mind-mapping, journaling, photo essays, audio and video recordings, poetry, interviews and more. Often, we'll invite teams to take harvesting responsibility for a particular day. We encourage people to use their own unique approach.

After the gathering, we share our harvesting with our broader community and beyond. This means working with all of the *information* we have collected and distilling it into *knowledge* and eventually *wisdom*. Given everyone's busy lives, it takes determination and clarity to create meaningful artifacts in a timely way. We've learned that the key to good harvesting is planning ahead. In order to harvest thoughtfully, we ask:

Logistics Checklist

A brilliantly designed and hosted gathering can fall apart if the community's basic needs are not well attended to, or if people can't find their way there. Here is a list of practicalities that are essential for success.

- ✔ **Budget.** Early on, set a clear budget for food, supplies, lodging and other hard costs related to the gathering. Created in partnership with local hosts, the budget may also include improving facilities or procuring equipment to support your gathering. We've found that it is important to keep the finances visible to all involved in creating the gathering.
- ✔ **Visas.** This has been the Achilles' heel of every gathering we have held. As soon as you've set the date and location, begin working on visas right away.
- ✔ **Booking Travel.** The price of airline tickets can vary as much as 300 percent, and restrictions on changes can increase the cost enormously. Sometimes participants find inexpensive tickets from local sources; other times those prices are still too high. Work with participants to gather multiple ticket prices and then make the most economical decision.
- ✔ **Food.** When gathering in a place where meals are included, food is not a huge issue (although you'll

- What are the processes or structures we want to use to capture our learning during and after the gathering?
- What purpose might the harvest from this gathering serve?
- Beyond our own community, who might benefit from what we learn?

Through gathering together, we give and receive many gifts. It is vital that these gifts be made visible and named so that we can remember why we come together in the first place.

Taking the Learning Home

When participants leave each other after a gathering, how do we know that the experience was transformative or valuable? What we know is that every time the

likely need to accommodate dietary and health restrictions). Most of the time, our community has preferred to cook for itself. We plan menus for as many meals as possible beforehand and invite participants to bring unique ingredients from home. Having a person accountable for meal planning, even if that role rotates, is essential.

✔ **Sleeping.** What are the minimal lodging requirements for your community to be comfortable and fully present during a gathering? Are people willing to camp? How essential is it for the community to stay together overnight? At times when our group has overflowed the number of beds available on site, we've used inexpensive accommodations at nearby inns or hotels. It's worked. But transportation and the loss of evening time together risk creating a sense of division in the community.

✔ **All the rest.** Meeting spaces, meeting supplies. Knowing where medical care is available, local transport. Long before the gathering, we consider each and every logistical aspect of our time together so we're ready to deal with what comes up. The key is establishing a point person (or two) who is responsible for all of these logistical matters, making sure people have the information they need, and creating clear processes to support our work of being and learning together.

Exchange community has come together for the Art of Learning Centering, all of us left knowing we were not alone; we realized we were part of an expanding web of individuals and groups everywhere building healthy and resilient communities. We always part ways with a deeper understanding of ourselves, our work and each other.

Participants in these gatherings have returned home to engage in groundbreaking experiments, expand the reach of their work or reengage in old projects with renewed energy and enthusiasm. After the 2008 Art of Learning Centering, greywater collection started up in Montreal; a community currency program was revitalized in Zimbabwe; organic farming programs expanded in

India. In addition to being exciting developments in and of themselves, these are the indicators that let us know we have hosted a gathering which strengthened community, engendered trust, inspired collective insight and created new possibilities for social change.

Our Invitation

Over the course of the past five years the Berkana community has witnessed, time and again, the transformative power of these kinds of gatherings. We've learned that coming together in this way is actually essential for the health and vitality of our relationships. We know that every time we meet face-to-face, it strengthens our sense of belonging, sparks creativity and learning and creates conditions for success in our individual and collective work.

Berkana continues to experiment and learn in this field of powerful encounters that strengthen communities and transform participants. Exchange members and others are in conversation about our next gathering in Brazil. The community is now shifting into a more self-organized form and so Art of Learning Centering gatherings will likely change some as we try out innovative ideas, involve new people and engage more and more with local hosts. No matter how the experience evolves over time, when we reflect back we realize that Berkana has developed a broad knowledge base and many skills in the design and hosting of successful gatherings. If we build the structures for future gatherings on this strong foundation, we know these experiences will continue to be meaningful for everyone involved.

We are also aware that many others working to create healthy and resilient communities throughout the world have had similar experiences organizing and participating in transformative gatherings. We invite you to join us in this experiment, test out the ideas we have offered in this article and share with us what you are learning. To learn more about past Berkana gatherings and tell us about your own experiences, please visit **www.berkana.org.**

Aerin Dunford is a writer, artist, urban farmer and yoga instructor who has been involved with the work of The Berkana Institute since 2005. From 2006 to 2008 she was a co-steward of the trans-local learning community, the Berkana Exchange. She is currently the Sharing Our Learning Director at Berkana. Aerin has a master's degree in Organizational Management with a focus on leadership and change from SIT Graduate Institute. She lives in Oaxaca de Juárez, Mexico.

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