

**Two Loops --  
Excerpted from**

*After Now*



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

## Berkana's Two Loops

Around the world many agree that we are in a period of change. Whether we speak in terms of climate change, looming global water shortages, overconsumption of natural resources, or stress in our lives — most people who stop to think about it know we are in a shifting time. It became clear that a framework was needed to ask people to consider important questions in their lives like, *What time is it in the world and in my life? Where are we? Where am I?*

Starting as early as 2010 in Japan, and continuing ever since, I have found that Berkana's Two Loops is a helpful way to start a conversation in which people begin to think with each other about all the different kinds of work needed in our world right now and to get more clarity about what it is they have to offer.

This simple model really isn't a theory of change, as some people sometimes refer to it. It's a map for thinking about what is important to each of us now and where our work lands in a larger system. It was co-discovered and co-created by a number of us from Berkana who helped organize a global learning village at Castle Borl in Slovenia in the summer of 2002.

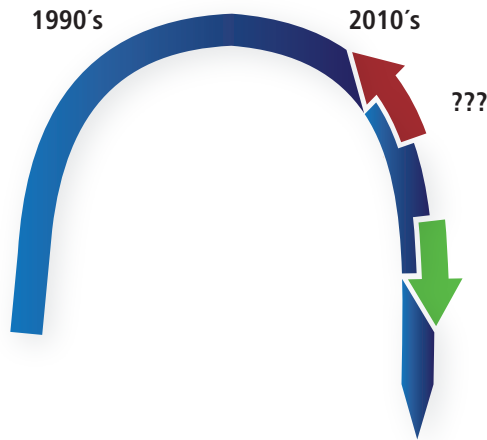
The Two Loops has proved to be an effective way to help people think about what's going on and where they stand.

And I mean "where they stand" literally! I remember the first time I used Two Loops in Japan. It was a sunny day in May 2010; we went out into a courtyard area next to the meeting room we were using at Tokyo University. With everyone in a big circle, I laid the two loops out on the ground with rope, introducing and explaining as I went along:

There's a curve that life generally follows. Things get better and better, there are some bumps along the way, things peak, they fall

apart. Sometimes it's a long curve, sometimes a short one. Nothing lasts forever. Conditions change. This is a simple picture of our reality.

Back in the latter half of the 20th century most people thought we were on an upswing — things were getting better and better. But such curves don't go on forever. They peak, and then they decline (as in the green arrow below). When that happens, some people push to reverse the decline (the red arrow) in order to get back to the “better and better” stage.



Let me tell a bit of the story from Japan in the context of these two loops. I mentioned the Japan of the 1990s back in Chapter 2, but want to expand on it here and look at it through the Two Loops lens.

When the bubble of a super growth economy burst in Japan in the mid-90s, many thought it was just a temporary setback. Many thought they just needed to keep on doing what they were doing and everything would get better again. “Surely we will get back on track.” In the devastating Kobe earthquake of 1995, most people felt that Japan just needed to pursue economic prosperity with more vigor and commitment. For most, Japan was still on the upward swing of the first loop above. Keep going forward. Get back on track.

As the new century was born, some people were wondering if economic prosperity really was the key to happiness. Those who had been successful in the post-war economy were retiring and going hiking in the mountains. The younger people, those born in the final

decades of the last century, weren't stepping into the economic machine in the same way their parents had. The people in their 40s and 50s were left "holding the bag" with little support from those older or younger than them.

By 2010, there was a sense that things were not working, that they were falling apart: a growing aging population, many of whom no longer lived with extended families; cracks showing in the public school system; economic stagnation; more and more pressures on the health care system; a general sense of malaise. Things just weren't as smooth and clear as they had seemed. Most people still thought they should push to get back to the old normal — to follow the red arrow back up the slope. Not everyone agreed with that, but many people did. Still, in many circles, people began to speak in terms of old and new paradigms.

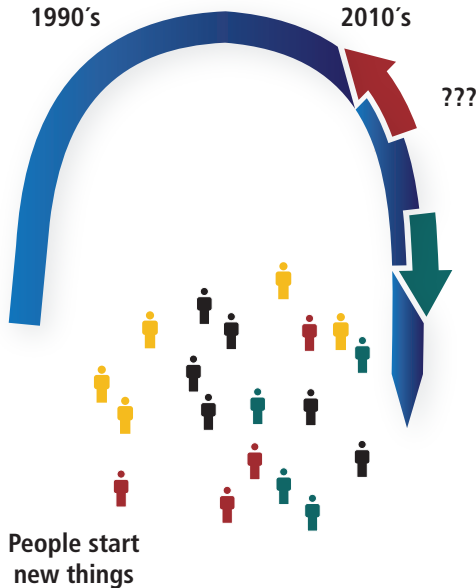
Later, after the Triple Disasters in Japan, the green arrow — the decline — became much more visible.

What if what's needed is stabilizing existing systems and letting the parts that no longer serve us fall away? What if we're not trying to return to the old normal, but trying to create a new one? What if we are beginning to let go of the old paradigm of domination and control as we work to create more life affirming ways of living with each other and our small planet?

In Tohoku, especially in Fukushima and in the coastal communities, the old normal was gone. It was a time of great loss and fear. But there were also openings, even excitement, about what was now possible. People were often a bit reluctant to talk about the excitement part — they seemed to feel they were being almost frivolous and disrespectful when they admitted they were having more fun than they ever had in their lives. But both existed side-by-side — the grief and the delight.

In the fall of 2012, Hakozaiki-san from Itatemura took me through a PowerPoint he had created. The PowerPoint compared Tokyo and Fukushima in terms of the traditional measure of progress — GNP. In the years before 3.11, Fukushima kept falling further and further behind Tokyo and when the disasters were brought into the picture, the gap between Tokyo and Fukushima looked insurmountable. Hakozaiki-san suggested it was clear that Fukushima needed to

find a new measure of progress. Perhaps happiness, not money, could be used to create a map for the future. Let go of the old. Create the new.



In the first decade of this century, more people had begun to step off the line of the old paradigm.

They started new things in many different arenas. Some left Tokyo to live in rural areas. Others began private schools that operated with different principles and values than public schools. Some experimented with renewable energy. Others set up small businesses that didn't require living in major urban areas.

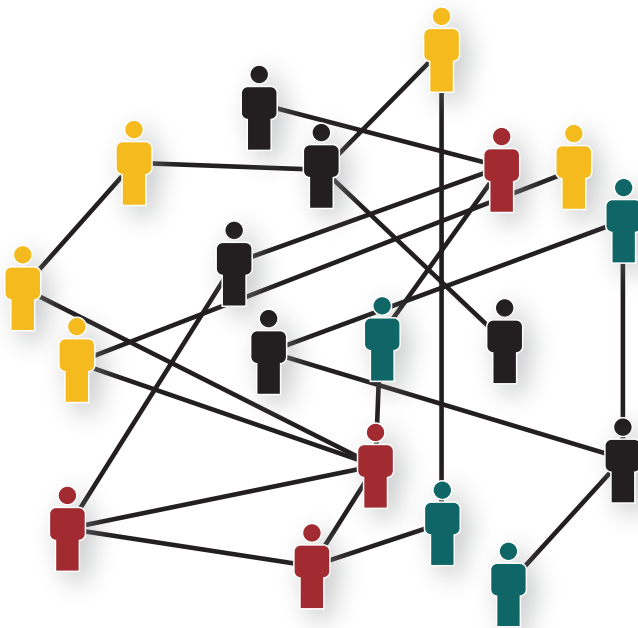
This shift intensified after the Triple Disasters.

In the disaster area itself, people realized they couldn't wait for the government to make everything okay. They had to step forward themselves. I remember the first volunteer center I visited in April of 2011. I mentioned it back in Chapter 2. It was in Ishinomaki and the people there said, "We don't know how to do this. We're teachers. We work in a school. But someone had to step forward and begin to organize centers for the many volunteers and the donations from all over Japan."

And it wasn't just the volunteer centers. As rescue and recovery efforts created a base of stability, so much more work was needed. Support for the people in emergency shelters, support for children, support for the elderly, new businesses, new housing, and on and on and on. The list was endless and people stepped forward.

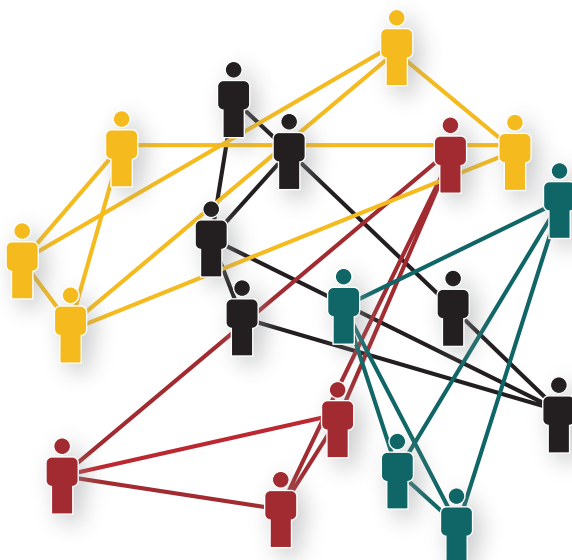
Most of what they were stepping into was chaotic and complex. There were no rules or guidebooks. But they had to start. They had to address what they saw in front of them. They had to learn as fast as they could. Initially most people worked in small teams in their local area, quickly working on the issues at hand. But as 2011 turned into 2012, people began to reach out to each other across the region. They began to form networks.

These initial networks were important. They enabled people to share information and experiences with each other. They talked about what they were doing — their successes, their failures — and about the changes happening inside of themselves. They began to learn from each other and see where they overlapped. This kind of initial connection was essential. It helped them remember that they were not alone.



## Creating the New

Soon, people who were working on the same themes started to reach out to each other, connecting within communities and between communities to share their experiences and generate new learnings. They began to form networks and to create groups and associations of people tackling similar issues, spread over different communities, businesses and organizations. Forming what is often referred to as “communities of practice,” “social labs,” or “co-creation labs.” The network pictured above began to shift into something more like this:



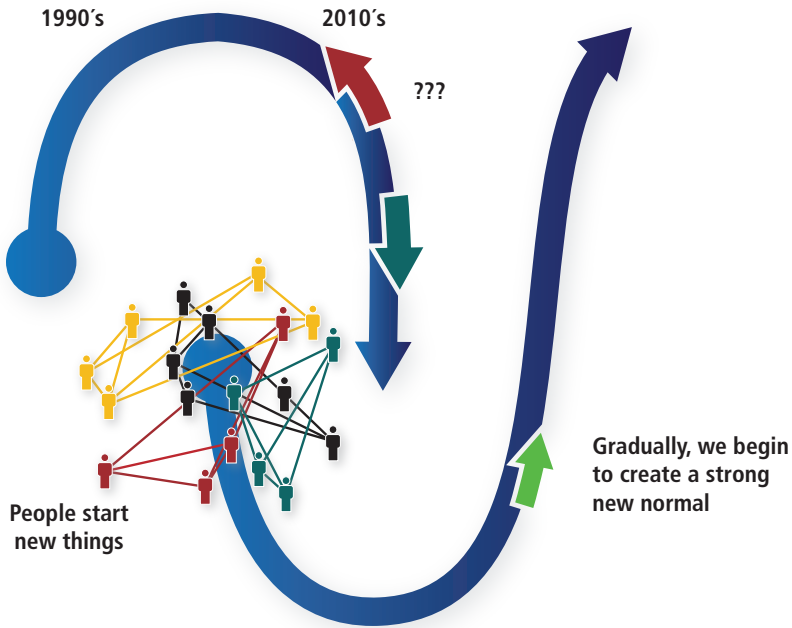
## Social Labs and Communities of Practice

At this point, the connections became more refined. People started to seek out those working in the same areas (represented by the colors above), engaged in similar work. The learning started to deepen. Local change began to open the way for broader social transformation.

In Tohoku, some of the themes were very specific: radiation decontamination, growing healthy foods, and support for elderly residents. Other times they were broader: community reconstruction, finding new vision, creating indicators of success. In every case the

purpose was the same — bringing people together to learn from each other’s experience in order to create something new that makes the communities better. Together, they began to create a new paradigm — they were discovering a new normal for AfterNow. They were building on the long road.

Can this actually happen? Yes, it can. It takes time. It is messy and chaotic, but even still, AfterNow starts to emerge. It isn’t — and I suspect can’t be — carefully organized. Change is not an orderly process. Often it is only in looking back that we can see progress. Using the Two Loops to map the territory can be helpful in finding our way.

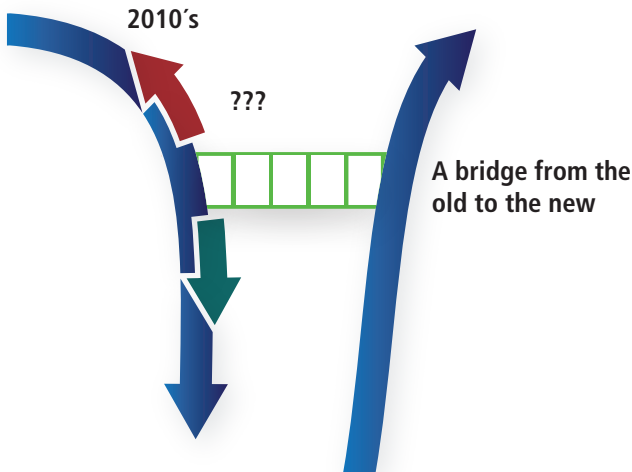


Let me give an example of this phenomenon in a US context. Back in the 70s, some people started “going back to the land.” They bought farms and began to grow their own food and, like most innovators and entrepreneurs, at first most of them failed. Some got discouraged and quit. Others kept at it, and kept learning. In 1974,

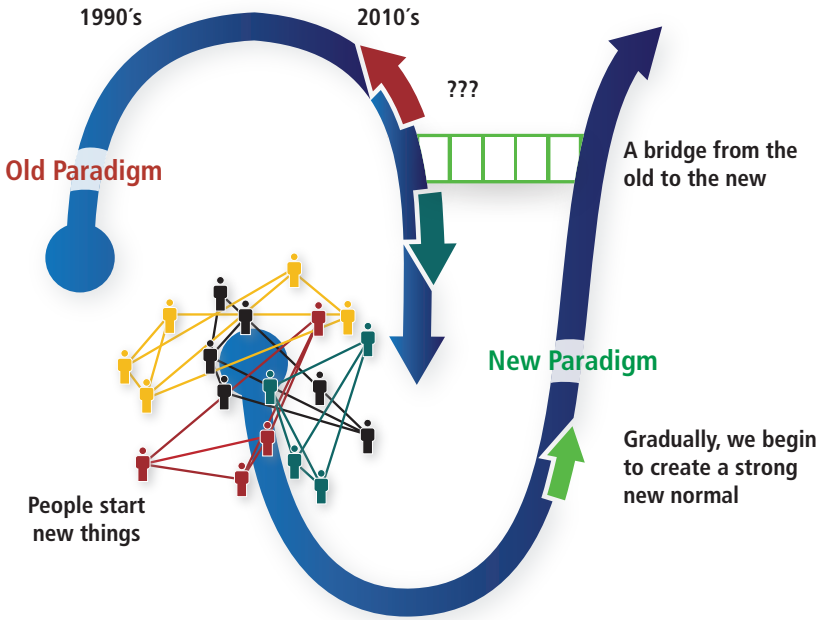


I invited poet and farmer Wendell Berry to speak at the EXPO '74 Environmental Symposium Series in Spokane. He said it was not only possible, but necessary to find more ways of producing food locally. His remarks led to the formation of Tilth, an early community of practitioners committed to local food production in Washington State. They started talking about what else was needed now. Eventually, among other things, they started working with other people living in urban areas to create Farmers Markets. When I co-founded the Spokane Farmers in the early 90s, it was a new and exciting addition to the community.

Now, almost 40 years after the local foods movement began, “buying local” is a common practice. Costco has a reputation for selling local foods whenever possible. Most supermarkets have local foods sections. All these changes made it possible for people to easily buy local food. Many didn't go through any sort of systemic analysis of the benefits of eating local food — it just made sense. New choices for local food became visible — and people began to cross over to the new.



The diagram on the next page can help us see what's going on and can be a useful way for us to figure out where our own work resides. Though as with all maps, it can't show all the variables.



Here are some other things to keep in mind:

1. Much of what we do doesn't work! Things fall apart. We have to persevere, take one step at a time.
2. The social labs and communities of practice pictured in the diagram for creating the new are needed at all stages of the process.
3. People in the old paradigm also need to be learning with each other, as do the people building bridges.
4. Likewise, bridge building — inviting others to try something new — is going on throughout.
5. Finally, it is helpful to keep the whole model, the whole system in heart/mind. Many different people are doing the work they are called to do; offering their gifts and insights is what sets the stage for transformation.

I will often lay the two loops and the bridge out on the floor and ask people to go stand where they are now working. I then invite them into conversation with those nearby with the following questions:

- What is your work?
- How does your work help the overall system?
- What can you offer and what do you need from other parts of the system?

I have found that people see this as a helpful way to think about their own work — right now. I know it helps me release the tension that builds up in my body when I try, unsuccessfully, to figure everything out in my head. It helps me relax a bit into the chaos swirling around me.

Like the other frameworks introduced briefly in this chapter, Two Loops helps people see their work and their life as part of a larger pattern. Transformation happens both with agonizing slowness and in the blink of an eye. The work of transformation takes perseverance, persistence and patience. Two Loops helps to make the larger system visible. It also makes it easier to see the importance of the many different kinds of work required in a period of transformation. There are several other frameworks I want to mention as well. I use them less frequently than Two Loops, but each of them offers a way to see the larger system.