

Berkana's Two Loops

It quickly 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 your life? Where are we? Where are you?” 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 their world right now and to get more clarity about what it is they have to offer.

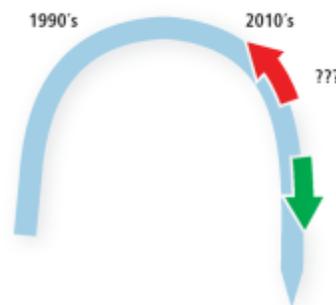
This simple model really isn’t a theory of change, as some people sometimes refer to it. It’s a map for thinking about what is important to each of us now and where our work lands in a larger system. It was co-discovered and co-created by a number of us from Berkana who were part of a global learning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

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 time of shift. 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 and 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 in order to and to get back to the “better and better” stage (the red arrow).



Let me tell a bit of the story from Japan in the context of these two loops.

Back at the beginning of the 1990s in Japan, many thought they just needed to keep on doing what we were doing and everything would get better again. When the bubble of a super growth economy had burst in Japan in the mid-90s, many thought it was just a temporary setback. “Surely we will get back on track.” And in the devastating Kobe earthquake of 1995, most people felt that Japan just needed to pursue economic prosperity with more vigor and commitment. But as the new century was born, people started 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 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 those younger than them.

By 2010, there was a sense of that things were not working, that they were falling apart: pressures caused by an 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. But most people 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 our work is to stabilize existing systems and let 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 many of the coastal communities, the old normal is gone. It is a time of great loss and fear, but there are also openings, even excitement, about what has been opened, what is now possible. People were often a bit reluctant to talk about the excitement part – it seemed to people that they were being almost frivolous and disrespectful when they admitted they were having more fun than they ever had in their lives. But both excited side-by-side – the grief and the delight.

In the fall of 2012, I remember my friend Hakozaki-san from Itatemura, mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 8, taking 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. Hakozaki-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 began stepping off the line of the old paradigm:



They were starting new things in many different areas. Some were leaving Tokyo to live in rural areas. Others were beginning private schools that operated with different principles and values than public schools. Some were experimenting with renewable energy. Others were setting 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. 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. We stood up."

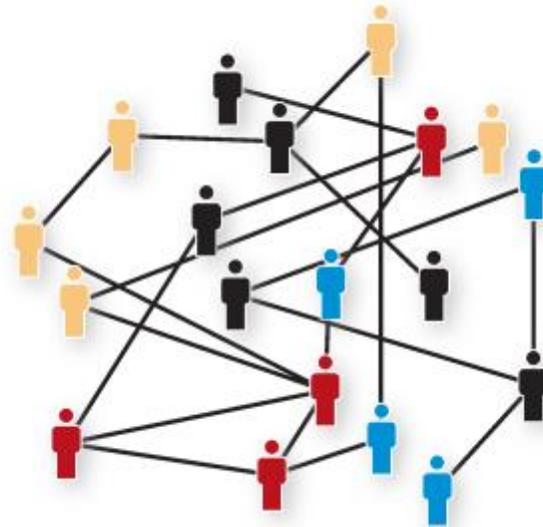
And it wasn't just volunteer centers. As rescue and recovery efforts created a base of stability, so much more work was needed. Support for the people in emergency shelters, support for children, support for the elderly, new businesses, beginning to build new housing, and on and on and on. The list was 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 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 with each other. They talked about what they were doing – their successes, their failures – and about the changes that were happening inside of themselves. They began to learn from each other and

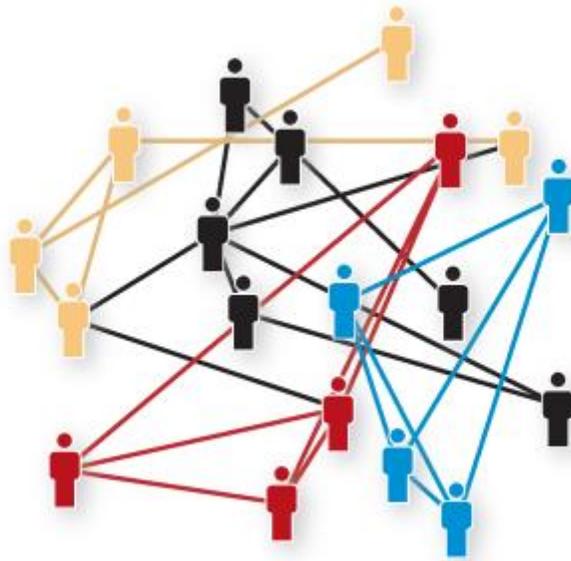
see where they overlapped. This kind of initial connection was essential. It helped them remember that they are not alone.

Creating the New



People started seeing that this networking alone wasn't enough. The people who were working on the same themes started to reach out to each other, connecting within communities and between communities. People engaged with the same issues or themes began to connect with each other to share their experiences and create new learnings. They began 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

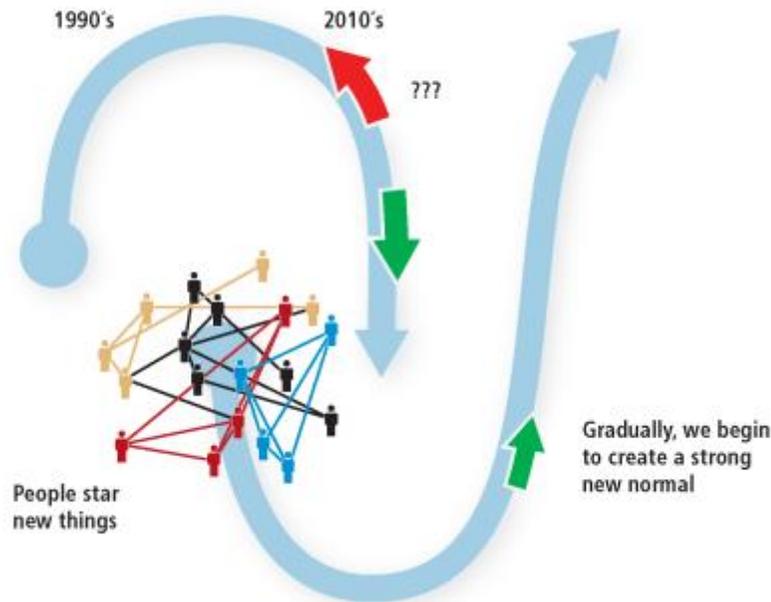


At this point, the connections became more refined. People started to seek out those working in the same areas (colors), engaged in similar work. The learning started to deepen. Local change began to open the way for broader social transformation.

In Tohoku, some of the themes were very specific: radiation decontamination, growing healthy foods, and support for elderly residents. Other times they were broad: community reconstruction, finding new vision, creating indicators of success. In every case the purpose was the same – bringing practitioners together to learn from each other’s experience in order to create something new that makes the communities better. As many of these communities of practice – formal and informal – were organized, they could transform the whole region.

Together, they began to create in new paradigm – where they were discovering a new normal for AfterNOW. They were building a new long road.

The Two Loops:



“Can this actually happen?” Yes, it can.

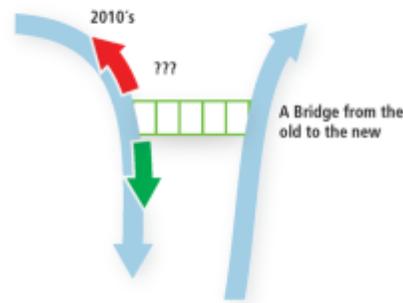
It takes time. It is a long road. It is messy and chaotic, but AfterNOW starts to emerge. It isn't – and I suspect can't be – carefully organized. Change is not an orderly process. Often it is only in looking back that we can see the steps, patterns and stages. The “Two Loops” maps the territory and can be helpful in finding our way.

Let me give one 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 Tilth¹, an early community of practitioners committed to local food production. 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 Farmers Market in Spokane in the early 90s, it was a new and exciting addition to the community.

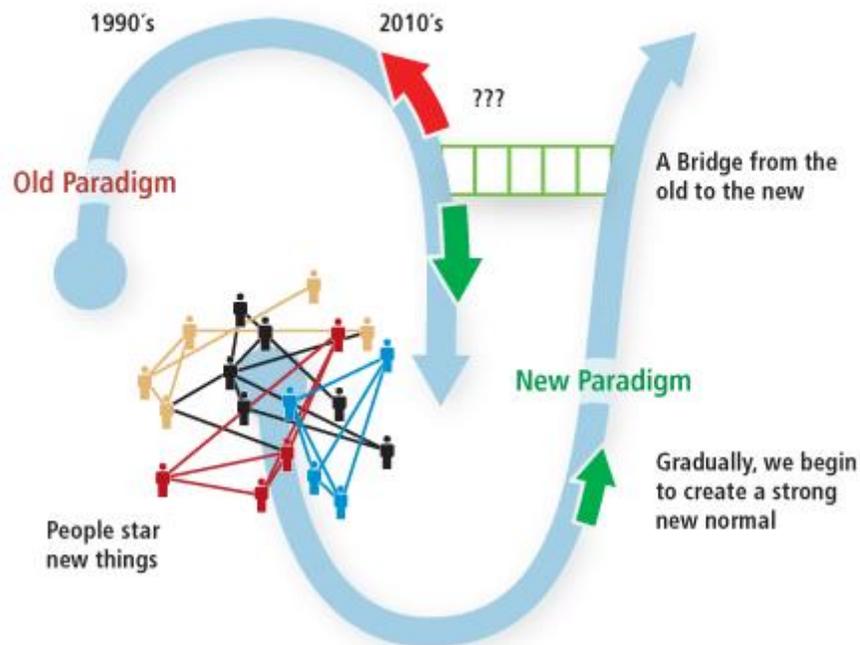
¹ A brief history of the Tilth movement is available at <http://seattletilth.org/about/abriefhistoryoftilth>. The YouTube Video of Wendell Berry and Bob Stilger from 1974 is available at http://bit.ly/wendell_bob_1974

Now, almost 40 years after the local foods movement began, “buying local” is a common practice. Most supermarkets have local foods sections. Costco has a reputation for selling local foods whenever possible. 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 were illuminated, building a bridge so people could easily cross to the new.



Of course, life doesn’t work like this simple diagram.

The diagram below, as messy as it is, shows more of what’s going on. It also presents a kind of orderliness, a pattern, which is not necessarily visible while we’re in the midst of it, living it. But perhaps knowing about these patterns and stages can help guide us when we are trying to shift systems.



This map is a simple way of thinking about the different kinds of action required for social transformation. It 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:

In getting to the new, the social transformation, there are three separate, yet connected, vital ways of working:

- Stabilizing things in the old paradigm while letting go of that which is no longer needed.
- Creating new possibilities.
- Building bridges that illuminate and access these new possibilities.

There are some additional aspects to keep in mind:

1. Much of what we do doesn't work! Things fall apart. We have to persevere, taking one step at a time.
2. The social labs and communities of practice pictured in the diagram for creating the new are needed all over the place.
3. People in the old paradigm also need to be learning with each other, as do people building bridges.
4. Likewise, bridge building – inviting others to try something new – is going on all over.

5. Finally, it is helpful to keep the whole model, the whole system in heartmind. Many different people doing the work they are called to do, offering their gifts and insights is what sets the stage for transformation.

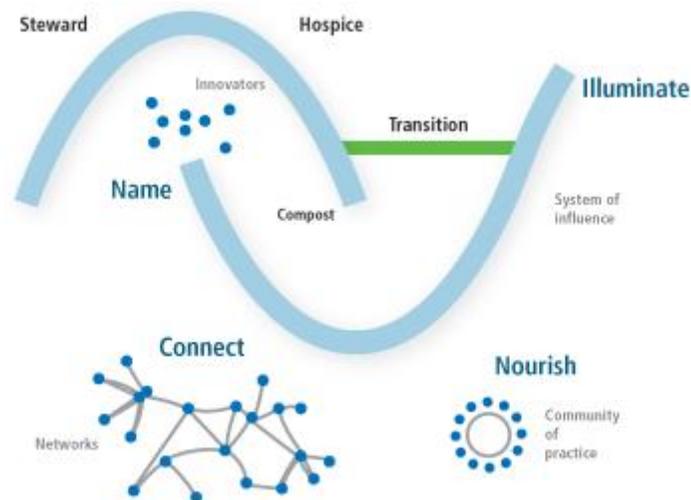
I will often lay the two loops and the bridge out on the floor and ask people to go stand where they are now working. I then invite them into conversation with those nearby with the following questions: What is your work? How does your work help the overall system? What can you offer and what do you need from each other?

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

Two Loops has been one of the foundation pieces for my work in Japan and elsewhere. There are a few other frameworks I use which I want to introduce now as well.

Berkana's Name-Connect-Nourish-Illuminate

As colleagues and I continued to work throughout the disaster area and across Japan, we became aware of the “spottiness” of our efforts – good work in many different places, but how might it lead to a shift at the systems level. I was reminded of our work at Berkana when we started thinking about the progression from networks to communities of practice to systems of influence. We built a model on top of the Two Loops framework:



People who have stepped off the “business as usual” track of the first loop are early innovators who are trying new things. Often those things don’t even have a common name in the beginning. Eventually a **name** begins to emerge. Because of that name, because of common vocabulary, people begin to **connect** with each other, forming loose networks.

Sometimes those they begin to deepen their interactions and develop some disciplined ways of learning together: they become communities of practice and **nourish** each other's work. As this continues, they come to a point where they are ready to share, and they begin to **illuminate** their work to others, and begin to create systems of influence.

At Berkana we believe that these parallel and overlapping progressions – name, connect, nourish and illuminate – and networks, communities of practice, systems of influence were important ways to thinking about transformation. As I've continue to use these frameworks, I've realized that what's most important is creating these systems of influence and that there are many ways of getting there.

