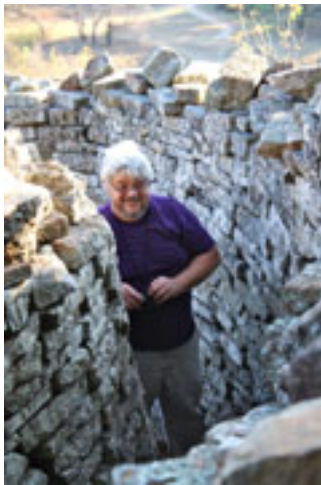


Profiles of Courage in Zimbabwe

More than a thousand years ago, they came from the north of Africa, leaving the violence and seeking peace. They came and they settled in an area that became known as the Great Zimbabwe, a kingdom from 1200-1500 AD which is estimated to have had a population of more than 10,000 and famous, today, for its unique stone architecture. Little is known about Great Zimbabwe. There was no written tradition amongst the people who came to be known as the Shona. Some speculate that perhaps somewhere, lost in the archives describing the travel of Arabic traders across the African continent, there might still be records and more information.



I've just finished a week at the Great Zimbabwe, in the company of a little more than 30 passionate, committed, insightful and experienced Zimbabweans who are the leaders of a number of nonprofit initiatives. My colleagues Marianne Knuth and Simone Poutnik offered a four-day training in the Art of Participatory Leadership under the guidance of Sabi Consulting, which is the steward of a network of nonprofits called Profile. When I arrived in Zim a little more than a week ago, it just felt good to be home as the spring

Jacaranda trees release the majesty of their purple blossoms against the African sky. I realized that I've been to this country more than any other in the last decade, except my own. Zimbabwe has been a great teacher for me. It has shown how people can come together to develop resilience in times of collapse.



My mind makes up stories when I don't know what to expect. I try to stop it – but it has a will of its own. I arrived not knowing what to expect of this week. Will the political stasis of Zanu PF and MDC hold a grip over this training? So many have fled from Zimbabwe in the last decade, who is left that will come to this training? Will they be eager to engage and learn or will they be reserved and cautious? Who will they be? Especially given that my work these past two years has concentrated in Japan, will I be able to speak and host in this culture in a way that is useful? What will happen?

I'm just humbled and amazed. WOW. What an incredible group of people. Each day as I learned more of their stories and their work I just felt deep gratification. They are the people who are tirelessly working with what they have to build resilient communities. AND, much of their work is confined within somewhat traditional structures where

hierarchy is the only organizing pattern and where the priorities of the donor dictate many of the parameters of their work.

It was a difficult and demanding week. They came expecting to be trained in participatory leadership, and found themselves sitting in a circle. Some of them arrived wanting to know our definitions and expecting us to be carefully articulating frameworks and theories. Instead, we invited them into exploration and questions. Some wanted us to give them answers – we said good questions are more important.



In the Art of Participatory Leadership, we believe that a participatory experience is the key component of the learning field. By the end of the first day, some of the participants were asking *is your only theory one of keeping us confused??*

As our time together continued, there were many times of push back: *people here learn by being instructed – they are not asked questions, they are told answers? People want to be delegated clear tasks with clear performance measures. We're not all that free, ourselves, to ask questions: our donors tell us what they want us to do and how to measure it or our funding will be revoked. In Zimbabwe's crises, too many of our staff are just here because they need a job – they are not that committed and some are not all that well educated. What is motivation for participation when the Director is paid eight times as much as others on the staff?*



But beneath these questions was a yearning, and a knowing. Some of our language didn't make all that much sense, but as we hung in there together, there started to be a listening beneath the words. I think the participants were beginning to connect what we said was possible with their own sense of yearning. And the listening wasn't all one-sided: I certainly came to understand more and more how thoughtful, careful and strategic people will need to be in implementing more participatory

learning processes in organizations.

In many ways part of this is the continuing burden of colonialism where people here were told that their own indigenous knowing and their own ways of building and maintaining community were woefully inadequate. The white experts from the north would organize things in a proper sort of way. They brought with them bureaucracy for organization and new ways to measure, control and account for progress. The colonialists also brought a

view that the resources and bounty of the world were there for the use of the most intelligent and powerful.

These views have been super-imposed on top of indigenous knowing and don't fit. But formal education in Zimbabwe is based on learning from someone who stands in front of a classroom and tells them day-after-day that the world is mechanical and predictable. Someone has to be in charge and tell others what to do. Policies and procedures will guide actions under which people will use the authority delegated to them by the person at the top to achieve pre-determined results.

TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP THE WORLDVIEW	PARTICIPATORY LEADERSHIP
Mechanistic - linear & causal	Organic - complex, unpredictable & adaptive
Establish Policies & Procedures	Get agreement on Purpose & Principles
The person with positional power has the answer we will use	Honest conversation reveals more satisfactory solutions
Leading by giving instructions & delegating tasks	Leading by listening and creating conditions for telling the truth
Management by Control	Leadership by trust
Fixed hierarchy & Silos	Teams, Networks, Dynamic hierarchy
Motivation via carrot & stick	Motivation through engagement & ownership
Chairing Meetings/Writing Reports	Hosting Dialog / Engaging with results
Decisions made by positional power for reasons that are often unclear	Decisions made by those most appropriate, with visibility & transparency
Working without clear purpose and jumping to solutions	Collective clarity of purpose is invisible leader
Pre-determined indicators guide all action	Full engagement with the system - noticing what is really happening - guides all action.

We worked in this dance between *the really old* - indigenous knowing, *the old* - traditional leadership from the colonial and modern era, and *the new* - participatory leadership to co-

discover what would serve Zimbabwe well, now. Each offer insights into ways of seeing the world and ways of being in the world. The chart I drew, above, is pretty dichotomous chart and can lead to either/or thinking. That's not really useful for many reasons. What is useful, I believe, is seeing how participatory leadership can be brought in to organizations to open up new insights, new possibilities, and new patterns of accountable action.

Those who came are more than able to work together to create a new Zimbabwe. They have the fire and the will. I suspect that many from this past week will take some of our ideas, structures, processes and tools and begin to adapt them for use in their own organizations. I hope they will continue to find ways to support each other in stepping into



this area of practice. I know they have dedicated their lives to their work. And I know they have perseverance!

See this blog and others on related topics at www.resilientcommunities.org.

Please also visit www.resilientjapan.org to see how work from this spirit is arising in Japan and www.berkana.org to for a broader view of what happens when we begin to work with life, rather than against it, to create healthy and resilient communities.

Bob Stilger, PhD
October 2, 2011
bob@berkana.org

pictures courtesy of Simone Poutnik!