

WITNESSING THE TRANSFORMATION, CO-CREATING PEACEFUL CULTURE, WEAVING THREADS OF COOPERATION:

OTEPIC, INTERNATIONAL PEACE INITIATIVES, MEMOS – LEARNING FROM HISTORY,
BEYOND BOUNDARIES, GLOBAL CAMPUS, CENTER FOR COUNCIL, GLOBAL ECOVILLAGE NETWORK AFRICA



*“If you are coming to help me, you are wasting your time.
But if you are coming because your liberation is bound up with mine,
Then let us work together.” - Lila Watson, Australian Indigenous*

Call and Response

This is the story of my journey to Africa in the winter of 2013-2014, following a calling much bigger than myself and yet intimately personal. I am being asked to grow up, to become a global citizen, a co-worker and guide in these times of transformation. I am learning about call and response... there are many callings in the world, so many needs at this time, and so many potential responses.

Africa attracts me because the crisis is so raw... so clearly can I witness the effects of our consumer culture on social and ecological welfare, so poignantly can I feel the human suffering in a culture that has been suppressed and often uprooted from its original intelligence and ways. And still, a unique and vibrant humanity persists and shines through. This was a journey into my heart, a global, political heart, opened through contact with the people, place and story.

I offer this 'report' from my journey as a thank you, to the many who have supported me in so many ways. I offer it as my 'response' to the journey, a harvest of experience and learning.

With Gratitude,
Siri Gunnarson

AFRICA SONGLINE; BACKGROUND

I first came to Kenya last winter with a small team, a pilgrimage of Beyond Boundaries (BB) an intergenerational response team, bearing witness and offering ourselves in service at 'watering holes' – acupuncture points among communities around the world that are living into a new way of earth stewardship and global community 'beyond boundaries'.



We were invited by Daktari Karambu Ringera, founder of International Peace Initiatives in Kenya, who after attending a Nature of Council training wanted to introduce council to her community project and build a BB 'peace hut' – a natural earth bag building, a space to listen, share and come together in prayer. It was a time of learning for me, a new way of cross-cultural work, and a true cooperation. Witnessing the people and place, I asked myself about my role as an outsider. When is it right to intervene, to offer... what serves healing and health?

After the BB project with IPI in 2010, I visited young community leader Philip Munyasia of OTEPIC (Organic Technology Extension and Promotion of Initiatives Center). I first heard of Philip while in Auroville with Beyond Boundaries, and later auspiciously met him at Tamera Healing Biotope in Portugal. I continued to support and collaborate with Philip for the past four years through the work and network of Tamera and the Global Campus. His place and people moved me; it gave me hope to be around young people from the slums who have stepped out of idleness in pursuit of a new way of cooperation with life. In their environment I saw the same social, material and economic issues that can be found in any slum in any so-called 'developing' country. With their passion and dedication I felt the possibility for real and radical transformation.

OCTOBER 2013 – JANUARY 2014 SERVICE JOURNEY HIGHLIGHTS

I knew I would return, and in the beginning 2013 I began to hear specific requests and see opportunities that I knew merited a response. I made a plan, raised the funds and chose to travel to Africa for three months as a Beyond Boundarian and as a coordinator of the Global Campus, Tamera - an experiential education and international network of regional models for regenerative and peaceful living.

- **OTEPIC: Global Campus, October 15 – November 15, 2013, Kitale, Kenya** – One-month time of cross-cultural contact and collaboration. I was part of a leadership team for our international group and coordinated a permaculture design course and the first steps on OTEPIC's new land.
- **OTEPIC Peace Hut Building Project, November & December 2013, Kitale, Kenya** – Two-month project supporting the builders we trained last year to become teachers and pass the technology on.
- **IPI (International Peace Initiative Center), November 8-15, 2013, January 1 – 6, 2014, Meru**
I returned to facilitate follow up council trainings for the staff and community, and support them as they bring council practice into their organization.
- **Global Eco Village Network Africa Gathering, December 9-15, 2012, Thika, Kenya** - I came with my cooperation partners to bear witness to this remarkable network that is emerging.
- **Council Training for Memos, January 7 -17, 2014, Kigali, Rwanda** – Responding to a call from Rwandan peacemakers, I co-led a five-day council training with Jared Siede, director of Center for Council.

OTEPIC GLOBAL CAMPUS MONTH

When I first visited OTEPIC I realized the threshold they are in – growing from a youth project in the slums towards creating a permaculture education and research center and eco-village community. I envisioned a group of international volunteers coming around the project at this critical moment to bear witness and offer support. This vision was coherent with the bigger call for the Global Campus, and for one month, nine ‘peace-workers in training’ came to OTEPIC. Simultaneously four other groups were in Portugal, Israel-Palestine, Colombia and Brazil, creating cross-cultural community and studying through physical work projects and regional networking.

OTEPIC has chosen to work in Bidii, an impoverished region on the outskirts of Kitale. Kitale is the headquarters for the Kenya Seed Company, which supplies most of East Africa with hybrid seeds. We witnessed the effects of deforestation and monoculture, and the effects on the people who live on this degraded land and survive on seasonal harvesting work. Facing the complexity of the needs we witnessed and heard from the neighbors, we applied permaculture techniques to observe and monitor the land, and create a plan towards a sustainable model.



Our Global Campus work month was centered on their 10 hectare ‘new land’: listening, planning, dreaming and working towards the manifestation of OTEPIC’s big vision. We invited an experienced permaculture teacher, Mugove Walter of Malawi, to lead us in an ‘Integrated Land Use Design’ time. Local community members and neighbors of the new land joined OTEPIC co-workers and us. We studied the lay of the land, discovered the native plants and looked at the bigger systems in the area. The neighbors brought good information and big enthusiasm as they participated and responded to the emerging vision.

PEACE HUT & EARTHWORKS ON THE NEW LAND

As soon as Philip heard of the Peace Hut in Meru, he knew he wanted to one in his future community. When we began to make plans for this collective work time, it was clear: OTEPIC’s first building project would be a peace hut. Simultaneously we dug a pond by hand, which provided soil for the hut and created the first element towards sustainable water management. With flooding during the rain season and drought in the dry season, it is clear changes have to be made in the whole watershed.



These complimentary projects of hut and pond became an experiential educational worksite with 30 – 40 people. We knew a few of the co-workers of OTEPIC were really engaged, and we focused with them, handing on responsibility as they gained understanding in the building techniques. Rain forced us inside some afternoons, and we had time to look deeper into the issue of water, the techniques, and simply listen to each other. We had a council inviting the vision for the hut, what they feel its purpose is, and what might be meaningful decoration. It is a place to meet, to pray, to sing, for the community to listen together.



For me, this was an incredible learning experience. I was a white female project leader supporting two Kenyan men to become job site leaders in a big community volunteer worksite. I was holding a lot of responsibility and overview, and knew I had to pass all of this on to my Kenyan co-workers. I realized beyond everything, it was about heart contact with my co-workers, and I moved from 'correction' to 'inquiry'... from 'leading' towards true cross-cultural collaboration.

KITALE WOMEN'S CIRCLE

During the Global Campus we touched on many 'hot issues' that did not have the space or trust to fully open. During the time after the Global Campus five of us stayed longer, working on projects and deepening in contact. The women of OTEPIC asked for us to hold women's circles, and they invited the neighbor women to join. During these circles we listened to deep stories from the woman, many for the first time speaking their grief and troubles. In this vulnerability solidarity arose, and our gatherings were colored with song, theatre and dance.



Many women have visions for change in their community, and there is a full invitation from Philip and OTEPIC to use the organization, and the new Peace Hut, as a platform for their meetings and future developments. There is a need of financial support and leadership for this group, and I hope to find support and encourage Daktari Karambu from IPI to visit the project as a trainer.

COUNCIL WITH INTERNATIONAL PEACE INITIATIVES

I returned to IPI following the call for council, first from a staff member who asked for more training and then the Director Karambu invited me to come and do a follow up training with her staff and an introduction to council for local young mothers". Alexis Slutzki, Council Trainer and BB ally, joined me.

IPI is a peace project responding to its community, through the leadership of Daktari. There is a vision of holistic living through many strong projects: IPI has more than 20 kids in the children's home, a handicrafts department, adult education for tailoring and catering, and an organic garden. The vision and work has a big community impact and continues to grow; now the focus is on the new 'eco center'.

"Africa is living someone else's story. We have allowed this and are complaining along the way. It is time to reclaim, to dare to dream, to do, to be. We are choosing our dreams to be bigger than our fears." - Daktari

When BB introduced council to the large and diverse IPI staff in 2011 many people joyfully jumped into the practice, organizing more councils, offerings for the youth and children. Others were understandably skeptical, even distrustful of the process. Regardless, for the last year they have been sitting in council together every week and integrating council in their community.

A 'key moment' came when we took away all elements of council, asked 'how do you already know council in your culture and history, and what forms and practices serve (IPI) here and now?' In this moment the spirit of council arose without form and we (the two outsiders, the 'leaders) sat back and watched. After some time, the center piece and talking piece were brought back in. The group had unanimously decided to continue to practice council together as an organization and an emerging community. I was grateful this issue came out and we were able to turn into it together, modeling how council can be used when there are hot issues in the community that are difficult to talk about. After this first training Daktari invited us back to facilitate an IPI year review and visioning session. We wove in council, along with a visioning meditation and inquiry into responsibility.

GLOBAL ECO-VILLAGE NETWORK AFRICA

In December I traveled on to the GEN Africa conference. This emerging network of eco-villages, community projects, activists and artists is working for change all over of Africa. In the opening statement Kosha Joubert, president of GEN-International, said, "There is a different dream coming alive... working with the self-organizing power of love." "We need to transform all places to regenerative places."

I was impressed by the heart and intelligence of the people, and their way of working together. It was inspiring to hear from people all over Africa, and their commitment to working together with their communities to remember who they are and work together for the future.

It was a gift to be there with my co-workers from OTEPIC, IPI and Tamera. Four of the youth from OTEPIC participated in a short 'Introduction to Eco-village Design Education' before the conference, and I witnessed real opening and engaged curiosity... they left with a widened perspective, inspired ideas, and connection to a growing regional network.

"It is a question of changing mind sets' Walter Mugove said, "development work usually asks the question what are your problems and the people are convinced they are the poorest of the poor. We change the question to "what are your resources?"

Witnessing the intelligence and strength of the individual people and projects that are coming together to create real change for Africa leaves me with real hope... a necessary companion to the witnessing of the complexity of the issues the region faces.

COUNCIL IN RWANDA

As the last step of the journey, I was called to Rwanda by Jared Siede, director of Center for Council, to train a group of reconciliation and peace workers. Council has been seeded in Rwanda through the work of Bernie Glassman and Zen Peacemakers. There have been two Bearing Witness Retreats in Rwanda in the last years and two years ago Fleet Maul and others introduced council in a two-day council training.

For three days before the training began, I opened up to the place and people, visiting memorial sites, listening to stories, and I felt the horror and I saw the beauty of the land and people. Rwanda is the cleanest, safest place I have been in Africa. I was amazed to see the clean, litter-free, paved roads and sidewalks. I witnessed a new pride in being Rwandan, beyond Hutu and Tutsi, and I listened.

Bernie Glassman wrote "In my view, we can't heal ourselves or other people unless we bear witness. In the Zen Peacemaker Order we stress bearing witness to the wholeness of life, to every aspect of the situation that arises. It means being each and every element of this situation."

We met Josee, a humble and beautiful therapist who has been using what she calls 'circle peace' in her women's groups. She described why she was called to work with the women who were raped and held during the genocide, and the children who were born from the rapes: "When we change ourselves we change the people around us, the community"



Jared Siede and I offered a five-day council training at the Kigali Genocide Memorial. Hosted by MEMOS – a memorial and reconciliation project in Rwanda engaged in growing a holistic network of peace workers – we had 14 people from different regions, projects, ages and genders. We met in the practice of council, and in the first days faced resistance and cross-cultural turbulence. As leaders we knew the gift of turning into it all. By day three, with the help of ever-present grace, all participants were in and opened easily to learn basic elements of the practice.

Reflections from Rwanda Council Training Participants:

"I feel that this training has helped me understand myself and the way I can heal and to have better way to help others with their own healing."

"Council teaches 'peace from the heart' and points to a way that people can live together in a more unified and loving society."

CONTINUING AS A GLOBAL CITIZEN, PART OF A GLOBAL NETWORK...

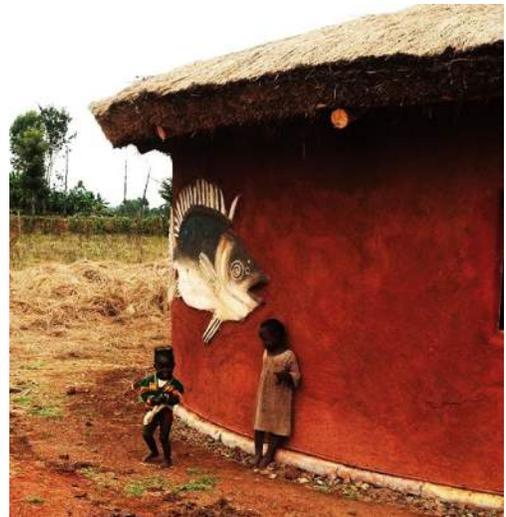
As I return to my own country, my own people,

I ask again, where am I to be, how am I to serve?

I feel the need for healing everywhere I go, and

I am grateful for the experiences that have grown me, the friendships that emerged, heart guided leadership, true collaboration and beauty.

I feel connected to Africa, and continue to hear the call for council there. I will continue to respond knowing I am deeply woven into a network of light centers evolving together.



- **OTEPIC** is continuing to develop their plan and is working on two natural building projects- a kitchen and a future seminar building.
- **The women of OTEPIC** continue to meet, and Daktari Karambu plans to visit them.
- **Mugove Walter visited IPI Mugove Walter visited IPI** and together created a thriving permaculture garden. They created a plan for the "Tirji Eco Center".
- **GEN Africa** will meet in Senegal December 2014 at the GEN International gathering.
- **GEN Kenya** has had its first meeting - a network is growing!
- **Rwanda Council Team** created a club and a facebook page and is continuing to hold councils in their communities and projects. Most of the people trained will participate and co-lead councils during the Bearing Witness Retreat in April, during the 20th commemoration of the genocide.
- **The Global Campus** continues to harvest the learning from the 2014 events and will spend time this year designing the curriculum and focusing on regional autonomy through growing the Portuguese regional network.

FINANCES

Thank you for the financial support, which was such a gift, a confirmation that what I am doing is connected to a bigger community, a bigger story. I received \$6,500 in donations, flight tickets and in kind gifts at a time when I had \$50 in my bank account. I received funding support from family, friends, Beyond Boundaries sponsors, and discounts and reimbursements from cooperation partners. I am grateful for this abundant sign of an emerging gift economy! I spent \$2500 on international airfare, \$1000 towards the overall budget of our Global Campus time, \$2500 on local travel, food, accommodation, and \$1000 for insurance, medical costs, small gifts and in kind donations. All other project costs, such as the materials for the peace hut, were funded through Lush Cosmetics, UK.

Gratitude.....

Thank you to all who supported me, in so many ways, to make this journey possible.

Thank you to all that came before me, my teachers, the founders of these projects and so many others. Thank you to Beyond Boundaries for the support, and to Gigi for the guidance, strong mentorship and trust. Thank you Alexis and Jared, for the shared leadership and strong learning experiences. Thank you to the Global Campus, and my Kenya group, for the commitment, care and collaboration. Thank you to Tamera, for the opportunity to 'refuel' in an ever-deepening experience of Global Community.

Deep gratitude for the heart, intelligence and manifesting power I met in OTEPIC, IPI, Memos, and the Africa network. I am humbled, and filled with hope from meeting your spirit and work.



**"We've all been given a gift, the gift of life.
What we do with our lives is our gift back."**

-Edo