

# Gaia Education: A Living Laboratory of Sustainable Learning

By graceKaya

In October 2010 I attended a Gaia Education Design for Sustainability program, a 4 week intensive which took place at the Findhorn Eco-Village in Scotland. Here is a glimpse into the program and how it relates to Dr. Michael Ben-Eli's 5 Core Principals of Sustainability. It is written from an artist's perspective; for whom facilitating is very familiar, yet the subject of eco-design is quite new. Beginning each section is an expression of my creativity relating to the content we covered during the week. Please enJOY!

## Week 1 - Social Design

Process In Motion



During week 1 the group engaged in a multitude of experiential exercises and insightful dialogues around the topic of Social Design. The activities focused on building community and embracing diversity, developing non-violent communication skills, articulating and receiving constructive feedback. As we explored various practices of deep listening it was beautiful to witness the powerful impact each one had on the many individuals who felt truly seen and heard. The act of courageously exposing ones vulnerability nearly instantaneously awarded the speaker a gift of clarifying insight.

I experienced empowering moments during the first week utilizing some of the conflict resolution tools within my own case study group; bringing about successful results. These tools were useful in a number of situations outside the class room, for as we were discussing community related issues, we were in fact, becoming a community.

We were encouraged to look in depth at our many personal stories, habit patterns and beliefs. The choices we make as individuals create our greater reality, so as we dig deeper with honesty and sensitivity, we have the opportunity to make more conscious, loving and healthy choices for ourselves and our community.

As an artist, I feel passionately about the power of creativity and its function as a way of exploring, celebrating and manifesting Life. So naturally I was most grateful for the section named Celebrating Life: Creativity and Art. Just like Einstein's famous quote indicates "You can't solve a problem at the same level of mind that created it." The tools of creativity we were given helped to raise our consciousness and evolve our problem solving abilities -- often softening the sharp edges of our egos resulting in greater clarity. Vibrantly spontaneous expressions of song and dance were explored on a daily basis. These tools worked to shake us up when the group dynamic had become low or disjointed; and, specifically in terms of problem solving, they helped us to reach beyond our typical linear thinking. Throughout the entire month, it was quite clear that creativity is a key function of sustainability. The joyous phrase, "If it's not FUN, it's not sustainable!" often bounced around the classroom.

The key ingredient that I received from this week was: the clearer, more authentic we can become with ourselves and others, the less room there is for miscommunication and unnecessary conflict. Investigating whether there truly is a conflict versus, perhaps a structural issue or simply a misunderstanding can save time, energy and hurt feelings, potentially preventing a full blown conflict.

The week offered a plethora of tangible exercises and concepts which helped to create the environment that Dr. Michael Ben-Eli's core principal number four articulates. *"Maximize degrees of freedom and potential self-realization of all humans without any individual or group, adversely affecting others."*

## Week 2 - Economic Design

Community and health: key elements of true wealth.

(artPLAY - "an evolving relationship with money" - the before and after)



I was both exhilarated and nervous about entering into the economic week. Fearful stories of poverty and economic crashes danced around my head. However, after a week full of engaging conversations I was encouraged to reinvestigate my assumed innate core beliefs about money and debt.

We discussed the importance of reframing our concepts of wealth to include other resources besides paper money & screen numbers. The concept of richness in our life ought to include for example: health, an individual's unique skill sets, physical manpower, unpaid work of stay-at-home parents, and access/ownership of land for growing our own foods.

Other topics discussed were: ways to shift the global economy to sustainability; creating social enterprises; how money really works; and the benefits of community banks with local currencies. Interactive role playing activities demonstrated variations of the bartering system; e.g. "let schemes" and "time shares". We highlighted the benefits, potential challenges and in what environment these programs might be most successful. Over the month we were able to exchange Findhorn's own local currency, the "Eko" for many products and goods; it was accepted at all of their local organizations and was in par with sterling 1 Eko = £1.

By the end of the week I had arrived at some new answers to the questions "what happens when we take all of the hidden costs into account?" How would we spend our money if we really acknowledged the impacts our purchases have on the people behind the scenes? When we begin to look at the entire planet and human population as our greater community - as our family - including the plants, animals and insects, our economic structures are more likely to fuse qualities of equality, sustainability and respect for all life into its foundations.

The truth is, one just cannot discuss economy without making reference to ecology, the two are inseparable as Ben-Eli's second core principal of sustainability states. *"Adopt an appropriate accounting system, fully aligned with the planet's ecological processes and reflecting true, comprehensive biospheric pricing to guide the economy."*

## Week 3 - Ecological Week

### The Living Machine



In the third week we discovered the importance of ecological design so as to amplify the natural resources by not over using them. We were introduced to various forms of gardening including permaculture, bio-organic farming and bio-dynamic farming. It was interesting to see how these approaches could be adapted for diverse climates. In celebrating such diversity we were reminded of how intricately connected the web of nature is, and how changes made to one part of the earth inevitably will impact the rest.

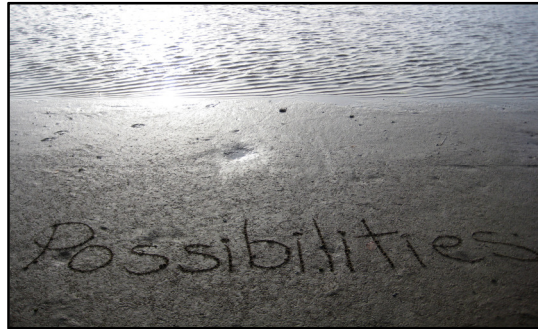
At Findhorn we enjoyed a tour of Europe's first Living Machine. The ecologically engineered waste water treatment system transforms the community's sewage, changing their "black water" into grey water. Using bacteria, algae, micro-organisms, numerous plants and trees, snails, fish and other living creatures as natural filters, the water then becomes pure enough to return it to the sea.

We discussed the details of a closed loop system and its importance when designing sustainable communities. Natural energy resources such as wind, water & solar are necessary elements of such a design. We investigated modern technologies that could benefit entire cities, rural villages or even the home of a single family. There was a lot of focus on meaningful use of energy; differentiating when it is needed versus wasteful habits of overuse. Remembering that even simple shifts in behaviour, such as turning off the light when you leave a room for a while, not letting the water run while you are brushing your teeth & wearing warm clothes around the house during the winter, can make a big difference.

One of my favourite insights came during the discussion of permaculture. The basic idea that "Everything Gardens" is a concept that helps us align ourselves with Ben-Eli's first core principal. *"Contain entropy and ensure that the flow of resources, through and within the economy, is as nearly non-declining as is permitted by physical laws."* His third principal was clearly supported during the bio-dynamic farming dialogue. *"Ensure that the essential diversity of all forms of life in the Biosphere is maintained."*

## Week 4 - Worldview Week

### Finding Our Footing



We completed the intensive with the Worldview week making the connection between personal health and planetary health while listening to and reconnecting with nature. We also discussed socially engaged spirituality and bioregionalism.

As time allowed, we were only able to dip, rather than dive, into a number of sacred rituals. However the idea was to get people thinking about other forms of processing that they could then bring back to their own communities. The resident teachers did this by giving us a balance of learning material that fluctuated between alternative holistic activities and practical tools for communication, facilitation and connecting with others.

The highlight of the week for me was when the group silently created a large labyrinth in the forest together. We were offered guidance by a “focalizer” beforehand, but when we quietly entered the woods it seemed as if the beautiful geometric shape magically created itself. Like many of the activities there was room for personal interpretation and choice in terms of the qualities and quantity of participation the individual would contribute. During this exercise I found myself moving very slowly, not able to keep up with the more active participants of the project. In stillness, I stepped out of the busy flow and reluctantly gave myself a moment to simply soak in the creative process from a witness perspective. It was then that I really understood something I'd read about a number of times in the past; there is a time for action and a space for being. Sometimes being can offer a greater impact than doing and vice versa. It's a great learning to sensitize one's self enough to know which would be most beneficial in the moment at hand.

Throughout the week we make our own journeys into Ben-Eli's fifth core principal for sustainability; *“Recognize the seamless, dynamic continuum of mystery, wisdom, love, energy, and matter that links the outer reaches of the cosmos with our solar system, our planet and it's biosphere including all humans, with our internal metabolic systems and their externalized technology extensions – embody this recognition in a universal ethics for guiding human actions.”*

The reality seems such that no one can exactly predict the future, so regardless of our background, education & life experiences, at any given moment we are always stepping into the unknown. The key is communication; sharing information, connecting honestly with each other, and taking our greater community and planet into consideration when making lifestyle decisions.