



## The Berkana Institute

### Enspirited Leadership: Landmarks for Uncertain Times

Bob Stilger, PhD

# Enspirited Leadership: Landmarks for Uncertain Times

Bob Stilger, PhD

All around the world, people are stepping forward in new ways to provide leadership. In many cases, they are not the people in positions of power in organizations or communities; they are simply those who see what must be done and are willing to speak, and then to act. Often, as they begin to step forward, their hearts are pounding with fear, but they believe the time has come to offer a new possibility for the future.

Where do these leaders come from? What gives them the courage to speak up? What capacities and practices, if cultivated, support people in developing their own leadership?

Over the last four years at The Berkana Institute, I've worked with a number of younger leaders involved

in community initiatives in many parts of the world. They practice a kind of leadership that comes from mind, heart and spirit and provides a foundation for effective action in the world. They practice what I call "enspirited leadership."

The leaders I've worked with come from places like Santos, Brazil, where the Instituto Elos works in favelas, or slums, where people have few material goods but where the human spirit is still strong. They always begin their work by asking the elders to talk about their lives and by looking for patterns of possibility in their stories. These leaders come from Edcouch-Elsa High School in Texas in the United States, where a school serving migrant workers has gone from having one of the highest dropout rates in Texas to having the highest rate of

placement in top U.S. colleges. They come from Johannesburg, South Africa, where the GreenHouse Project demonstrates how to build green, grow food in urban areas and practice zero waste.

To support this enspirited work in the world, in 2004 Berkana launched the Berkana Exchange. We work primarily with learning centers around the world that are helping ordinary people step forward as leaders. Working with urban youth in Dakar, Senegal, with villagers in rural Zimbabwe, across the generations in Udaipur, India, and with indigenous peoples in Chiapas, Mexico, these learning centers are helping people offer whatever leadership they can in these changing times.

I have identified six key landmarks for enspirited leaders:

1. They work from a sense of true calling
2. They journey in the company of others
3. They live with a spiritual center
4. They demand diversity
5. Reflective learning guides their lives
6. Their work is filled with ambiguity and uncertainty

### A Sense of True Calling

Each of these pioneering leaders has stepped into his or her work because of a strong sense of calling, rather than through a methodical, strategic decision-making process. In many ways, life leads them to their work. And, of course, their work then leads them to their life.



Marianne Knuth

Marianne Knuth from Kufunda Learning Village in Zimbabwe explained her commitment to her work in this way:

“I had this feeling that I had to do it. If I would have thought someone else was going to be able to do it, I would have let them. Maybe that’s being arrogant, but I just had to do it. There was a real fire that was burning—and it was really exciting.”

Tim Merry, who began a learning center in Holland and

in 2004 started the Shire in Nova Scotia, Canada, said it this way:

“It has been a really personal journey. The reason I am doing this work is because it is making me stronger, and because it is making me happy in what I do. I am beginning to understand the greatest gift we can give to the world is



Tim Merry

our own happiness, and that’s all we really have to do. We don’t need to do anything more than be content with who we are. We don’t have to change the world.”

What stands out to me from many conversations is that these leaders follow deep gut instincts that tell them where to place their attention and where to create their intentions for action. Their actions are conceived in a place of spirit, not in a place of thought. What gives these young men and women

the confidence and courage to respond to that which called them? How were they able to step forward while so many who hear such a calling choose to ignore it?

### In the Company of Others

Part of the answer is that they don’t do their work alone. Close friends and family who share deep bonds of trust, love and respect are essential for finding the courage to follow the inner voice. Moving into new territory, doing work that seems unconventional and perhaps even foolish to some, requires companions.

Some of the most striking characteristics of the companions who move together are that they come from different age groups and are frequently family members. This pattern is different from the activists of the 1960s. What I recall from my twenties was precious little connection with siblings, a distancing from my parents’ ideas, and suspicion about most people over thirty.

In describing how he began, Cire Kane of Synapse Center in Senegal said that he kept remembering his grandfather’s and parents’ advice:

“Dare to build on your relationships rather than pursuing money. Success in life lies in relationships.’ I have learned from them the value of understanding myself and my place in this world. I’m here because many people contributed to my development. And I remember so much of what happened to me and understand more myself when I listen closely to others. My whole life is a simple movement circling around community, relationships and joy. And this community is expanding every day beyond the borders of my birth land, crossing oceans and connecting with many good-hearted people around the world.”

There may be some who believe they can make these journeys alone, as rugged individuals. But why? Why wouldn’t we all want to find close companions to share our journey? Why wouldn’t we seek others excited by the same possibilities and the same questions? Where would we find nourishment if we traveled alone?

### A Spiritual Center

What do leaders need to have in order to stand with confidence in a complex, changing and un-

predictable world? A partial answer, I suspect, is that holding an encompassing view requires, at least from time to time, a higher level of consciousness. The evolution of such consciousness seems to require a spiritual practice. Each of these learning center founders works from a spiritual center. Their practices are



Zoë and Una Nicholson

simply a part of their daily lives.

Zoë Nicholson, founder of LifeWorks in England, says:

“I started a meditation practice about the same time I began this work and I realized it was possible to have a fuller life at a slower speed. I didn’t really need to run around filling up my life. I could just slow down, unpack and my life would be a lot fuller... We can do all the intellectual stuff about saving the planet, but the bottom line is how can I find a way to feel alive?”

Una Nicholson, Zoë's sister, adds:

“Things just seem to happen a lot more harmoniously, bountifully and easily. The right things happen at the right time. Surprises come along and good things happen. For me, it just becomes a practice of being aligned with myself—that seems to provide the path.”



Manish Jain

When I asked Manish Jain from India about his work at the core of Shikshantar, the learning center he has created with others in Udaipur, India, his response was:

“This work is not about saving or changing the world, but about how I live my own life and live it as an invitation to others. As the Bhagavad-Gita says: ‘Try to live the way that you feel is true with your own inner values. Don’t worry about the results. The presence of a spiritual center is what allows these

leaders to hear and trust their inner voices and follow their calls. They also move, with that spirit, into a place of reflective learning that acts as a compass to guide their action.

### A Demand For Diversity

When these leaders look at a given situation, they look for the surrounding web of relationships and systems. They look for the whole picture. The younger leaders I’ve worked with all have had experience in multiple cultures. Such experiences may not be a precondition for enspirited leadership, but they usually shake people up enough that they begin to see the world more broadly. Ante Glavas who started Horizon in Croatia says:

“When one is born in one culture, it is taken for granted that the world is as it is. When one then truly learns another culture deeply, then one realizes that there is not a set way of seeing the world.”

The capacity to understand that the way we view our lives is a construct our minds have created makes it easier to let go of false certainties. In *Beyond Culture*, Edward Hall suggests that multicultural

experiences demand an expansion in consciousness. Expanded consciousness is required for this work.

The presence of others whose ideas and experiences differ greatly from our own invites us to let go of our limited view of what's needed and what can happen. Diversity is a key to open exploration and inquiry. It is what helps us let go of old ideas and solutions and to search for what else might be possible.

### Reflective Learning as a Guide

For these leaders, the search for spiritual ground is accompanied by an ongoing process of surfacing facts and impressions, revealing patterns and assumptions, examining actions and behaviors, and affirming or changing the course of action. This continuous process makes up reflective learning.

In early 2002, I met with many younger leaders in Prague, and we characterized this approach as follows:

- Above all, this is a creative adventure. It is experimental. It calls us to focus our attention on the now. Our work, our lives, are laboratories of grace. Ann Doshier, an elder and community psychologist who has served on The Berkana

Institute's board of directors, first coined the term "laboratories of grace" in the late 1990s.

- This work is bigger than any of us separately, and it still calls on each of us to be separate and ourselves.
- We are called upon to use our full imagination and learning, our collective diversity, our respect for



Ante Glavas

synchronicity and mystery, and our willingness to be transformed.

- We do this important work with a spirit of play, humor, friendship and love. We are connected and we connect to others.
- Our local work is critical ground from which global transformation can emerge, with integrity.

These reflections are alive. They hold a sense of genuine curiosity. This kind of reflective learning affirms life and invites inquiry into the uncertain path of



transformation. The process of making such reflections explicit is as ordinary for these leaders as their spirituality is. They have a capacity to move easily from the realm of spirit to the realm of thought, and this motion gives them balance.

### Ambiguity and Uncertainty



Cire Kane

Ambiguity and uncertainty are befriended in this work. To follow a sense of calling, in the company of others, aware of a diverse world, from a spiritual center and with a clarity about assumptions, is to let go of control. There is simply no other way. Doing all of those things throws the doors of ambiguity and uncertainty wide open.

A choice each of us can make is whether ambiguity and uncertainty open a pathway to fear or a pathway to balance. When we think we are

supposed to be in charge, when our self-confidence is based on being able to predict what will happen and how things will turn out, then ambiguity and uncertainty usually invite our fear to rise up and bite us.

When we are able to release ourselves into the uncertainty, we are invited to become explorers, to discover what lies ahead as we work with others to create that future. Cire Kane put it well:

“Today, the path is still unclear. It is literally invisible, and yet my heart is often being moved and my soul split open. My lovely work is taking me every day on a journey of new experiences. These experiences are opening my heart to the unimaginable beauty of life and community around me. Every day I awaken to a new day. I go out into the world with a feeling of excitement and joy and a feeling of being at home, everywhere in our diverse supportive community. I do my work with engagement and joy, with lots of downs and still many ups. I break for prayer, sometimes meditation, often to be with my parents or to hang out with friends. I love my work. I love my community and I love the life I’m living. I will



persevere through uncertainty and fear about my ability to carry out the mission before me.”

### Landmarks in Your Life

The work of these leaders is *enspirited*, in that it comes from a strong inner force that demands attention. It is *appreciative*, in that it looks for strengths that can be built upon. It is *emergent*, in that it creates both its path and its destination. These six landmarks are a guidance system for work in this territory.

As exciting as this work can be, it is also easy to get lost. I have opportunities to talk with people all over the world engaged in this

enspirited work, and they often feel discouraged, isolated, lonely and disconnected. They’ve forgotten to make sure that what they are doing is their true work. They have lost touch with those around them. They’re just too busy to slow down and be quiet. They’ll get to reflection later. The views of others are just too distracting. And, oh yes, wouldn’t it be nice to have some certainty?

My work, and that of The Berkana Institute, is to help people be wildly excited and grounded in this kind of work. These landmarks are part of this process.

How are they present in your life and work?

*You can find out more about the people and learning centers that we work and learn with at [www.berkana.org](http://www.berkana.org).*

Bob Stilger has been helping people create the communities they want since the early 70s. He's championed a number of nonprofit ventures where people are building the world they want tomorrow, today. Bob is the Co-President of The Berkana Institute, where he works and learns with younger leaders around the world. His doctoral dissertation, presented in 2004 at the California Institute of Integral Studies, was a joint inquiry with seven leaders around how they created six learning centers in different parts of the world. *Enspirited Leadership* shares some of their collective learning.

[www.berkana.org](http://www.berkana.org)

Printed on 100% recycled paper

