

A black and white photograph of a young child, seen in profile from the side, looking intently at a stream of water flowing from a metal tap. The child is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved shirt. The background is a blurred outdoor setting, possibly a schoolyard or a public area, with some foliage and a building visible in the distance. The overall mood is one of curiosity and observation.

making
our own paths of
learning and living

swapathgami

re-storying our communities july 3-13, 2010

Twenty people, ages seven to 65, participated in the sixth annual Swapathgami Filmmaking workshop in Udaipur. Aspiring filmmakers came from different parts of India. They made short, emotional films, revealing their own personal stories. The workshop was hosted by Ruchir, Gungun, Sanjay, Vishal and Manish. Check out the films on youtube (search for swapathgami). *For more information, contact Ruchir <ruchirguitar@gmail.com>.*

reconnecting to our healing powers

march 4-8, 2010

For four days, Gandhi Smarak Bhavan in Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh, held a gathering on self-healing. About 50 people hosted hands-on seminars, played together, ate organic food, and strengthened their emerging network of healing practitioners.

People were interested in a wide range of healing methodologies, including healthy food, traditional herbs, acupressure, massage, reiki, yoga, trataka meditation and naturopathy. A broad definition of self-healing was accepted, and people were challenged to ask themselves: "What does 'self-healing' mean to you?"; "What needs to be healed in the world?"; "How would you go about healing yourself and others?"

To participate in the next gathering, contact Sanjoy and Damyanti <sanjoydamyanti@rediffmail.com>.



playing to change the world april 12-18, 2010

Udaipur was host to Edgard Gouveia from Brazil and the Oasis Game. A team of 40 players from around the India, shared their gifts, cooperative games, and circle dances with a local community in Shivaji Nagar basti.

Players started the game by 'looking for the beauty' and the strengths in the slum area. Then, they listened to the stories and dreams of various members across the community. They also discovered various assets, resources and skills that were already present in the community. Based on this, they came up with a proposal to co-create a small 'miracle' and presented it to the community for their feedback. People liked it but were still skeptical.

a journey with the unknown october 25-31, 2010

Can you live for a week without any money, technology, medicine, food supplies? Nineteen people, ages seven to 42, took up the challenge at the annual Swapathgami Cycle Yatra. This time, the *yatris* travelled through the tribal villages and forests of Hardoti, in the southeast part of Rajasthan (on the border of Madhya Pradesh).

Along the way, the *yatris* realized that the most so-called backward and poor area of Rajasthan was actually the richest – in terms of wild, natural foods, medicinal herbs, eco-friendly housing, clean environment, love and hospitality. The local folk music was really amazing. *Yatris* felt how gracious local communities were in sharing their wealth with others. *To join in the next cycle yatra, contact Ramawtar <ramjiram1@gmail.com>.*



The energy and enthusiasm of the local children was contagious. In two exciting days, a small park was built using only natural/waste materials. More importantly, everyone felt the joy of working together to achieve the seemingly impossible.

For more information on oasis games, visit <elosbrasil.org/en/metodologias/oasis> and contact Vishal <aachi8@gmail.com>.

the barefoot challenge

*"Because the wind wants to feel your hair,
and the earth wants to touch your feet."*

- Kahlil Gibran

We live in nature, but we don't live naturally. We live on the earth, but we don't touch it. Ninety percent of the time, we hide from the sun. We use hot water to bathe, which is a fast, functional affair. Most of the time we condition the air we breathe. In winter, we keep warm, and in summers we protect ourselves from the heat. We burn most of the vitamins in food before we eat. We protect ourselves from all that is natural. And many of us fall ill from time to time and worry about our general health. What can we do to heal ourselves? I have found one simple and quick way to get back in touch with the earth: walk barefoot.

Soil has healing properties; it draws out toxins from the body. Minerals that get lost on their way to us otherwise seep in directly from the touch of mother earth. Walking barefoot on mother earth is like hugging your mother.

Nature has made our feet sensitive. We have many acupressure points on our feet, which love to be massaged. But we deprive our feet of different surfaces by continuously covering them with thick chappals, or walking on flat tiled floor.

Try this experiment. Twice a day, walk barefoot on bare earth

Are you tired of the rat-race?

Are you too busy to pursue your own dreams?

Does your life inspire you?

**JOIN THE
'YEAR ON' CAMPAIGN!!!**

We invite you to take a brake...

*Think about opting for a gap year after class 5,
8, 10, 12 or college to:*

Explore who you really are...

Engage your community...

Co-create a more beautiful world...

You won't lose a year, you'll re-gain your life.



for fifteen minutes. If you can't find bare earth, walk on a footpath. Make sure it is not a very smooth footpath though; mud and pebbles are important. Walk slowly, letting the earth seep into your being. It might be painful at first, but soon your feet will relish the massage. Most of your bodily aches and pains will diminish within a week. If you continue for more than a month, you will start feeling a new strength in your body, feet up. The feet will actually radiate a palpable sense of well-being.

Walking barefoot is especially good for knee pain, stiffness in the joints, and back pain. A study showed that the incidence of arthritis and varicose veins are much lower in villages, probably because they walk barefoot. Digestion also improves drastically by the acupressure effect of barefoot walking. Add to this a warm footbath at night, followed by a quick massage with oil. Soaking the feet in warm water for five to ten minutes will refresh your entire being, and the massage will soothe the creases and seal in the energy.

Nature cure is an inexpensive and straightforward system of alternative healing. All it requires is the small courage to take the small step out of our comfort and fashion zones.

- **Manjushree Abhinav**, Bangalore
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She is a writer and filmmaker. Yes, she does walk the talk.

rooftop revolution

Starting a vegetable patch at home in a city isn't simple, yet it is delightful. As first time farmers, it took us to places and people we wouldn't have known otherwise.

We have been trying to move towards a healthy and personally fulfilling lifestyle for some time. Part of this attempt includes growing our own food and creating a conscious kitchen in our home. Our efforts began three months ago, when our first step in this journey was to collect 'green garbage' as we'd often seen plants growing on garbage (instead of in soil).

We kept our eyes peeled for any opportunity to pick up discarded waste. We soon acquired *bhusa* (straw) from our fruit vendor, coconut husks from a lady selling coconuts outside a temple, rotten veggies/ leaves of vegetables thrown away at a *subzi mandi* (vegetable market), and dry leaves swept up at a local shopping complex. We also found discarded pieces of granite/marble, and used coconuts from a tender coconut vendor. Most people were curious to know what we intended to do with the 'garbage'. When told, were eager to help. Thus began the first step of our journey. Finding the free green wealth is not difficult!

We weren't sure how exactly to go about making the garden on the terrace. Luckily, we met a few people in Pune who already had thriving terrace gardens: Rashmi's garden with a 10-foot long, fruit-laden papaya tree growing in just four inches of soil, and Jyoti Shah's garden with many vegetables, flowers and fruit trees growing in green garbage, without any soil. Seeing this gave us new confidence and ideas.

We got to work: cut up plastic sheets and laid them, used granite bits and coconuts to create beds, lined the bottom with coconut husks, straw and used *pattal* (leaf plates). Finally, we put the vegetable waste on top, and lo!, four beds were almost ready!

We now needed soil. Getting hold of soil can be quite tricky in a concrete city area. But as we looked down from the terrace, we spotted a pile of garbage with a lot of dry leaves in an empty plot in front of our house. Apprehensive at first about what we'd find – plastic, metal, sharp objects – we were soon elated to find such rich manure right beside our home. We salvaged about four sackfuls, which went right on top of our beds. The first plant to go in was 'khajur' (date palm) which we'd found growing on the garbage heap itself.

It was all in a morning's work or *karma yoga* as we like to believe. And we even got a bonus! We found two whole cabbages with just their outer leaves decaying. So we simply took off some of the outer leaves and were left with good-looking fine cabbages for our lunch. Our veggie patch had started yielding vegetables even before we could plant!

We watered the beds for a few days to help the green matter begin to compost. The top layer of soil was drying up quite fast, so we covered it with jute sacks to preserve moisture. A few days later, we planted our first seeds. In the first bed, we put fenugreek and mustard and, in the second, spinach and *rajgira* (amaranth millets). In the third, we put a pineapple head, a bulb of onion and 'mango ginger' (*ambe-halad* in Marathi). In the fourth, we put safflower and coriander.

Up to now, we have harvested spinach, mustard greens and amaranth greens twice and enjoyed including them in our meals. It's a delight to eat what you have grown yourself. We are still exploring where we can source local seeds from, what seeds we should plant and when, and how much of each variety we should plant in order to provide for our needs.

Our journey with our terrace garden continues. A beautiful off-shoot of this process is that we're meeting several people who are engaged in similar experiments. Meeting them provides us with good ideas and encouragement. It's almost as if other people are nurturing us, and we're nurturing our plants in turn!

- Shirish Kher and Vanaja Vaidyanathan, Pune
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Walking out of Posh Dreams

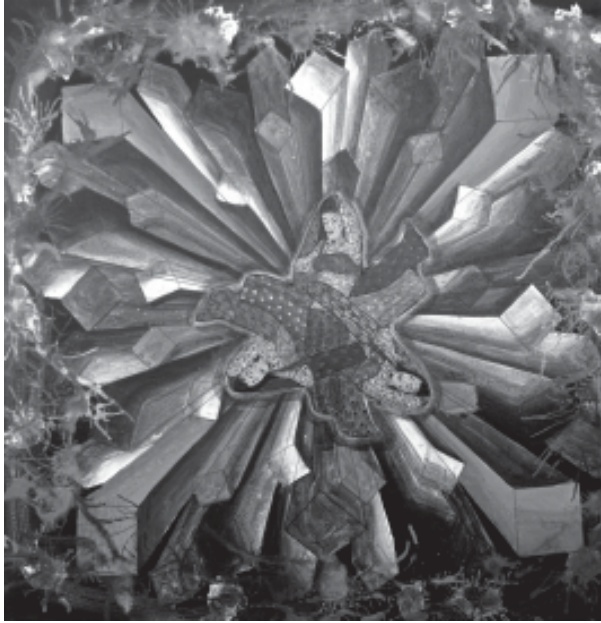
I was doing well at Baskin Robbins, the world's leading U.S.-based ice cream company. Lucrative offers to work abroad were on the horizon, and I was looking forward to an appropriate break. Then, my college friend approached me with an innovative business idea around multimedia computers and educational software. They would make complex lessons simple and enjoyable. Being a backbencher in school, I was fascinated by this concept. I decided to quit my job. We operated our business from a posh Mumbai locality and had one of the best schools in the city as our client.

During this period my grandfather insisted I meet Dr. Kalbag, a scientist turned educationist, and see his experiments with Vigyan Ashram. I was not keen to travel all the way to the remote village of Pabal to visit an unfamiliar person. When I finally met Dr. Kalbag, it was hard to believe that someone would migrate from a posh bungalow in Juhu to a barren land in a village. I never knew this was going to be a turning point in my life.

I was inspired by Dr. Kalbag's vision so I started concentrating more on schools in remote areas. I learned a lot during my travels in the tribal areas. Having escaped 'education' and 'development,' they are still original and authentic, holding on to their culture and world-view, which has sustained them for centuries.

Around the same time, I met Minal, my wife. We shared common thinking and values, and she joined me in the business. Overall business was flourishing, however, it was an extremely frustrating experience. We found ourselves dealing with money-hungry school managers and stubborn teachers who didn't have the self-determination to transform themselves. We were continually negotiating with our business ethics. What was the value of this build-a-business-at-any-cost kind of life? Finally, Minal and I decided to quit.

We were convinced that despite of all the glitter, the five-star hotels, malls, consumerist hospitals and schools, the culture of India is still in rural areas. In days of yore, excellent architects, super human minds, amazing space walkers, all lived in villages and forests. None of the great of that time had to leave and go to foreign countries or cities for 'higher education'. If our soul resides in the soil, then our education ought to be related to Mother Earth.



We decided to migrate to our ancestral village in the region of Konkan. My great-grandfather migrated from this village to Kolhapur town to join Rajaram College as

professor of mathematics. Since then our house was lying idle. The move was a very 'irrational' decision. While not absolutely clear about what we were going to do, Minal and I read more on K.J. Baby's Kanavu non-formal school and Bunker Roy's Barefoot College, as well as J. Krishnamurthi's and Gandhi's ideas on education

We converted our 80-year old abandoned ancestral house into a school that would provide real education. Instead of lectures in closed classrooms, we would help children learn through observation, by making mistakes and experiencing responsibility. Two youth from a local orphanage initially joined us for this experiment.

'School without Walls' came together by questioning, experimenting and exploring. Our daily life problems became our curriculum to learn. It slowly developed into a school for the students, of the students and by the students. Today, our daughter, Mrunalini, is no longer going to school. She is grooming herself wonderfully in this natural learning system.

To nurture the spirit of entrepreneurship and self-reliance among ourselves and our ex-students, the concept of 'Incubation - A Resource Center' has emerged. We are producing vermi-wash/vermi-compost on a industrial scale. We are now planning to start a bakery unit, organic fast food center, and soil brick production.

Over the years, I have learnt that money is not an end in itself. You should try to do what you like best of all.

Minal and I feel content these days. Finally, what our conscience tells us, and what we actually do in our daily lives, is converging.

- Sachin Desai, Maharashtra
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The Transcendental Brinjal

A few months ago, the Minister of State for Environment and Forests held public hearings to determine the future of BT Brinjal in India. When I attended talks and read the research about Genetically Modified (GM) seeds, I became concerned about the irreversible damage it would inflict on the health of humans and animals. (See www.iamnolabrat.com).

In the last two years, I had spent considerable time living in remote villages, learning organic farming and reforestation. I lived with many farmers in their mud homes and developed meaningful relationships with them. I saw, firsthand, that farming is a lot about 'soil building', but that GM seeds would kill the microbial activity in the soil, leaving it infertile. GM seeds could contaminate thousands of traditional species of the same crop, endangering the rich biodiversity of nature. This would enormously threaten the economic stability of farmers, who are already struggling hard to survive. It was while spending time in Vidarbha, Maharashtra, that I also became more aware of the causes of farmer suicides. I felt deeply moved to do something.

I started writing articles, mobilizing resources, holding public meetings and awareness campaigns to sensitize people about GM seeds in Ahmedabad. At the time, I had typhoid fever and was not in the best of health. However, since the issue was so grave and the threat so imminent, I felt called to go out and put in as much energy as I could, to inspire more people to attend the public hearing and take a firm stand against BT Brinjal. It was an intense period of my life. After the month of campaigning against BT Brinjal and the subsequent public hearing, I took time to slow down.

In the past five years, I have spent a few weeks every year in complete silence, with no contact to the outside world, in places as diverse as a forest monastery in the deep crevices of the Himalayas to a closed room near a city where the food is dropped inside my room from a small window. This time of solitude has helped me direct my attention inward. I saw that I was feeling a lot of anger towards Monsanto (the corporation that supplies GM seeds), the politicians and the big farmers. Through my daily work routine, I had not realized that I was experiencing all this noise and negativity in my mind, but when I would sit alone in silence, the hopelessness and discontent revealed itself more clearly.

I could also see that this hatred and cynicism was draining me and making my mind unhealthy. For today, if we were struggling against BT Brinjal, two months later, it could be against a new pesticide, or a forest that

could be cut, or a chemical factory that might grab fertile land from poor farmers. The old insensitive politicians will retire, and new ones will step in to play the same game. I had begun wondering, how many times would we as activists find the energy to fight against issues, one after another, in isolation?

I have friends who have been dedicated activists for many years. Most of them feel burnt out today! I sense that these problems were prevalent thousands of years ago and might continue for thousands more.

Now the question had intensified for me. What was I supposed to do? How should I use my energy, so that I don't get drained, but can channel it to bring more goodness and peace in my life and in the world? At one level, I felt that it was crucial for me to engage with the GM issue. At the same time, I do not want to carry the burden and pain of negative emotions towards people or corporations in my being.

When I spent time in meditation and solitude to observe the subtle workings of my mind, I was able to get a deeper glimpse into the subconscious layers of my inner ecology. It became clearer to me that all problems that our world is facing today, such as environmental destruction, economic injustice, terrorism, animal cruelty, are all intertwined branches stemming from the seeds of fear, greed or ignorance of our collective minds. I realized that, while it is imperative to work rigorously on issues from the outside, we cannot afford to ignore the correlation of these issues to their roots.

I started to look more closely at my own anger, hatred and discontentment towards the corporations and politicians. It struck me that in order to address any imbalance in the outer ecology, the internal disturbances and negativities within my mind needed to be resolved first. I could not solve the problem from the same inner space that created it. I realized that I needed to make a radical shift from fear to faith, from anger to acceptance, and from restlessness to stillness.

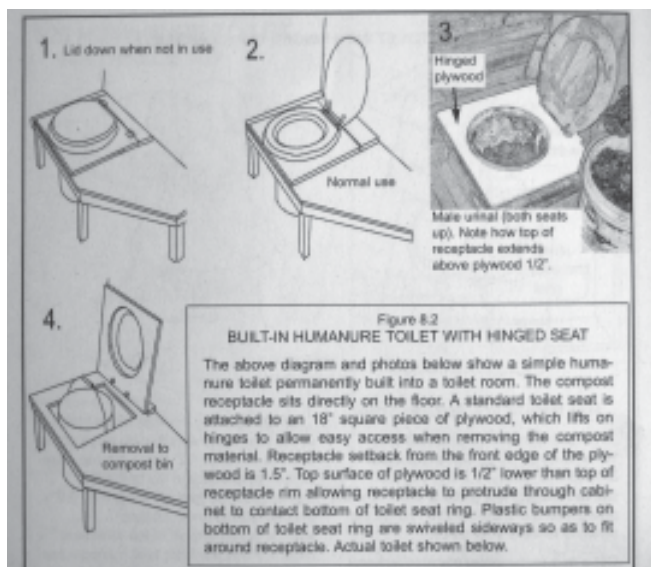
I have come to believe that, as an activist, I am affecting the world at multiple stratum. One layer is through the physical and intellectual energy that I put into my projects. An even more profound layer is that of thoughts. The internal matrix of emotions, feelings and awareness in our minds is forcefully radiating into the world, reflected in our actions and vibrations that touch others. Many of us are drawn to change the outer circumstances, but a deeper transformation can flower only through an inner spiritual activism that holds the true power to awaken, love and heal our earth.

- **Nirali Shah**, Ahmedabad
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The Power of the Pot

At a young age, I learned that toilet time can be used productively. My dad drinks juice, listens to music, and reads all while sitting on the pot. When I read Joseph Jenkins' *The Humane Handbook* (2005), I learned that that toilet *deposits* can also be an asset! Safely disposing of human by-products can play perfectly into the earth's ecology. Human poop and pee can be recycled into nutritious compost.

Five gallons of water are contaminated each time we use a toilet. After we flush, the contaminated water rushes off into the sewer, and then on to a sewage cleaning facility. To clean this poop-water — so that we can drink it — toxic chemicals are used. Then, if it wasn't dumped into a natural body of water, it returns to the system for us to re-contaminate. If this isn't convincing enough, Jenkins offers a fun fact: "If all the world's drinking water were put in one cubical tank, the tank would measure only 95 miles on each side." With such limited reserves, stewardship of our water is essential.



other biomass. Also, it contains high levels of nitrogen, which balance the often excessive amount of carbon in a compost pile. The home bucket requires minimal water: pee and fruit-waste provide moisture. And, if you don't have space for such a project in your home — especially since the compost pile ought to sit untouched for up to a year — never fear! You can promote the models for large-scale use in your city.

The hope for sustainable living and fresh food inspired me to tackle unknown skills and the untouchable excrement. A bucket model compost toilet is the first thing I have ever built. I had to explore new parts of Udaipur to find the materials. While, the craftsmanship is not perfect, I am quite happy with the functionality of the poop-pot. It is ready to recycle one of our most repelling waste products.

The chance to build a toilet, use it, and know that I am not wasting water is more than enough to slap a smile on my face. In fact, it has helped me know that I am connected to a larger part of life, not just what is contained in *my* body and brain. So, I feel a great relief each time I sit, or squat. (Thank you India!)

Jenkins describes how, in the early 20th century, American officials were stunned to see Chinese and other East Asian peoples cultivating the same land for thousands of years, while their land was already getting worn out after only a few hundred years! A key difference was the nutrient cycle. In China, human defecation are regularly returned to the soil, rather than pumped out to a processing plant or buried with toxic waste, both of which deprives the soil of the nutrients.

So, why flush feces when you can compost them?!

If human feces are composted properly, all pathogens will die in the heat of the compost pit. It will become a very clean, nice smelling compost that can be used to grow food. Out of the many models Jenkins shares, a home bucket model is highlighted. The basic process involves going potty in a bucket, covering the deposits with a clean organic material like sawdust, creating a large compost bin, and adding carbon-rich material like grass and leaves to the pile. The deposits are like money in the bank! The process works because our shit is full of microbes, which enable it to decompose itself and

The more I face the dirtiness of my life, the stuff that is more easily flushed or forgotten, the more I discover the miraculous. The very microbes that can transform potentially harmful poop into compost lie within the poop itself. Humane composting shows me how the



solutions to our complex problems can be found within the problems themselves. Zero waste living is possible. From our consumption to our defecation, we can make the changes necessary to sustaining our lives on Earth.

- Mackenzie Shreve, Omaha, USA
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A Recipe for Halchal Saturday Cafe

The Halchal Saturday Cafe is a simple young experiment birthed from the timeless tradition of building healthy community around good food. Cooked up by some swapathgamis in Udaipur, this recipe is less of a guide and more me wanting to share my experiences of and reflections on our cafe. I hope it serves as a delicious offering of inspiration for any and all forthcoming cafe varieties you might create in your community.

Serves anywhere from 10-50+ friends and guests.

Ingredients (depends on seasonality and who and what is available in your local community)

- creative, crazy people
- slow food
- beautiful ideas
- kitchen or space for food prep
- THE MAGIC CONNECTION

Method

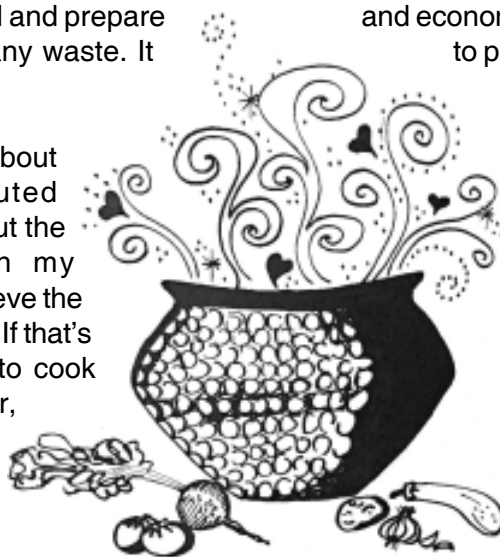
1. The general method is to marinate the guests with the ideas and slow food overnight. Stir occasionally.

2. While you and your guests are marinating, you will be left with the question of what to cook. We feel that, for our cafe, we explore health, ecology and spirit. We cook, as much as possible, without:

- processed oil. The operative word being *processed*. We realize oil is important, so we use naturally oily foods such as, coconut, peanut and sesame;
- processed sugar. Our sweets are made with gur, mishri, dates, mahua, raisins or honey;
- animal products. Our food is 100% vegan.

We use local grains, especially local millets such as *Ragi, Jo, Jowar, Rajgira, Sama* and *Bajra*. We aim to source organically grown food and prepare everything without generating any waste. It is a zero waste cafe.

An important lesson I learned about serving such bravely executed foods: you must tell people about the miracle on their plate. In my experience, they likely won't believe the feat you have just accomplished. If that's the case, you can invite them to cook with you the following week. Or, just engage them in a conversation around the importance of kitchens as the laboratories of our culture[s].



3. Decorate your space as you would make a good *pulao* (rice and vegetable dish). It should feel warm and comforting — familiar even — but should be a textured experience that invokes the earthiness of a root vegetable, the sweetness of dried fruit, a spicy awakening of the senses, and a crunchy, cashew-y something that makes the space really creamy-dreamy. Most importantly, it should feature what makes it your own — upcycled CD lampshades, chairs from old tires, scavenged table tops from carom boards, old saris, etc. all work well.

4. Don't worry if THE MAGIC CONNECTION doesn't immediately grace your cafe with its presence. Plugging into local food systems does well to simultaneously bring you closer to understanding the interconnectivity and oneness of everything on our planet. Doing so also leaves you in quiet awe and wonder at the complexity of everything. Our cafe is a casual affair, and developing connection never feels overwhelming or burdensome. Gingerly put your fears and doubts aside, as you would the seeds of a particularly potent chili, to be thrown into the cosmic compost after everyone has gone home and you're cleaning up.

5. **Do not charge money.** The concept of a gift economy resonates strongly within me, especially because I'm the kind of person who always used to believe that whatever you do for a job, it should be your passion. But, it turns out my passion is serving people, and I am beginning to suspect that I don't want to take what I am passionate about and turn it into a commodified thing to do between nine-to-five. Exchanging love for money doesn't feel very good, and so we at the Halchal Cafe promote a gift culture and economy. People pay what they want or are able to pay, which may come in the form of money, time, service, musical and dance performances, or any other gift they have to offer.

6. At the end of the night, you will know that the *halchal* of the fusion of friends, food, and ideas is an infinite one, perpetually reborn and exploding its way into our quietly awaiting future. Serve humbly with a side of mint chutney.

- Kate Morales, Udaipur/Atlanta
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just in time library

Books have been an inherent part of my life. Over the years, I selected them carefully and guarded them closely. They have been a source of inspiration, wisdom, laughter, tears, and so much more.

For many years, I would conduct an interview before even lending a book. Will you look after it? Make sure you don't fold the pages! When will you bring it back? Family and friends would be exasperated, but they would put up with it, because I really had some great books! Many were expensive or hard to get a hold of.

But, all that changed about ten months back. My friend, Sheetal Sanghvi, began discussing how his collection was gathering dust, and he wanted to give it away. He suggested I should do the same. Sheetal told me to imagine how much difference the books could make to another's life. Just as they had impacted me, another would benefit. As I listened to him, I realized that I had read many of them several times. Also, it was easier to look up material on the internet now, rather than search through the books. I was simply holding on, because it was hard to let go.

I reminded myself of all the lessons I have learned over the years, an important one being that nothing is permanent. It was unrealistic to cling to objects and try to keep things unchanged.

Besides, Sheetal's argument was highly persuasive. So, with a deep breath, I agreed. Sheetal immediately carted away dozens of my books, clearing one shelf at a time. The stagnant energy was suddenly flowing, and I could feel the bookcase, the room, myself, feeling lighter. It felt really good to imagine those beautiful masterpieces finding new lives to touch.

With some of Sheetal's books and other donations, we set up '**Spread the Word**' at The Urban Ashram. This is a library which has no cards, no supervision. People are encouraged to take books and pass them on. They may also add to the collection if they wish.

Each time I visited the Urban Ashram, my satisfaction grew. I felt happy with my decision. I continued giving away my books to whoever asked for one. I shared the idea with many others. There were mixed reactions. Some thought it made no sense. But many others took to the idea with enthusiasm and began doing it themselves. When I spoke to my friend Arun about this, we discussed how abundance principles, *Misogi*, space clearing, and so many teachings and practices support such

movement. He also said something that stayed with me. Arun said that we tend to accumulate material *just in case* we ever need it again. But if we are willing to trust the process of life, let go and be in flow, we can count on the universe providing us whatever is needed *just in time!*

This entire exercise had yielded a lot of positivity and learnings for a lot of people, including myself. Because you really learn when you practice the teachings that appeal to you.

Last evening, I remembered my favorite comic books, *Calvin and Hobbes*. They were particularly precious to me, not only because I thoroughly enjoyed them, but they were possibly the last of Sameer's possessions I had held onto for all these years. I felt a brief moment of sadness when I realized I no longer had them. I had given away the entire collection to Sheetal. I reminded myself how everything is in divine order, and how the universe is constantly looking out for me. What I truly need is provided in the moment. I thought of how much Sheetal had been enjoying them, and I smiled and moved on.

I had been on a sabbatical and mostly keeping to myself. But one day, Sheetal called and insisted on meeting me. So I went to meet him. We had a nice chat about some other matters. As I was leaving, he called me back and handed over three *Calvin and Hobbes!* I was stunned at the timing and even more at what he said. He realized that it was difficult for him to pass on these particular books, as he found them too precious himself. So, he thought about how hard it must have been for me to give them away. "They are a part of you, and you should have them back," he told me. When I mentioned that it was only yesterday that I had been missing them, he said they had not been getting attention. They had been lost in all my other books. Now, with less of them, they came back, called by the heart to come home.

What a lovely validation from the universe.

I really do feel taken care of right now, emboldened to trust life more and more every day. We are provided what we need — just in time.

- **Sangeeta Bhagwat**, Pune
<besangeeta@gmail.com>

Check out Shikshantar's new book on *Reclaiming the Gift Culture* for more ideas on how you can start new gift culture experiments in your life:
<www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/giftculture.pdf>

The Art of Hosting

Hosting visitors, parties, gatherings, celebrations and conversations is an age-old practice present in all human societies. What's more, cultures root themselves in rituals that involve hosting others in our space. I remember the period before Christmas, in Paraguay, where neighbors take the time to visit each other's nativity scenes. Families prepare themselves for hosting the visitors that will arrive anytime, setting aside food, drinks and even little gifts for them to take home. Each of our cultures has practices that involve visiting others or being visited. Those hosting spaces have great potential to influence – for good or for ill – the outcomes of these social encounters and the experience people will have there.

I wasn't aware of the active role of hosting others, before I became a member of the first 'Hub' that opened in London in 2005 (www.the-hub.net). I was invited to be one of the first hosts of that space, so I had to find out what this role was all about... I still remember putting the word '*hosting*' in Google to find out what I was supposed to do. Of course, that didn't help! I initially didn't learn about hosting from reading existing social theories, but rather, from following what felt intuitively right. Some insights came from conversations with members of the Hub, and some from people who were hosting other communities around the world. But most of my understanding came from what felt natural to do, in each specific situation.

At the *Hubs*, hosts set the conditions for interdependence, collaboration and collective social action to happen among a diverse group of people. This sounds big, but how it is done lies in the simplicity of everyday activities.

Hosts do three key things. First, they co-create an open and inspiring physical shared space, together with the community, where people can work, meet, talk, share, learn. A key moment in this process is where the community actually designs the space with chalk or post-it notes with ideas, or builds the furniture to be used.

Second, they attract a variety of skills and personalities into the network or community. People

and projects are mapped and invited to form communities of interest and practice across disciplines.

Third, hosts help set a rhythm of common activities. They co-create a culture and environment that is conducive to experimentation, courage and mutual support. Learning that every conversation we have can lead to creating inspiring and meaningful activities for others, is one of the biggest satisfactions I have felt as a host.

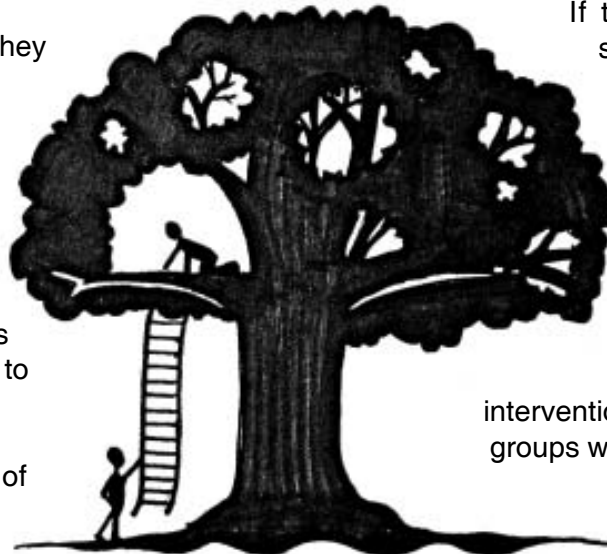
I see hosting as a new paradigm for inspiring and supporting people to realize their initiatives. It is rarely seen inside conventional 'incubators' or development agencies, where people are encouraged to work in isolation, under the fallacy that they can achieve more on their own. In contrast, hosting is about collaboration. It responds to complex situations which value and, indeed, often require a number of diverse ideas, projects and peoples.

A common challenge for hosts is knowing when to pause. A host I know was so busy that she was unknowingly creating a stressed environment. I find it is challenging to host when I am feeling sick, because, as with any party, everyone expects the hosts to be jolly and entertaining. That's why I recommend hosting in teams, because nobody can be a host all the time.

I even see hosting as a new profession. Publicizing and honoring it could allow millions of hidden hosts and conveners – like librarians, secretaries, youth workers, nurses, mothers, to name but a few – to unlock their individual and collective leadership capacities, and generate new ways of creating social interactions and transformation in their organizations and communities.

If there is one thing that would summarize the essence of hosting others in our spaces, I would say that you can't host others if you don't know your place well — meaning *your* shared spaces, communities, rhythm, organizations, and networks. We need to know everyone in them, their stories, talents and dreams, so that our interventions as hosts are useful for the groups we belong to.

- **Maria Glauser**, London
<mglaiser@gmail.com>



No More Mile-Markers

Having spent many years as a distance runner, I can't help but think about my life journey in terms of racing and training. In America, society assigns us worth according to a series of mile markers. We move from high school to college, to marriage and kids and career and, eventually to retirement. Those who pass these mile markers in a timely fashion are viewed as 'successful', bearers of an ideal to which all should aspire.

A few years ago, I found myself having a series of conversations with my 74-year-old great aunt, my 50-year-old mom, and my 68-year-old dad. Each person felt that their relationships and the things they created, were what mattered most to them now, not when/how they reached those mile markers. Each person remembered a time in their 20s, where they could have made an important choice for themselves, but instead had succumbed to the pressures of what they believed they 'should' do.

As a 29-year-old woman entrepreneur and three-time college walk-out, I've always questioned the traditional path. In the process of building three very businesses, I've come to realize that great things emerge, if we allow life to expand like a web, as opposed to confining it to a straight line.

Starting a business was at first confusing and hard. I was responsible for bookkeeping, marketing, networking, website design, program development—things I'd never done in prior jobs. Classes in school never seemed to cover the exact topics I needed to learn. So, I started asking people in my network — who I knew had the knowledge I was seeking — to meet me for a coffee. Through these informal conversations, I obtained answers to my questions, and found my way into new areas of study.

Three years ago, I co-founded 'The New Prosperity Initiative' (NPI) <<http://thenewprosperityinitiative.org>>, a media organization focused on the social sector. We basically tell good stories. Stories which can inspire and create change by highlighting work that solves community problems and improves the world. My work with NPI allows me to interact with solutions-focused, out-of-the-box thinkers. These people take on the world's toughest problems *and* have the courage to rethink what has always been done before. They are passionate about what they do. The conversations I've had with them are priceless.



Through NPI, we have found that newly emerging social media tools, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and blogging, in addition to in-person meetings and dialogues, have helped us further our mission. Social media is about using the power of internet and cell phones for social activism. People use these electronic media tools to organize events, raise awareness about social causes, lobby politicians, etc. As a cash-strapped start-up, social media initially appealed to us, because it was a free way for us to distribute content. As

time has progressed, we've seen our network grow through social media. Additionally, social media has allowed me to discover and connect with people who share my values rather quickly, regardless of location. Many of my online connections have turned into in-person relationships, which then lead to new resources or projects

There's a big debate happening right now about whether or not social media can really help bring about social change. Egypt is cited as a example of this. I think it can, but in-person relationships are equally, if not more, valuable than social media networking. To be effective, social media must be paired with offline face-to-face connections, experiments and actions. We have to remember that behind each social media outlet is a real person who is part of many communities. It is important to make continual efforts to connect to these diverse realities and interests.

As happy as I am to have started NPI, I realize now that it excluded me from certain groups I once felt a part of. When I first walked out from my previous 9-5 job and regular activities, I felt deeply lonely. I had to be patient as my new community assembled itself rather randomly. I've met a new contact at a networking event, another through a friend, some even through social media. Today, I know that for them, 'success' means increasing my own strength and creativity as a human being on this planet, not fulfilling some business outcome or achieving the next mile-marker. It is a community that I love and cherish, and one that I know loves and cherishes me.

- **Jeanne Dasaro**, Boston
<<http://jeannedasaro.com>>

An Invitation to Sangatya

Are you a young person seeking a space in the world to live a life of freedom, peace and harmony?

Sangatya formed in 2007 as a voluntary association. Like-minded people came together, united by a common concern for peace, equality and sustainability. We are situated in a village called Nakre in Udipi district, coastal Karnataka. We are a small group of people with some experience in activism, science, engineering and academics.

Our principal aim is to live without using more than our share of the world's resources. Since it is difficult to ascertain what is our share of the world's resources, our practical goal is to support as many livelihoods as possible with the resources we have while continuously using renewable resources. We believe that the challenge of sustainability can't be met with technology alone. It is important to build caring relationships that facilitate the sharing of resources and labor.

We do organic farming. We obtain the biomass required for maintaining soil fertility from recycling all the biomass that grows with the crops. We grow grains without tilling. It lightens our labor and reduces soil vulnerability to erosion during monsoons. One of the questions we are trying to answer is: How can one be a good farmer and still have time and energy for other creative activities that enrich life?

We do some spinning and weaving, but it is not a significant activity as of now. We would like to build a network of home spinners and weavers.

We intend to meet all our energy requirements from renewable sources. The source that can be most easily harvested here is biomass. Direct use of solar energy is also possible for some purposes.

We welcome new people who share our values and concerns to live and work with us. Even short term (minimum duration is one month) volunteers and people who are exploring opportunities to live a different life are welcome. A spirit of equality and sharing within the group and a readiness to do physical work are important. Food and accommodation will, of course, be provided.

- **Sahadevan** <k.sahadevan@gmail.com> or
Shreekumar <shreeudp@gmail.com>
Tel. number: 08258-205340

the slow thought movement

...is a peaceful revolution in the way we think. it is about stepping away from the borrowed, second-hand thinking of our times and moving towards original, first-hand thinking.

...is thought that comes directly from you and the realm of your experience.

...embodies a conscious renunciation of borrowed ideas.

Through the strength of community learning and sharing with each other in a spirit of honest self-expression — we can accelerate the pace of our personal and collective evolution.

Learn more about our online community at:
www.SlowThoughtMovement.com
freedom@slowthoughtmovement.com

the walkouts-walkons network

The Swapathgami Network is a collection of friends engaged in exploring individual pathways outside of institutionalizing structures. As *swapathgamis*, we trust our own creative intelligences and intuition over the prescribed lives of the Ready-Made world. By 'walking-out' from unhealthy, dehumanizing and violent lifestyles, we are 'walking-on' into endless possibilities. Anyone can be a *Swapathgami*, and all are invited to join us for:

Learning Journeys – to connect individuals and groups engaged in exciting thinking and doing.

Celebrations/Gatherings/Public Dialogues – space to explore crucial issues and to build strong relationships between people with common concerns. Possibilities for future collaborations often evolve during these events when the community comes together.

Communications – print, film and web resources to share experiences of walking-out and walking-on.

Communities of Practice – collaborative explorations and sharing of skills. Past groups have focused on a diversity of projects including (but not limited to) film making, theatre, eco-livelihoods, self-healing, Oasis Game, organic farming and *kabaad se jugaad*.

For more information, explore our website:
www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/walkoutsnetwork.htm

You are invited to share your experiences as a Swapathgami co-creator!

art workshops as an engagement with the soul of communities

After my graduation in Fine Arts from MS University, Baroda, I dreamt of becoming a big-name artist who would engage in gallery-based art practice. However, in my search for a deeper understanding of art beyond the individual realm, I found tremendous meaning in becoming involved with the indigenous communities of Bihar. I spent most of my days in the most economically deprived villages as a Jesuit.

I now embrace a traveler's life, constantly moving from community to community in different states, conducting art workshops. The workshops are formatted to allow the participants to create art without constraints. I never dictate what should be created.

Unfortunately, the capitalist era looks at art as a product with huge profit, competition, fame and glamour, rather than a process. There is so much competition in the whole process that the purity of creativity is stranded.

Perhaps this death of art and aesthetics begins from the moment they become a subject being taught in schools. Art has been misunderstood as merely drawing and painting. Children are being taught uniformly designed short cuts, which curtail their own possibilities for innovation. Schools have been using and standardizing these destructive methods. Are we not maneuvering the death of creativity in children?

Art, as generally perceived, is limited to fixed definitions of what is popularly considered as 'good', 'right' and 'beautiful'. In my workshops, the attempt is to break these definitions and boundaries. My workshops basically address the human need for an open atmosphere in order to encourage a free spirit and creative expression. The atmosphere is grounded on a space of non-judgment and non-compulsive evaluation without a fixed time-table or a rigid format.

The origin of art practice is traced back to the cave-paintings by early human beings. Their art was part of their spiritual rituals and self-expressions. Even today indigenous communities are still engaged in art practices as a way of living and expressing the individual and the community, not as an act of competition.

I consider myself a co-learner rather than a resource person. It is not a teacher-student relationship; rather it is a relationship of co-learners. The workshop becomes a process of personal internal purification for me. I believe the workshops influence the participants, who



may go through similar purification experiences at their own pace. Internal purification means questioning my own lifestyle, which has traces of overemphasis on my own 'comfort' and my own 'success.' This process allows me to assimilate the qualities of simplicity, honesty and sensitivity into my life. I believe in the importance of spending the entire time with the participants: laboring with them, eating and cooking with them, serving meals to them, singing and dancing, and even sleeping alongside them.

The art workshops have challenged some of my perspectives and strengthened my convictions. I realize now that anything we do from our heart is art. In order to acknowledge and appreciate the creator within, one has to become fearless of oneself and consequently of others. Becoming fearless means responding to the promptings of the inner self and accepting oneself as one is. To create art is to create oneself.

We are able to create communities because the creative force within us enables us to build relationships with oneself, other human beings, nature and the cosmos. Perhaps, this is the reason why artistic expressions are an integral part of the everyday lives of tribal communities. My workshops should be looked at from this larger point of view: as a means to regenerate the soul of the communities through their expressions.

Art can no longer be limited to creating beautiful objects. Rather it must involve creating good human beings: human beings as works of art and expressions of love.

I visualize myself continuing this engagement with as many communities as possible in the coming years, going through a process of unlearning more unhealthy concepts accumulated in my life. I invite you to join me.

- **Blaise Joseph**, Patna
<blaisesj@gmail.com>

Film Review: 3 Idiots

Aamir Khan's *3 Idiots* has been touted as being the highest grossing Indian film ever. It has spawned a huge cult of 'idiots', who dream of defying the System and breaking institutionalized barriers in pursuit of the deepest truths. "Aal izz well", its simplistic little motto, is the new anthem of the masses, blurted out whenever a desperate situation demands a beam of optimism.

The story begins with two friends, Raju and Farhan, who leave everything behind, from their trousers to an international flight, to embark on a search for their long lost friend who has disappeared into the mists shrouding the hills of Shimla. They are led by their once arch-nemesis, Chatur, who has his own agenda to look for Mr. Lost, Rancchodas Shymaldas Chhanchad (Rancho for short).

The narrative, like many great ones, is told through a series of flashbacks about these three idiots' engineering college days together, their constant skirmishes with the principal (nicknamed by the students as ViruS) and their run-ins with the teacher's pet, Chatur. These flashbacks, interspersed with happenings in the present, ultimately lead to unveiling of the mystery surrounding Rancho and his disappearance.

My friends, many of whom were engineering students, could completely empathize with the unfair trials, faced by the three protagonists. According to them, being someone like Rancho, who always stands up against the System, yet still excels in it — just out of his sheer brilliance — was possible only in their wildest fantasies. Most of my friends identified with the other protagonists: Farhan, whose real interest is in wildlife photography but is forced to get a degree in engineering by his ambitious father and Raju, who likes engineering but is scared of failing and losing out in the rat-race.

Through cheeky visuals and sharp dialogues, *3 Idiots* makes some very strong critiques about competition, institutions and the Indian education system. "Was this suicide or murder?" Rancho asks the principal after a creative student commits suicide, because he was failed for missing a project deadline. Even the song lyrics are powerful: *Saari umra hum, mar mar ke jee liye, ek pal ab hamein, jeene do*

jeeno do... (We spent our entire lives leading a dull and zombie-like existence, now, just for one moment, let us actually LIVE...).

Over the last one year, I have been plagued with questions about what I want to learn/do over the next few years as all my peers go about joining mainstream colleges to get professional degrees and certificates. A part of me is also attracted to that; experiencing 'college life' and having the security of a degree in my hands. But watching this film, I became more aware of the stark uselessness of a degree. I realized that if I discover my real passion — what I really, truly enjoy doing — and learn and understand that more deeply, I shall be happier than if I sat cramming over a textbook, in a desolate room, in a desolate college, amongst desolate people, all driven by the wicked desperation that only competitive exams can elicit.

I heard of a few people who, after watching this film, found the courage to quit conventional college and start following their hearts. However, many just watched the film for the sake of entertainment, let the questions it raised play around in their heads for a day or two, and then went back to being dumbed down by the routine of the institutionalized world.

So the question really is: can films like these that raise questions about institutionalization and thought control really motivate people to change? Can these films provide the encouragement to help people make that one final push? Or is that asking too much? Because, in the end, *3 Idiots* is a commercial film, meant for entertainment of the masses and, from the perspective of the producers, for making lots of money.

As for my story, taking inspiration from this film, I decided to quit the formal system and am helping build a new

real-world solution to the education crisis. I have joined Swaraj University to co-create an innovative learning community for young people. Instead of studying abstract theories in a college, I am giving myself the space to explore my diverse passions, practice my values in my life, collaborate with a vibrant community of idiots, and along the way, to let myself finally 'jeene do'...

- **Sakhi Nitin-Anita**, Nashik
<sakhina@gmail.com>



swaraj university: an interview with Reva Dandage



How did you become interested in alternative education?

My own experience with education was not great. I failed in 12th grade in almost every subject. Two of my peers who also failed committed suicide shortly afterwards. This moved me tremendously. I eventually

retook and passed the tests for 12th grade and entered university. I was able to do well there, which to me, demonstrated to me that the education system didn't make sense and that it didn't understand me. I began looking out for alternatives that acknowledged who people are and their various learning styles and gifts. So I spent the next seven years visiting, learning about, and working with free schools in the U.S., England, and Israel, as both a student and a staff member. The purpose was to learn and to find out what I could start back in India. I understand the system better in India, as I grew up in it, and that was where all my frustration came from, so I felt inspired to create something here.

What is the most exciting aspect of your work?

The space at Swaraj excites me because it's really what our society needs right now: people living out their dreams and not just becoming corporate puppets. I love supporting young people who are trying to live according to their deepest values. It's also exciting to see that the work that the learners are doing is helping to take care of local communities, all living beings, and the planet.

The khojis (seeker-learners) have a place where they can not only follow their own interests, questions and talents, but also can express their emotional needs. We are close like a family. We talk about our relationships, our hurts, our hopes, and our struggles and dilemmas with our families and communities. Healing is a really important part of the learning process.

Personally, for the first time, I am in intimate contact with a group of people from very different socio-economic backgrounds than mine. I know the khojis' stories much better. It has made me see my privileges in a different, more powerful way and encouraged me to think about how to use these for positive change.

What will the learners do after they 'graduate'? Will they get a degree from Swaraj University?

At Swaraj University, we are challenging the system of

superficial degrees and, instead, equipping each khoji to create a portfolio that documents all of their practical learning, reflections and experience over the two years.

The mission of Swaraj is to nurture new community leaders, who are ready to face today's challenges in innovative and compassionate ways. These are unique people doing work in unique fields (even creating new disciplines and careers). Concrete skills, practical knowledge levels, attitudes and networks matter much more than a degree. I feel confident that when the khojis start their own green enterprises, they will be able to regenerate their local cultures, ecologies and economies in some amazing ways!

What has been one of your most powerful learning experiences in Swaraj University?

I had an aha! moment when I went on the cycle *yatra* learning journey with the khojis. After having grown up in upper-middle class India and living in the US for nine years, where everything revolves around one's economic status, I nervously joined the cycle *yatra*. We headed out on our bicycles, without the security of money in our pockets and, therefore, without the security of food and shelter. I had heard that people were caring in rural India, but I was still overwhelmed by the experience. Families would make sure our bellies were full before their own. Some could barely afford their own meals and, yet, they still welcomed us into their homes. It made me wonder why people who have financial wealth can't share it as easily as those who don't have it. This experience challenged me to think about how can I be more generous and hospitable in my own life.

What do you personally want to learn more about?

My current motivation is to learn to live a simpler life. I'm excited to move to Tapovan Ashram, which is 20 km from Udaipur. It has organic farming and medicinal plants, and serves as the current campus for Swaraj University. I want to be closer to the land, learn to experiment with growing my own food and healing myself, and be in better connection with Gaia. I'm also trying to understand myself better so that I can be more true to my spirit and to the people around me.

Swaraj University is based on the philosophy of self-designed learning and green entrepreneurship. There are no formal qualifications required to join. Ustaads (faculty-mentors) are situated all over the country. For more information, please visit www.swarajuniversity.org or Swaraj University on facebook. Contact Reva at <reva@post.com> or 09414155919.

"We are not threatened by silence. We are completely at home in it. From our earliest times, our Aboriginal way has taught us to be still and wait. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course - like the seasons. We watch the moon in each of its phases. We wait for the rain to fill our rivers and water the thirsty earth. When twilight comes we prepare for the night. At dawn we rise with the sun. We watch the bush foods and wait for them to open before we gather them. We wait for our young people as they grow, stage by stage, through their initiation ceremonies. When a relation dies we wait for a long time with the sorrow. We own our grief and allow it to heal slowly. We don't worry. We know that in time and in the spirit of Dadirri [deep inner listening] the way will be made clear."

Adapted from Miriam Rose Ungunmerr

an invitation

The power within *Swapathgami* comes from our own practical experiences and relationships. We invite you to share your essays, poems, cartoons, photographs, stories, quotes, films, books, websites, etc. We print both English and Hindi editions. Contact:

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thanks! thanks. thanks & thanks ^ thanks...

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learning webs:

online education resources

- A selection by Jack Plafker <jlpmhs@gmail.com>

There are plenty of great learning resources on the web to help you self-design your own personalized education program:

WikiMedia sites are 'free' (as in both 'speech' and 'beer') encyclopedia, dictionary, textbook collection, primary source material and other resources created using the same unique consensus-based and volunteer-driven model that is most often associated with **Wikipedia**. It is very impressive, with extensive documentation to explain its process for skeptics. <http://www.wikimedia.org/>

iTunesU and **Youtube EDU** are basically the same idea with different delivery mechanisms. They are freely accessible videos of lectures from professors at top-notch universities, on every topic of study imaginable. Youtube EDU is found at <http://youtube.com/education> and iTunesU is accessible through <http://itunes.com/>

P2PU (Peer2Peer University) promotes "Learning for everyone, by everyone, about almost anything." A newly-launched 'people's education' program, P2PU offers six-week courses offered on university-level topics. Each course is organized by a volunteer and co-taught by the students themselves utilizing the wealth of free materials available online. <http://p2pu.org/>

Internet Archive is an online multimedia library, including fan-taped copies of many concerts, archived copies of old websites, public-domain books, and more. <http://archive.org/>

TEDTalks offer "Ideas worth spreading." Find free videos of 18-minute conference lectures by scholars from all different fields. <http://ted.com>

For more self-design learning sites, visit:

<http://www.marcandangel.com/2010/11/15/>

[12-dozen-places-to-self-educate-yourself-online/](http://www.marcandangel.com/2010/11/15/12-dozen-places-to-self-educate-yourself-online/)