making our own paths of learning and living

swapathgami
the walkouts-walkons network

The Network is a collection of people engaged in exploring individual pathways outside of institutionalized structures. As swapathgamis, we trust our own creative intelligence over the prescribed lives of the Ready-Made world. By 'walking-out' from unhealthy and isolating 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.

**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, music, eco-livelihoods and kabaad se jugaad.

For more information, explore our website: <www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/walkoutnetwork.htm>

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

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**network update**

Over 40 people gathered, from all around India, to explore the wonderful world of 'waste' and what could be done with it! Paper curtains, beads and containers; shoes and purses of rubber tires; toys and games of wooden scraps; gemstone dust paintings; and more was shared and created by swapathgamis. The children of Karm Marg added lots of energy to the meet, as did the theater games and fire-side dancing and singing. How to make a zero waste life possible, how to improve products made of waste (so they are beautiful, useful and durable), and how to engage with local community members on transforming waste, were among the issues actively pursued. To learn more, contact Shibu Nair <shibu@thanal.org> or Vishal Singh <shikshantar@yahoo.com>.

**kabaad se jugaad meet**

**karm marg, faridabad**

**december 16-19, 2005**

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I like to cycle. I have tried a few times in Delhi where I live, but in about ten kilometres I ended up coughing and splattering. It was worse than the cigarettes I smoke.

When the first opportunity arose to cycle through villages in Rajasthan, I grabbed it with both hands. There was a rider though. No one was allowed to use money. I was a little apprehensive. It was an unforeseen element to the experiment, but it was also exciting.

14 of us we cycled through villages, dancing, singing, painting on walls, working in the fields, swimming in rivulets, meeting people, helping them in their homes, cooking in the open, and lots and lots of talking. Not having to deal with money, we were forced into circumstances that were somewhat unsettling. For example, we had to ask for work – without a resume! We had to ask for food. At times, people gave us cooked food; at other times, we got flour and dal and perhaps some onions, chillies and garlic. We were happy with what we got. We ate with a ferocious appetite.

I had a splitting headache one night and was about to take a pill when Ramawtar saw me and almost scolded, "How can you take pills when I am around?" he said. "See, I can't stand headaches, anything else but not headaches," I said. He made me lie down, put my head in his lap and gave me a massage with an oil he had made himself. I can never forget that massage, because I never believed it would work. While massaging, he told me about his mother who used to look at the night sky and tell what the time was by the position of the stars. So many things to learn.

I learnt about the purpose of art, of poetry and painting and theatre and films, while working in the fields or while cleaning the cattle-shed. Whom am I trying to impress? There are only friends out there. But chiefly what I learnt about was the real value of things, or rather, the value of Real Things; the value of food, of clothing, of trees and fruits and flowing water. How much money does it cost for a tree to bear fruits? Seems suddenly absurd, doesn’t it?

- Sanjay Maharishi, New Delhi <sanjay.maharishi@gmail.com>

**cycle yatra**

**october 25-31, 2005**

An opportunity to be closer to nature. Sleeping under the night stars. Hearing the sounds of birds. Watching the sunset while cleaning cowsheds. Plucking tamarind and other forest fruits when hungry. Taking care of each other in the small difficulties. Learning to cut the crop and realizing it is a skill that takes effort, and that the labor of farmers is devalued, or rather, the work of city people is overvalued. Yet the work in the fields is more pleasurable. Doing different work brought lots of textures into my hands: cow dung, corn, grass, flour, mud, limestone, and more. I can still feel those.

After living in a city where the rivers have become drains, to then bathe in a pond or stream made me feel more accountable towards my contribution in polluting the water. In asking for food, I learned humility. I enjoyed seeing the pleasure people take in offering some thing to others. It makes me believe that our basic nature is to receive and offer.

On the last day, we traveled through a forest area, and we stopped every half an hour to sit next to the stream, to watch the light through the leaves falling on the water, to see the beautiful patterns that form when the stream comes across a stone.

- Shammi Nanda, Jaipur, India <shammi_nanda@yahoo.com>
why did you walk out of ... ?

professional architecture

In 1988, as fresh graduates with degrees in architecture, and disillusioned with the formal education system, we moved to the village community of Gandhigram <www.gandhigram.org> in Tamil Nadu. Our disillusionment came about with our active participation as students in the National Campaign for Housing Rights. This brought us in contact with a number of grass roots activist organizations and NGOs and gave us a peek into the rural reality, which we had no clue about, as students of architecture. We realized the severe limitations of the formal educational system and its lack of relevance to problems on the ground. One of us gave up the idea of preparing for higher education and the other discontinued from the Masters course in Architecture midway.

Actually, architecture used to be taught through apprenticeship till mid-20th century. Even when we were in college, there would be apprentices who would come for evening classes. This has changed dramatically now. In the informal sector, there is much exploitation of apprentices and no culture of pride in teaching/learning skills — mainly due to the formal sector’s dominance in our consciousness. Ideally, we should break this deep divide between learning at ‘work’ and learning in institutions.

Our work in Gandhigram was a beginning in the long process of re-educating ourselves. We had to learn many skills from scratch (such as masonry) and learn properties of common but unknown (to us) building materials, such as mud. We also had to motivate and train (and train ourselves in the process) our own team of construction workers who would be interested in alternative and environmentally sustainable building technologies. We received a lot of support from ASTRA - Center for Sustainable Technologies in the Indian Institute of Science (Bangalore, India) in learning about alternative technologies. This was a formative, crucial phase in our life, when we made friends with like-minded people; and decided to get married and stick to living and working in rural areas.

Today, you can find our family in Sittilingi, where we have created Thulir, a rural learning community of indigenous children. Our children are learning in their own ways, outside of school and alongside the children of the community. We are hoping to nurture all of the children’s own curiosity and capacities, connect them with sympathetic and motivating adults, encourage them to learn skills useful to their communities, which ultimately enable them to live lives of dignity.

- Anuradha and Krishna, Sittilingi, India <thulir@rediffmail.com>

A LINGERING SONNET SEEKING

learn to love the questions
~ Rainer Maria Rilke

perhaps it’s not so much what I walked out on
since now I’m here shivering looking at the moon
wondering where it goes and how the corn rises
and if the moon weeps when there’s a war.
since there is still always a war and someone
planning on a profit a winning I wonder if the moon
turns into a constant weeping — tears of Isis
unseen tides breaking the beach an apocalyptic fire

I want to see where an old man’s eyes
go and a woman’s womb and breasts made of fire
(the surgeons fear this unquenchable fire
an ire even their scalpels can’t calm
but I want to know where it goes).

what happens to a baby’s milky coo
when its throat falls and treads a trail of hunger?
a young man’s ears when all he hears it the thunder
of tongues of tanks turning round and round on his sighs?

like him I’m in the dark so I might as well be a seed
— but how? can these poor lines spiral down and succeed
into root stem heart and leaf
into the strange and untamed power
of some fine-tuned trembling perfectly vulnerable flower?

- Elaine Upton, New Mexico, USA
<emupton@yahoo.com>
questioning the welfare State

I grew up in Denmark listening to seemingly endless public debates on how to best extend the gifts of welfare to the entire population. The welfare-state had become such an integral part of our national identity, that this seemed to be the only problem left worth discussing. From the Danish media, I inherited a view that welfare was the only really humane way of dealing with people. It took me time to realize why this much-celebrated show of human compassion felt so cold to me.

My parents were both working, so as a child I didn’t know much about unemployment benefits or state pensions, the cornerstone of Danish welfare. Only when my grandmother got sick and was hospitalized for months did I begin to realize what welfare meant in real life. It meant that we would not have to worry about paying for treatment; that we did not have to locate a qualified doctor ourselves; that my grandmother would be largely free from pain; and, most importantly, that our security was guaranteed. In theory, it sounded good to me (at least then), but I couldn’t shake the sensation of it being inhuman in its actual practice. Why was my grandmother being treated by people that didn’t know her, didn’t have time to get to know her, and most likely, did not even want to know her? The system saw her as a number in a row of suffering objects waiting to be relieved of their pain, instead of seeing her as a being with a whole range of emotions. I hated that my grandmother was treated in a mechanical process that she clearly was too human for. But I was young then and didn’t think in such intellectual terms, and since everyone else seemed content with her treatment at the hospital, I kept silent.

Yet this uneasiness continued throughout my youth. Though I passed through numerous political phases, I never really felt at peace with the idea of welfare. I kept seeing the same strange mechanical logic of the state in schools, hospitals, taxes and so on. But while in Denmark, I never managed to distance myself enough from society to be conscious of its values. When I went to an international high-school in Norway with people from 80 different countries, I learned more about the conditions of life in other parts of the world. Their life-stories were still abstract to me, though, so only after travelling in India for a few months did I begin to remotely grasp what my friends had been telling me.

Gradually I became conscious of the fear of discomfort so deeply ingrained in the welfare-state. In an attempt to abolish suffering, we used the most effective structure we knew. The Machine. The logic of the machine is applied to human beings in the name of efficiency. “People MUST be cared for, suffering in solitude is inhuman,” we say and pay someone to care for our sick neighbors. “Education should be state-run and universal, in the name of freedom and equality,” we say and force everyone into one system of schooling. “Suffering is ugly, we must help those less fortunate than us” we say and give millions of dollars to make other countries more like ours. I see the welfare-state as a seductive sugarcoating of the same old, bitter industrial pill. In a sense, it is easier to fight against the evils of industrialism with its obvious objectification and exploitation of workers, than it is to fight against the cold but comfortable structure of the welfare state. In Nordic countries, the struggle against the inhumanity of the industrial world seems to have been directed towards making life less difficult for people, not more meaningful. So many of the problems of military-industrial society have therefore continued under the surface.

The subtlest effects of this State are however against communities, not individuals. Parents work more to pay high state taxes, so children are institutionalized since a parent can’t stay at home with them, thereby bringing about the disintegration of the already weak family-unit. In both pre-industrial and industrial societies the individual would most often have to rely on his family and community for financial support and job opportunities. When the State takes over this economic safety net, it may have given opportunities to many talented individuals, but it has also brought about the dissolution of old social and cultural groups. If it had led to independence, I would have been the last to criticize it, but its clearest effect so far has been in forcing the individual to be part of one and only one community: THE STATE. As a whole, this mass of welfare-laws is gradually depriving communities of the cohesion that gives them their potential for cultural creation.

Together with western ‘liberal democracy’ the welfare state has become the most stable system known to human history so far. It has no real rebels; it is debated only in terms of its extent and allocation in society. Our fear of discomfort preempts any real possibility for questioning the anesthetization that welfare has brought to Nordic countries. In our narcotic haze, we have sadly grown blind to the fact that we live in one of the only truly totalitarian states that the world has seen. Safe and comfortable no doubt, but totalitarian nonetheless.

- Bastian H. Aue, Denmark
<overbifrost@hotmail.com>
To continue to play the game
Feels to me insane
When everything created by passion is looted
It’s soul polluted
I thought for so long if I contributed
It would shift
Uplift
The craziness I saw around me
Set me free
But now I feel we are collectively drunk
Staggering blind
Searching for truth
All we’ve found is the edge of the roof
I have decided I don’t want to play the game anymore
Fuck the rules
I don’t like the way you score
I’m headed for the door
New shore
To explore

The more I participated
The more I hated
Who I became
Looked for someone to blame
’Cause I found myself contributing to some master plan
Which compromised who I am
That was not born out of what I deeply know
It felt like some crazy show
That should be on the early afternoon TV
Only it was the reality
I got lost in smoking weed
Ignoring my deep need
For purpose and passion
Ignored my world crashin’
To the ground
Around me
Lost touch with my family
Forgot what it felt like to be free
Of weight on my shoulders
As I rolled boulders
Up the mountain
Only to let them roll down again
But somehow I knew I was never meant
To live this winter of discontent
In my anxiety and restless stress
There was a whispering
Beyond my feeling of being powerless
What if I was to say YES?
Instead of “I can’t” and “I don’t know”
What if I straightened my back
Shrugged the boulders from my shoulders?
What would happen to me
If I followed my dreams?
The canopy of my illusion, confusion
Began to come apart at the seams
The hardest thing was the choices

The constant internal voices
Of my conditioning
Ringing like an alarm
It was hard to stay calm
As I left my well-paid job
My apartment in the centre of town
My role as the clown
My friends and girlfriend
All saw it as the end
But I felt like I was just beginning
Half the time crying, half the time grinning
At every step I took into the light
I had to stand and fight
My fears
Come to know that each of my tears
Shed
Was moving me ahead
Closer to my core
New shore to explore

The further I walked away
The clearer the game became
And I realised the only person to blame
Was me
For not taking responsibility
For playing along
With a way of life
I had known was wrong
Now I was becoming strong
Choosing another way
Choosing not to play
Choosing to stay
In my own sanity
Which I know is really planetary
I’ve got this feeling if we all stopped playing the game
& began to focus on finding another way that was sane
The old systems would crumble
The leaders stop to mumble
Excuses
For the abuses
Against our deepest humanity
Which I know is really planetary
To continue to play the game
Feels to me insane
When everything created by passion is looted
It’s soul polluted...
So now I have decided I don’t want to play the game anymore
Fuck the rules
I don’t like the way you score
I’m headed for the door
New shore
To explore

- Tim Merry, The Shire, Canada
<tim@oftheshire.org>

For more poetry slams, visit www.timmerry.com
Walking out from fast and easy consumerism is the first step to decreasing our dependency on institutions that devalue personal power and local traditions. Practicing the skills we have, sharing them among friends and stewarding the resources of our specific environments allows us to live in a more meaningful way.

While in school, a mother dog had mildly scratched me (not bitten). This could have been treated with simple iodine or antiseptic wash. But the municipal hospital doctor, without even examining me, jabbed me with two anti-tetanus and 14 mega painful injections on the abdomen. The treatment was much worse than the 'dog bite.' It was then I decided that I would become a better doctor and I pursued holistic healing modalities. Today, I am a full-fledged Naturopath. I also studied Ayurveda, Yoga, Homoeopathy and Acupuncture.

Except for the sweet pills of homoeopathy, my two sons do not know the taste of medicines. They never drink Coke or Pepsi. I gave away my refrigerator to my brother some 15 years ago, television to my watchman eight years ago. I will not accept microwave even if someone were to gift it to me. I can afford a car, but I prefer traveling by public transport. At home, we still drink matka water.

I have also not vaccinated my children. When my younger son fractured his hand (radius and ulna were broken), I repaired it without surgery: no screws, plates, antibiotics, etc. Only, plaster cast for three weeks, homoeopathy and massage. Likewise, I treated my wife of a 'slipped disc' and other complications without surgery 18 years ago, and she is fit as a fiddle and participating with me in all activities.

In 1985, I wrote, in an editorial entitled Health Care is Self Care, "The present health system is top-heavy, over-centralized, and heavily curative in its approach, urban and elite-oriented, costly and dependency creating". If diabetics have to live with insulin for lifetime, if asthmatics have to sleep with a pump, if high BP patients have to take anti-hypertensives for life, and others have to take anti-cholesterol, thyroid medicine, antacids for life; if cancer patients are made to suffer from chemotherapy (treatment worse than the disease); obviously it means allopathy is a bogus science. Earlier it was a lone battle. Today, there are many groups like mine working against medical quackery.

Dr. Leo Rebello, Mumbai, India
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When I was young and would get hurt, my family would tell me to pee on my wound. We didn’t have Band-Aids or hospitals where I lived, so I did as told. I didn’t understand how it worked, but it did; urine would heal my wounds. Years later, my wife brought home a book on urine therapy. After reading it, I felt like I should give it a try. Those days, I had a terrible pain in my shoulders and was taking allopathic drugs for it. When I first tried urine, my mind was an obstacle. Its smell and taste was strange to me. When I took a larger quantity the next day, I felt a burning sensation in my stomach. I worried that it might be an infection, but then remembered that nothing poisonous exists in urine. Rather, it is excess water filtered by our kidneys, which contains vitamins, hormones, antibiotics, etc. Five days later, I felt a lot less pain in my shoulder. Even the exhaustion I felt climbing the office stairs reduced considerably. The change was magic.

I read more and learned that older urine (at least three days old) was really beneficial. I had a patch of fungus on my head which was relieved by using it. I then started a 'urine facial' and soon found my skin glowing. It replaced my after-shave lotion! When my son Aditya was three, he came down with excema (a skin disease). The allopathic doctor said there was no cure. After some research, I decided to bathe him in a mixture of water and his own urine. In about 20 days, his skin recovered fully. Since then, whenever Aditya has fallen ill, I mix his urine with orange or lemon juice and give it to him.

Despite living a stressful life in Mumbai, urine therapy has kept me out of hospitals and away from doctors and antibiotics. No multinational or NGO can patent or own it; this health power is entirely in our own hands.

- Sudarshan Juyal, Mumbai, India
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Check out The Golden Fountain by Coen van der Kroon (1993) to learn more about healing through urine.

Walking out from fast and easy consumerism is the first step to decreasing our dependency on institutions that devalue personal power and local traditions. Practicing the skills we have, sharing them among friends and stewarding the resources of our specific environments allows us to live in a more meaningful way.
The most earnestly given advice of a professor at my former art school was to "never give away anything you make." Everything, she reasoned, must be sold if an artist is going to advance in their career. In retrospect, I am glad to have ignored this toxic sentiment. I realize that in my 'career' as an artist I have sold perhaps five or six pieces, but have given away and traded dozens. I have been supported in greater ways by these interactions than had I isolated myself as an artist only interested in selling a product.

I once worked in the kitchen of an artist colony. Every month, 50 artists would come to the colony to paint, sculpt, write, take photos and use the printmaking press. I was able to observe many artists and the wide range of ways they approached their art work. Some artists were, like my former professor, very protective of their ideas, concerned with where they went to school, how many and which galleries they had shown in. They wanted recognition in the art community and distanced themselves from those not of that world.

Other people at the colony seemed to take a different approach. They were excited about art made both on and off the canvas: whether they were doing their laundry, cooking food, talking or drawing. Though a minority at the artist colony, they gave most of the life and energy to the place. Unfortunately, they were often judged for not putting all of their energy into making tangible, visual art. This made me uncomfortable, and I felt torn between wanting to be an artist that other artists respected, and a person who lived artistically, though I might be less 'successful'.

What kind of artist did I want to become? I decided to start being less concerned with the product (the finished painting) and more concerned with the process. I began to willfully re-examine two things in my own practice: Why I was working with oil paint and other highly toxic and expensive materials? and Why I was trying to add to a tradition rooted in elitism and specialization, at the expense of being a part of a more diverse community?

The first question I easily answered. I stopped working in toxic mediums two years ago, though it meant giving up some of my favorite processes. The second question required more time. Once I realized I was dissatisfied with separating visual art from living, the only thing to do was to explore alternatives. I decided to be less concerned with the product (the finished painting) and more with the process. I observed that when an artist sells, they often limit themselves to repeating the same kind of work, for security. When not concerned with satisfying a customer, they allow themselves the freedom to continuously change their style.

My own work concentrates on how individuals interact with their social environment. I use discarded magazines and newspapers to create figurative collages. I then draw from the collages using pen and ink. The figures often appear, upon first glance, to be deformed. Some have two heads or three arms, or the body of a woman and the face of a man. The unconventional appearance is meant to illustrate how our personal experiences and emotional states affect how we interact with our environment.

I have been also incorporating found materials like matchbox covers and patterns from cloth scraps. By including waste in my drawings, I hope to blur the distinction between that which is expendable or unvalued and that which is precious or coveted. By using what is immediately available, my pieces show a specific place and moment, a 'map' or visual diary.

Though social and physical environments are my primary inspirations, I use visual art as an expression of my own thoughts. I do believe, however, that drawings are not ends in themselves, but rather methods with which I support my greater artistic practice of living. Allowing people to touch and look at the art at their own pace creates a better space for more meaningful conversation than an impersonal and isolated gallery ever could. Through conversations, I share how I am expanding my art into my entire way of living and learn how others are also approaching living as art and art as living. The beauty is, no one else can live the art that is your life.

- Rachel Schattman, Vermont, USA
< rachel_vt@hotmail.com >
11-year-old Laloonath shared this account of his mornings in Baga, Goa. Laloonath does not go to school, but rather is taking his learning into his own hands everyday.

6:00 am: I get up. I get on my bike and go exercise on the beach. On some mornings, the sky is over-cast; on others it’s clear. I don’t see much on the way to the beach. I exercise for about an hour; some walking, some jogging and some karate. By the end, I feel quite tired. I like to exercise on the red sand the best.

7:30 am: After that, I go buy a pau-bhaji (a tangy dish of vegetables with a fresh roll) and chai (sweet, milk tea) from a small stall under a banyan tree, at the edge of Baga field. I sit down to eat at the little plastic table. Quite a nice breakfast, I must say.

8:00 am: I go down to where the fishing boats dock to do my sea-snake rounds. You see, the fishermen head out with fish on their mind, but about 10 sea snakes get caught in their nets every day. It used to be around 50-60 a day!!! Now they are becoming less and less common. The Beaked sea-snake and the Short sea-snake are common. The first is one of few aggressive sea-snakes, and it’s the snake I most often encounter. The fishermen don’t take much notice of me; they just help me take the snakes out of the nets. Through these efforts at least one sea-snake is saved a day, though probably caught again in a few days.

8:45 am: I get on my bike and head home. Frequently I hear calls of “Laloonath, Laloonath, sorop, sorop (snake, snake)!”; so I go off after them to their house or some building site. The snakes I’m called to catch (from the most common to the least) are: the Indian rat-snake, Checkered Keel-back, Common Bronze-Back Tree Snake, Spectacled Cobra, Common krait, Russell’s viper, Saw-scaled viper, Common vine snake, Whitaker’s boa, and once an Indian Rock Python. After I catch them, I release them far away. Before I started to relocate snakes, most people would kill them.

9:15 am: I get home and relax a bit. Then, I catch a motor-bike taxi and volunteer at the International Animal Rescue center. I walk dogs, play with puppies and kittens, be the snake advisor and help with the surgeries.

1:30 pm: If I’d have a snake from the morning, I would go and release it far from civilization. Then I get home, have lunch and relax.

- Laloonath, Goa, India
<omanath05@yahoo.com> or <zeevnaja@yahoo.co.in>
searching for a deeper union

My mom had dragged me to the gym again. I was back in the conservative Washington, D.C., area that I grew up calling home. I have come to realize that to share time with my mom, I usually have to spend it ‘running’ next to her on a machine in an air conditioned room, and hopefully getting a word in about how my life is and how she’s doing. This had been our way of hanging out since the 1980s aerobic craze. But it would be different this time, she assured me, they now offered yoga. After studying yoga for two years on my own, I was apprehensive, but gave it a chance. One class later, I left knowing I should ‘officially’ begin teaching yoga asana or postures. My own practice incorporated the beginning stages of yogic breath or pranayama. After my return to San Francisco, I began teaching to friends once a week.

At first, I felt not ‘qualified’ to teach. I didn’t hold a certificate and had been practicing haphazardly myself. I signed up for the one course I had paid for the work they did, and I didn’t feel comfortable making money off of their work, our business plans dissolved. She did not want to start a co-operative. Instead she took our plans and created her own business.

Now I’m in India. I traveled to Haridwar and stayed at the Sri Santosh Puri ashram <www.yoganga.org> for a month. We practiced asana, sometimes in a led class, but mostly by ourselves. It was in this small ashram that I understood the sutras of Patanjali and other yogic concepts through my observation of faithful, devoted practitioners. It was no longer information exchanged in trainings for future asana teachers, but rather mutually sharing in a deep practice. I learned more in my first month here than in all the trainings I participated in before. Wisdom emerges from those who spend their lives in practice, rather than those repeating concepts they have read from multiple books.

When your life is simplified, when you practice meditation/pranayama/asana daily, bathe in the Ganges, and are not bombarded by the media telling you to consume more, you begin to look at your material life with a clearer perspective. Although I live far below the standard of living of my parents, I find myself enjoying certain comforts. I question my level of attachment to the material world. I question whether I could live without my community, family, friends, wonder if I can define my path outside the restrictions of what I ‘should’ do according to my teaching credential, career path. I also wonder what my role is as an activist if I am working on myself and not ‘actively’ engaged with the world’s problems. I am scared, yet I know fear is something to let go of in order to embrace the divine. I am no longer who I was before, yet we are conditioned to keep believing what we are based on the past. Presently this is how I want to live. We will see about the future.

- Eleni Gekas, San Francisco, USA <yoganaki@gmail.com>
I have two sons: Mahal is four and Lake is seven weeks. People often ask if he sleeps through the night. I see the intention behind the question: to connect our worlds and to have some relationship to a being that has nothing to say. Yet another question might be, “What has this baby taught you?” I can’t imagine a parent without an answer that wouldn’t hold infinite jewels of wisdom about an individual baby.

When I became pregnant with Mahal, I knew because I was sick. For me, hyperemesis gravidarum (HG) looked like months of starvation, where every sip of water meant losing a cup of liquid, seizure-like vomiting as many as 20 times a day, every day. I experienced sensory overload so strong that I could smell food 1/4-mile away, khaki was too bright and the word ‘onion’ was overwhelming. There are cures, but no cure works for two women.

It was the ultimate learning journey. Within a week, I went from being ‘all-natural’, with filtered water showers and a chemical-free apartment, to sobbing in a doctor’s office, begging for drugs they had never heard of. I found myself in and out of the emergency room for intravenous fluids and felt depressed that I needed modern technology to have a baby.

Ultimately, I was hospitalized. I found myself as a happily married, responsible adult creating a family, being spoken to as a young, dramatic girl who had gotten herself pregnant. I could feel myself dying, yet the doctor made me feel ashamed and silly for mentioning it. I was expected to just trust the random specialists that kept coming in, poking my belly, telling me what to think, then prescribing something new. When I asked to leave, the doctor said only after I held my food in, which of course I could not. She didn’t even come in a week after my request. I’ve since discovered that many Americans starve to death in hospitals. My husband and mom helped me to ‘escape’.

We began exploring alternative remedies. Through chiropractic’s Neuro-Emotional Technique I found parts of my body that were holding childhood traumas and an emotional resistance to having a child of mixed race. With the help of hypnotherapy I went deeper, saw my own racism towards both our cultures and resentment towards the world.

HG is a very dangerous condition for the mothers, but ironically indicates a very healthy baby that’s putting out an enormous amount of hormones. They use all of the mom’s resources for themselves. Suddenly, it made sense that the baby was being intentional.

After that point, I made a promise to listen to my baby. I began doing things I had always wanted to and found I could hold my food for a few days and gain strength. I became a vegetarian and began a serious yoga practice. Amazingly, each time I noticed something I ‘should’ do, I would get sick again until I did it. That meant moving out of Los Angeles to a small environmentally friendly town in Northern California. Planning a natural chemical-free birth. Not working and preparing to stay home. In the end, it meant living a life of tremendous personal integrity, worthy of this new soul and a great reminder of my own sacred life. It is mind-boggling to look back from this context and see the miracle of every person, conversation, magazine article, event and book that came to me in those nine months. I believe Mahal put them there to help me make those shifts.

Lake created his environment this year in much the same way, with totally new lessons. We chose to deal with the HG on our terms, totally naturally without chemicals or a doctor trying to oversee anything. We wanted to ride it out in our own home, with my brother Franz to support Mahal. As I got sicker, we stopped measuring my well-being in the usual ways – like my weight, how many times I threw up, or how much I didn’t eat. Instead, we lived by the guiding question, “What conversations are we having?” We knew that if we were having meaningful conversations, then vitality, partnership, love and affinity would be present. Physically, I was much more ill this time for months longer. But looking back, this pregnancy is a source of pride and gratitude. My husband David, Mahal, Lake and I completely created a context of wellness that overshadowed any negative physical experience.

The magic was how timely those lessons were. So when I hear of challenges and hardships in other births, I really want to know, “What has this baby taught you?”

- Maya Hackett, Davis, USA
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living my dreams at al-jana (lebanon)

'I wish I were a bird so I can fly to my beloved country'. That's how I first met Al-Jana - through the book it had published for its 'Youg Journalist' project. A friend shared the book as he was telling me about a cartoon workshop Al-Jana was preparing. That was my first visit to the center.

Al-Jana’s full name is Arab Resources Center for Popular Arts (ARCPA). It’s an association based in Lebanon, working with the Palestinian refugee camps. They host efforts like 'The Reading Campaign', which energizes the network of libraries and associations in the camps; an international children’s film festival; a multimedia project through which youth and children can express themselves; and a dynamic summer camp. Al-Jana gives the children of the refugee camp the opportunity to dream — and to dare to share their dreams. For me, it’s a space where we can express ourselves, without being afraid of the reactions.

When Moa’atza Dajani, the founder-director, asked me to participate in the first summer camp, I didn’t hesitate to accept. I was so happy to be part of such an experience. But I never knew that it would change a lot of things inside of me. The summer camp was a ‘bouquet’ of the best skills for working with children and youth. It takes place in the Lebanese mountains and consists of workshops for librarians and youth volunteers in the refugee camps. I had the chance to learn with different artists from all over the world: dance, performance, making films, telling stories and ‘translation’.

Besides the workshops, I also have learned a lot about working on a team with people older than me. The second year, I took care of the girls’ dorm, and that’s when I discovered that sometimes, adults can be more demanding than children! I was in situations where I had to tell them what to do, without them feeling that I was rude to them — which was a big challenge for me! But I had a lot of fun, even while doing serious tasks. This is why the summer camp is so special.

With Al-Jana, each activity is an experience through which to learn and understand new things. Like in the Reading Week, I achieved my dream of performing on stage for a big audience. Believe me, there is no feeling in the world like when you are performing for little children, who open their eyes as wide as they can with a big smile on their faces as they watch you. I will never forget how the children took my hand during the parade of actors, and how sad they were at the end, saying, “Why are you leaving now?”

Over the last two years, Al-Jana has been working with walkout children and sharing the ‘walk-out, walk-on’ concept to offer a different perspective to librarians and animators. For this, I helped to do some research on ‘why children leave schools?’ and then created and performed in a play about this issue. The play focused on exposing the many factors related to walking out. We gave the children a chance to share their opinions by having open conversation time after each scene.

In a few years with Al-Jana, I learned the meaning of being happy during work, the importance of seeing happiness on the faces of others. I learned to have faith in new ideas, without being afraid of what can happen at the end, and not to be afraid of the child inside of me, but instead, to give this little girl in me the freedom to do what she wants, because only children do not fear new experiences. There are a lot of other things that I don’t have the words to express, because they have become part of my personality, and words are not the perfect way to tell what we have learned and become.

I don’t know why I keep working and volunteering here, but I do know that each time I think about working somewhere else, I feel lost. Al-Jana has given me a path, and I feel that this way respects my presence as a human person, and respects others. I feel I am working for something real, like the Palestinian struggle, and this gives me energy to work a lot without feeling like I am being used. This way of working leaves me free to explore life in new ways, because any other place would put me in the prison of the system.

- Racha, Beirut, Lebanon
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All are more than welcome to participate in any of Al-Jana’s activities. Contact Moa’taz Dajani at <arcpa@cyberia.net.lb> or www.al-jana.com to learn more.
My parents and I had already decided that school wasn’t the only thing in life that was important. Why sit trapped in four walls and slave over your homework when you have the whole world at your feet, to explore? I decided to take a year off school. Mind you, I was very reluctant at first; school and the people in it were the only thing I had. How could I leave my best friends? But I decided to try it and skip school.

It was during that year that I came upon the Teenage Liberation Handbook (TLH) by Grace Llewellyn. On the first page, there was this story about a little girl who grew up in this orchard, always wishing that she could eat those fruits high upon those trees. And she starts her own way, picking up berries from the bushes first, jumping, and trying to reach the higher berries. But her parents send her to an ‘eating class’ where they give her canned, mixed fruit. They make her jump, compare her to the others, have competitions, make her sick of fruits, and finally give her a certificate saying she has passed and can eat fruits on tall trees. She goes out. Into her orchard. She can reach the fruits now. She plucks one, takes a bite, and throws it away. It’s not interesting anymore.

When I decided to skip school, there were questions. I had them, so had my friends and relatives. How are you going to study? What about exams? Don’t they increase achievement and concentration? How are you going to achieve a goal? What made you really leave school? Didn’t you have friends there? Then why? What was the worst thing about school? I tried to tell them that there was no worst thing about school, this was just an experiment. But the question stuck in my head.

Many things about school made it more like a four-walled prison than a learning space. And I found out what those things were from this handbook: competition, grades, rankings, teacher-dominance-student-obedience, and the fact that school doesn’t provide us any freedom. Why does a free, democratic country believe in the principle of ‘caging’ children so they’ll learn better? And over that, why must school teach us these ‘values’? Like telling us that farmers feed us and that India’s leading occupation is still agriculture, but also telling us how poor farmers are and why we should try not to be a farmer...It’s not just schools that we are ‘walking out’ of, I guess, it’s a whole system of society. Maybe this is a first step in changing our entire lifestyles, in leaving the world of competition, success...

Success was an interesting topic discussed in the book. Does success mean being better than your elder sibling, who is always getting top marks in everything? Or does it mean slaving your way through the best years of your life, just to get a good job and please your parents? Once I heard a story of a boy who always topped all exams at university and then went onto his first job. On the first day, his boss came over and called him a dumb idiot for a mistake he’d made. The boy felt so ashamed, humiliated, because he had never known what failure was. Had never made a mistake before. So when he did, he felt so bad, so hurt, that he went and killed himself. This story may or may not be true, I don’t know, but whatever. The point remains. It got me thinking about Rabindranath Tagore, who never went to school. What if he had gone and gotten lost in math and history and geography? Then maybe he would have never seen the poetry in things. And India would have lost one of her greatest poets.

All this I had experienced in my school life. Haven’t we all? But I never saw it that way. And I don’t think many people do. This book gave me the insight I needed, and also indirectly let me know that what I was doing was the right thing. Of the many ‘handbooks’ or ‘survival guides’ I have read, this one was also the most inspirational. The others had orders or instructions. Here, it was personal experiences, more of sharing with me, "I did this; and it was good", instead of "Do this. It’s good for you."

For teens like me who are happy with their school, please read this. It gives you a whole new perspective about schools. And for people who are bored with your schools and want to just walk away, please read this too. It also has things like how to convince your parents and what you could do once you get out of school. That helped me a lot too, as I was worried how I was going to plan a routine for my studies. The book said I didn’t need any routine. I could roam free, not do anything, sit and stare all day at the blue sky; and I still could learn a lot of things. Better than sitting and slogging on a history textbook.

So give TLH a read. If it doesn’t change your views about schools and institutions on the whole, at least you’ll get some questions to think about.

- Sakhi, Nashik, India
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people tree - new delhi

In my case, whatever I have done in life so far, nothing was really planned. It is not that I chose to do different things or to do things differently. Actually there was no option; for me that was the only way to be. Very early on, I realized anything regular or mediocre (where one is supposed to follow rules and methods) will kill me. So naturally, there was lot of confusion and chaos in the growing period, because I knew what not to do but I did not know what to do. In the moment, I think, I knew that I would find the conviction to be honest to my true self, and everything else would follow. That matters.

While learning to draw and paint and think, I came to know of People Tree. People Tree accepted me the way I was. It helped me to gain more faith in myself. While providing a workplace, it also provided a personal space for me to grow within.

Whatever work you do there, it coincides with what you truly believe in life. So it is not really work as a job. For example, when designing T-shirts, I constantly choose to express my own thought process at that time. It is like, I must get it out, sometimes like a compulsion. It could be my helpless anger and frustration at the growing hatred and communalism in the country, or it could be an unedited poem about my inner journey.

I love designing things for People Tree. While making a T-shirt, I am not thinking about the current fashion trends or the market. On the contrary, I may be even trying to go against the trend and make something that portrays my individual thoughts. This gets reflected in my style. And then what is really special is that these creations make their own market. They attract people who relate to it in a personal level. They feel happy that their abstract thoughts have been given a somewhat definite appearance.

It still surprises me when, many times, somebody walks in and reads the lines I have written and really connects to them. Especially when, looking at them, I never would have guessed that they would understand something so personal to me. And I think that’s one of the things People Tree does for me: It is a constant endeavor to find meaningful universal expressions for my very personal experiences and thoughts. The varied mediums of expressions, techniques, skills are only tools which I am able to pick up on the way....

Here I will stop with these lines that I had put on a design for T-shirt, which I never expected so many young people to love:

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i can not live
if i have to do things
just because I am expected to do them.
i can not breathe
if i have to do things
just the way they are supposed to be done.
i cannot make life a mere
happy existence,
a fixed pattern of rituals, a
set of rules.
constantly i will fly,
i will dream,
i will realise and
i will live....
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- Sutanu Panigrahi, New Delhi, India  
<hi_sutanu@yahoo.com>

People Tree is a treasure trove tucked away in the hustle and bustle of Connaught Place, New Delhi (8 Regal Building, Parliament Street): a combination design shop, boutique, bookstore, gathering place. Founded by the wife-and-husband team of Gurpreet Sidhu and Orijit Sen, People Tree hosts the creations of a number of diverse artists and designers from across the country. Contact them at: 011-2334-0699; info@peopletreeonline.com; or visit www.peopletreeonline.com to learn more.
design with a difference: an interview with Gurpreet Sidhu

How did People Tree start?
With hand-painted T-shirts!

Let me back up. Both Orijit (my husband and co-founder of People Tree) and I were considered ‘traitors’ by NID, our design school. Unlike our peers who were working in advertising or for museums and making a lot of money, we wanted to do something different. We felt that a design degree did not prepare you for reality outside. But NID’s exposure programs were really wonderful because they showed us traditional crafts and lifestyles — a whole different world from our middle class life.

One of our first projects was to create the design for the Government’s Department of Women and Child Welfare. But it raised a lot of questions: Why is there so much money wasted? Who is seeing these exhibitions? Aside from the contractors, is anyone else benefiting? Orijit had been facing similar questions while doing design work in London. We decided together not to do this kind of work anymore.

To earn a bit of money, we had a party to hand-paint T-shirts and sell them. We thought we could bring art to the street, to share pains and passions of the real world, but not at ‘gallery prices’. We used this space, where my grandparents had a medical shop in the 1950s. That’s how it started.

How did your parents feel about this decision?
They weren’t happy at all! I mean, they were quite open and liberal as I was growing up, and were fine with my decision to go into design, crafts, environmental issues. But when we left that to open People Tree, they thought we were socialists! Ultimately, they said, “Let these lunatics do what they want.” Now, of course, because things are going quite well, they are happy with it.

How do you operate People Tree?
We have never taken funding from anyone. Funding kills creativity. Instead of taking any subsidies, we started with what we could set up on our own. In making ourselves vulnerable, we were open to both the great stuff and the bad stuff. Putting our concerns down on T-shirts attracted many people who are not designers: like activists, NGO workers, etc. Their desire to share information and projects led us to open a book section in the store. On the other hand, we often met people who had money but who would say, ”It costs too much!” To start a dialogue, I would respond, “You paint the T-shirt yourself and then tell me how much it should be.” Some wonderful relationships came out of this too.

We started bartering to deal with money issues in a different way, so that exchanges could happen. People also regularly come in with products to sell, so we discuss pricing together. Fair trade is definitely on our minds: for the artist, for us, for the buyer. We constantly have to work on this; it is an ongoing process.

What role do you see People Tree playing in the business sector?
This is a sampling store. We try to put forth lots of new ideas for people to consider. Nothing is patented; we don’t want to control anything. If things like paper bags can be produced in larger quantities, then that can be good for everyone. Also, we feel small shops like ours ought to come up in local communities. They can both exchange and sell things, as well as challenge invading products like plastic, by making new choices available.

How can I or other swapathgamis become part of People Tree?
I’ve been asked this question many times, and I don’t have a perfect answer. Here, we have attracted artists, animators, designers, who feel claustrophobic in the commercial art world and are disenchanted with the way creativity is mis-used, as well as young people who have a passion for design. I agree that going to school and colleges has no meaning, as they don’t prepare you for life outside. I can connect you with other groups and organizations that match your interests, as well as offer feedback on your own designs and creations.

Beyond her tough exterior, Gurpreet Sidhu has a sensitive and caring core. She is a motivator, who always seeks to bring out the creativity and beauty in each person. Making money is the least of her concerns! Gurpreet gives 100% and her larger vision makes People Tree what it is. Although she is a multi-tasker who is perpetually running late, you can reach her at <peopletreeonline@gmail.com>.
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. Contact: Shilpa or Ramawtar c/o Shikshantar 21 Fatehpura, Udaipur (Raj) 313004 India Phone: +91-294-245-1303 Web: www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/walkoutsnetwork.htm Email: shilpa@swaraj.org

an invitation

"... So you are on the brink of madness. This is a good bit of news, majestic in its fearfulness, fearful in its majesty and beauty. I say that madness is the first step towards unselfishness. Be mad. Be mad and tell us what is behind the veil of 'sanity'. The purpose of life is to bring us closer to those secrets, and madness is the only means."
- Khalil Gibran, 1921

learning webs:
eco-building and eco-living

**Auroville**
www.auroville.org

For over 30 years, the city of Auroville (Tamil Nadu, India) has been engaging in appropriate architecture. This website shows building materials, building technology, eco-friendly architecture, climate responsive designs, integration with natural surroundings, cost-effective buildings, spatial design... Auroville’s work has spilled over into the design and management of infrastructure, rainwater harvesting systems, domestic waste water treatment plants and renewable energy systems.

**Path to Freedom**
www.pathtofreedom.com

The mission of this group says it all: Providing pathways for living a self-sufficient lifestyle in an urban setting. The Dervaes family’s site offers many excellent how-to articles on everything: Agriculture, Personal Care, Animals, Water & Waste, Food & Cooking, Alternative Energy, Skills & Crafting, Healthy Home, and Alternative Building. With pictures, diagrams and stories, eco-friendly possibilities not only become clear, but they also become practical and practice-able. Get started!

**Greenhouse Project**
www.greenhouse.org.za

The Greenhouse Project based in Johannesburg, South Africa, is practically demonstrating how to build, cultivate, and cycle resources (water, materials and energy), in ways that benefit both the environment and local people. Get inspired by their efforts!

**Green Home Building**
http://greenhomebuilding.com/

This diverse and eclectic site shares building ideas that enable us to live more lightly on the earth and to take greater responsibility for our lifestyles. It has many resources on the various facets of sustainable architecture, which includes renewable energy, local and natural materials use, forestry, water conservation, and growing and storing food. It also has a veritable encyclopedia of natural building, including adobe, bamboo, cob, rock, strawbale and rammed earth. The site also features vernacular architecture from around the world.

Re-membering Nai Taleem: Real Learning for the 21st Century Film Festival is being organized in cities and towns around the country. The festival seeks to inspire deeper dialogues around innovative learning opportunities. Contact Manish Jain <manish@swaraj.org> to learn more.

**TV Turnoff Week** is being celebrated around the world from April 24-30, 2006. Check out <www.tvturnoff.org> to get ideas for organizing an event in your community!