

Global Priors Council  
Chicago

July 29, 1976  
T-425

STAKES, GUILDS AND THE COMMUNITY CONGRESS

I am going to talk about stakes, guilds and the Community Congress or Council. I am going to talk about those things as they show up in Oombulgurri. What I am talking about are the social forms that allow a community to stand on its feet and do its job.

First the stake--the stake has to do with focusing people's care for a particular piece of geography, and that begins with the grid.

Oombulgurri's so small you'd think that would be fairly easy. But until we had walked through Oombulgurri with the old people, and again with the men, the women and the youth, and even the children, we didn't know what was there. We discovered resources, community operating patterns, nodes and relationships that we never dreamed, just by walking and talking. In that process people began to get self conscious of their own geography. Then getting everyone together to draw a picture of the turf and then to push that form and give that geography some significance.

Then you have your grid and your stake is begun. But that walking through continues and keeps going on every week. It doesn't matter if you're handing out a bulletin or just going down to say hello--what is important is those stakes are visited. It doesn't matter if it is you or the stake leader or whoever, but somehow somebody shows up there every week--that is the stake visit.

The stake meeting will sound very familiar to you. You start off with a song or two or three, or twenty minutes worth sometimes, and then you do accountability. We just sit down and say, "Let's see what families are here tonight?", and each family responds, and then absolution is pronounced. Then, there is always a conversation. We have done simple conversations on celebration: "What celebrations do you remember from the past? What are some great celebrations you have participated in this year? What do you expect to be the great celebrations next year for this community?"; spirit conversations on rocks and fire, something that simple breaks them loose. When we did the conversation on the rocks, the old people took over the conversation and began spinning and telling stories. Everybody in the room went away with that in their being for weeks and weeks.

We do some kind of a study. When we first decided to do this the auxilliary had very long conversations about what kind of study we should do and what do Aboriginal people need to know in these times. Finally, people started showing up and we had to make a decision. We decided to teach CS-1. We taught CS-1 for thirteen weeks and again broke people loose. In one section we were working on the global, and it just happened that Mr. and Mrs. Prather came through on a trip and had a slide show on Majuro. They showed the slides one night and then by popular demand showed them the next night. We had had a small stock of tuna fish in KITCO for about three months that was gathering dust on the shelf. People weren't interested in the least in tuna fish, but after seeing the slide show with the tuna fish from Majuro coming off the boats everybody came into the store and asked, "Does that tuna fish come from Majuro? I'll take one." The whole stock was wiped out in one morning. People's images of the globe became exploded and grounded.

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Doing this week after week, people get trained very quickly in that kind of a construct. I will never forget the night we were getting ready for the meeting having our interlude and sitting down, when Olive Evans just marched up to the front of the room. She sat down, did the opening, songs, accountability, and then turned to one of us and said, "Who is doing the conversation tonight?" People get trained in those structures.

Finally, I want to talk about the work day as it is related to the stakes. People plan and implement very concrete jobs, demonstrating their care for a particular, very local piece of geography. Oombulgurri is so small that if a stake does something over here, everybody in town can see it. They want to stop what they are doing and go do the same thing themselves.

One area behind Mary Taylor's house had become a rubbish heap. People had started depositing rubbish there instead of in the proper "tip". They decided they would go out and clean that area one Saturday morning. When they started cleaning it up, everybody else in town dropped what they were doing and started cleaning up their area. You would have thought the Prime Minister was going to show up the next day, because it sparkled. The stake is, finally, focused local care.

The Guild, in relation to that, is a social form organized around a particular concrete task or job to do, like pigs, parks, gardens, buildings. The Guild does three things. It engages, and that has to do with guild constructs. It enlivens, and that has to do with guild symbols. It empowers, and that has to do with doing the whole job.

In Guild constructs, we use a weekly guild meeting, which is a time of planning the details of the week and working out who is going to do what jobs. It is also a time of giving form to the time. KITCO in Oombulgurri does its deposit on Monday, stocks the shelves on Tuesday, works in its garden on Wednesday, stocks the shelves again on Thursday, does the books on Friday and has a big clean up on Saturday. It gives form to time that people can hold in their heads and can begin to operate out of themselves. At the same time, the Guild meetings give form to time, they allow a chance to be sensitive, to be thinking, to be working all the time on acceleration. What is the next leap for this guild?

The daily guild assembly is very short, fifteen minutes, first thing in the morning. It provides the opportunity to set a context for the work of the day. It is a time to do imaginal short courses. We build thirteen weeks of imaginal short courses and take one every morning and drop it at the guild assembly. It is also a time to check and organize. If Harold didn't get all the plowing done yesterday, he needs the tractor again this morning and Henry wanted it to unload the barge. It is a time to check and coordinate where the tractor is going to go.

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We have used trips as self-conscious training events for the guilds as well. One that comes to mind particularly is the trip the Garden Guild made to the agriculture research station in the next town. The Garden Guild men saw two new kinds of irrigation. They came back and decided those were good but that their trickle method was better, and they would stay with that. Another was the one the KITCO ladies made to the big supermarket in the next town. Those are fantastic events. The ladies got dressed up and went into the next town and presented themselves as a guild to the people in that town. The people in the town responded. The KITCO ladies were taken out to lunch and in the one store they went to for training, the manager had thought through ahead of time what she wanted to have happen. She laid out a stock order and actually had the ladies go through and do this particular order. They really learned something. They came back to Oombulgurri, and the next order they got, they did it exactly the same way.

Also under training is the whole issue of the shadow. What that finally is about is your being able to stand in the shadow of a giant. The guild leaders have got to have five stars down their shoulders, each one of them.

Oombulgurri looks at assignments every six months at the end of the quarterly planning. That's the time to check to see all the bases have been covered. We have found this out with the pigs. We started out with three pigs, but when a sow has piglets she can have up to eleven at a time. When we had three pigs one man could do the pigs, but when two sows farrowed within one week of each other, all of a sudden we had twenty-two pigs. The guild assignments have got to change to be able to handle that. It is a time for everyone to see the whole picture and decide how the whole job is going to get done. It is hard when you have to pull someone out of the Construction Guild and put them over to handle all of the piglets. But everybody makes the decision about getting the whole job done.

Then there is something I call cross-guild events. That's when guilds work directly on each other. Inter-guild work happens when there is a job that's too big to be done by one guild or a job that takes too long for one guild to do. One of them was planting the sorghum. We had waited a little late to get our sorghum in the ground, and the rains were running out on us. We finally got the piece of equipment that we needed and started plowing, but the plowing had to happen very, very quickly. It couldn't get done in six or eight hours a day; the plowing had to go on twenty-four hours a day. So the Workshop Guild put a light on the tractor and the Farming Guild put a sign-up sheet outside of the store saying, "Would you like to sign up for a six-hour shift on a two-man team?" So for twenty-four hours a day for three days they plowed. That gave people a new sense of power relative to what was possible in using those skills in coordination with each other.

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Then, on Friday morning we have something we call New Women's Forum. That is a time when the ladies from all the different guilds get together in the kitchen for a cup of tea, a celebration, and they talk about the signal events of the week, and what is anticipated for next week. All of the ladies leave their guild work a half-hour early, go home and get cleaned up, come back looking fine, and sit down and have their cup of tea. What they really do during that hour and a half is scheme about what is going to bring that community off. It is not in the indicative battleplanning method anywhere, but it is very effective.

All of those things working together begin to create the kind of momentum that needs to happen in a community. When the guilds start catalyzing each other, momentum breeds momentum, victory catalyzes victory. One example is the basketball court, which had been an eyesore right in the middle of the community for a long time. The parks and gardens ladies finally decided to clean it up. They went out early one Saturday morning and started cleaning away the grass, rubble and rocks. They had gotten most of that job done by the heat of the day and had come into our house to have something cold to drink. We spent some time chatting and relaxing and then went back out to clean up and pick up our tools. When we got back out there, the Cattle Guild had started putting up a fence all around the basketball court. It wasn't in the plan--nobody told them to put up that fence--but it was a most incredible fence. It had ten foot high fence-posts: they only know how to build one kind of fence--a cattle fence--so they put that around the basketball court.

Seeing what one guild is doing, catalyzes another guild. The momentum begins to build and begins to roll. There is a kind of wildness in that momentum that makes you want to pull back. You think if this thing keeps spinning like this, it is going to fly apart at any minute. But when a community has burned its bridges behind it and has its face to the future, there is only one way you can go and that is to go with the momentum and keep it happening.

I want to talk about guild symbols. You have heard some of the rituals and songs, seen some of the decor and uniforms. The Parks and Gardens Guild wanted to put up street signs in Oombulgurri. When you only have two streets you wouldn't think it would be necessary to have street signs for directions, but they wanted to have street signs. They thought they would name the streets after the old missionaries so that there would be a Ja Ja Gribble Street and a J. J. Thompson Street. They took their plan to old Robert Roberts. He thought about it for a long time and then he said, "No, these streets have to do with Oombulgurri's future and you name this one New Day Boulevard." The sign and big bold decor up all over the community say to people everyday that we have borrowed this awesome land to give it human form. It's a constant reminder. It gives them a way to stand in the terrifying wonder of the land that they live in.

Every guild has a space. It doesn't matter if it is under a Boab tree or a constructed meeting room, but every guild has its own space and it knows where that space is. It is audacious space. The Cattle Guild didn't have a guild space and one morning, in about an hour and a half, they put up a bough shed out by the corral. They had their guild space right where they did their work.

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Finally, a word about the quarterly community meeting, Congress or Council. All it is, is a Town Meeting or mini-consult. It happens every single quarter. It can be as simple as saying, "What did we do last quarter? What do we want to do next quarter? How are we going to do it?" and then figuring out who is going to do what and when. It is a great celebration of the past quarter, and there is always a great deal of anticipation about the next quarter.

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There is no magic about what it is that brings a community alive and puts it on its feet, even though it feels that way sometimes. Standing there, you don't know how it happened and yet you do know. It's hard work. It's doing what we know how to do, what we have done for years and years and years--stakes and guilds and congress. That is what gives a community a chance to get on its feet and get moving.

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