

## THE GROUP OF EIGHTEEN

In 1994, the Bert and Mary Meyer Foundation (BAMM) brought together 18 grantee leaders to discuss how to distribute its assets, philosophy and mission to an entity that was led by its grantees. Initially, the group was asked to help answer the questions - should we and if so, what kind of process would help the group to raise thoughtful questions and issues about how to transfer the assets of BAMM to a grantee led foundation? The Southern Partners Fund (SPF) was developed out of the work of the 18 grantee leaders. Jane Sapp (cultural facilitator for the Bert and Mary Meyer Foundation) facilitated a five-year process to support the Group of Eighteen and the vision that began at that initial meeting. Over time, the facilitation took on the form of cultural work, and what follows is how cultural work looked and felt to the Group of Eighteen and the facilitator, Jane Sapp.

*Leroy Johnson: When you bring 18 people together that don't necessarily know each other, it is really important to build a process of trust... to be able to talk about how we make decisions together about something so important and in ways that don't dishonor you or your community. It was necessary to take some time to figure out who we were in the room, why we were in the room with each other, and whether we could trust each other to make decisions that were about community. We come out of a history of oppression, suppression, and depression, out of a history of putting folks in isolation, out of a place where the tactic of slavery was to destroy family and the tribal understanding of who we are. That's why we had to build community and trust within that room.*

It became clear to everyone within the group that they needed to find a process for building trust and to identify someone to lead them in their relationship building. The process they came to use was cultural work, and its leader was Jane Sapp. Here are her reflections on the process and her leadership:

I am a singer, musician, teacher and cultural worker. Being an artist keeps me thinking about possibilities. It keeps me exploring and imagining. As an artist, I don't like to feel locked in. When structures and formulas are rigid, to me, it feels like the beginning of oppression. Oppression never explores possibility. It constantly locks things out. I always encourage people to continue to imagine and to explore possibilities, to continue to be open in order to let in new ideas and feelings.

I entered the SPF story when Barbara Meyer invited me to be a cultural facilitator for the first session of the Group of Eighteen. I was not exactly clear about the purpose of the meeting, but I did understand that they were meeting to create a new entity. Barbara asked me to facilitate a session that would help leaders of southern, rural, community organizations think of how they could build a building that could stand the test of time.

As I thought about Barbara's question, I turned to my own personal experiences with organizations. What is often missing in an organization's work plan is the lack of attention paid to relationships. This can lead to perilous struggles, with staff and members feeling unheard and disconnected from each other.

I was practically raised in the church and often use it as a frame of reference when thinking about organizations and organizational relationships. I think of the culture of the Black church and traditional African-American congregational singing. In that culture and tradition, there is a web of relationships between the minister, song-leader, choir and congregation. The voices are always connected, always aware of each other, always supporting each other. A space is created that is open enough to support individual expressions, and connect with and respond to the energy of group while building a sense of community that extends beyond the walls of church. In my work as a cultural facilitator I always think about how people are connected, and how they are honored in their connection to each other.

So whenever I'm asked to work with the issue of institutional development, I begin with the people and their relationships. The people are my focus. People make institutions, people make policies, people plan meetings, people raise funds, people serve on boards and the **people** turn the wheels of the organization! This focus shaped my work with the Group of Eighteen.

From my own experiences with meetings and conferences, I know that much information is shared, decisions are voted on, people exchange thoughts about an issue. But to me there is always something missing. I want to hear what people *really* think, what they *really* know, what they really feel. As a musician and performer I know that when people are deeply touched and moved, a layer of truth and knowledge unfolds that is the lasting kind, the unshakeable kind; the unrelenting, authentic power of the human experience, knowledge and will. This was where I wanted this group of eighteen to go together.

What an extraordinary group of people! They were all organizers and leaders in their communities, as well as grassroots educators. They were founders of organizations, leading voices in the fight for migrant and rural farmworkers, for women's and youth empowerment, for education reform, environmental and economic justice; for the rights of black workers and Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Trans-gender (LGBT) communities. They were community action groups and leaders who understood the role of culture in organizing.

I felt that if this group could reexamine their visions for change and reflect on who they were in the work for social change, something powerfully creative and transformative might emerge. So I started with the metaphor of the building. If they could design a building that could withstand the test of time, how would it look? What and who would be inside of it? What would be happening, and how would it be organized?

**'Everyone needs to feel as if they have special gifts to bring to the table' was the idea I focused on.** We sang, to feel connected, and we created ritual. We made time to hear from each person, individually, at every meeting asking people to share their stories or updates on their work and their lives.

I also asked: Who is it that you bring with you - from your history, from your family? Whose thinking, whose values, whose spirit shapes your work? People talked about what they brought from their communities. They shared stories about grandmothers and other elders in their communities. Several members referenced other individuals whose examples they wanted to

follow. It was interesting people didn't name the usual suspects, instead they referenced their daily lives and the people and values that had become a part of the way they move and think in the world. They said, 'I bring the courage of my community, the spirit of my ancestors, the love I have for my family and for you.' That was the lens through which they wanted to look at how to put SPF together: through the lens of their history, their values, their communities, their communities' struggles and experiences.

Another part of our cultural process was the sharing of struggles with each other. We heard about migrant farm workers in Florida, not only what their struggles are like but what their lives are like. We heard about young people in Mississippi who are struggling to have their history become part of public education. We learned about how Black farmers participated in co-operatives as a path to economic development. We were constantly reminded of the stories of women, of domestic abuse and poverty. We also recognized how women are coming together to support each other and to find their power. We heard about the work of Black churches to bring about social change. We heard stories about the continuing intimidation and harassment of Black people by the vestiges of the segregationists in the South. And of course we heard the stories of how people were standing up and fighting back.

As a result, I led an exercise, 'I come from a place where...' and I asked people to fill in the end of the sentence. I wanted people to talk about what it feels like, smells like, looks like and sounds like in the places where they live. Each life was shaped by a set of experiences, histories and values.

I also asked them to think of the Group as a spice rack. If each person was a spice, what spice would they be? It was intended to help everyone recognize that each person brings something special to the table, to the mix, and that something special is seen and felt and heard by others.

I would ask, 'If LeRoy were suddenly gone from the group, what would we feel was missing? What would be missing if we didn't have Peggy or Fernando or Aricelli or Ann?'

We sang and we danced together. The children of the Group of Eighteen were always invited. We celebrated on these evenings, our cultural evenings. And of course, there was more storytelling. We shared a range of music: blues, gospel, Appalachian ballads, and we danced to salsa. There were prayers and testimonies about the work. We took that time to celebrate victories. They were great evenings with music, dance, stories, food, children and humor. We were able to witness the layers and wholeness of who we were and bring that critical awareness to our meetings..

As the cultural facilitator, I frequently encouraged the group to use metaphors. When people think metaphorically a more poetic voice emerges. Why is a poetic voice important? It allows people begin to speak from within and think more deeply. They begin to reach for their full voice and to bring their full experiences to bear on the conversation. The Group of Eighteen were powerful leaders within their own communities: I wanted to create an environment where they could own and understand the historical and cultural roots of their leadership and vision. The power of history and culture combined with their experiences would be a source of strength at whatever table they may have found themselves seated.

I had often observed that metaphors help to awaken people's imaginations and sharpen their analysis. The group had to answer: in what way is an organization like a house, or a family, or a book? How am I like a spice? Any time you are starting something new, something you want to be transformative a lot of imaginative thinking is required. I didn't want them to lose themselves in the day-to-day bureaucratic routines of running an organization. I did not want them to repeat what had proven ineffective in creating change. I wanted to take away the routines to see what they would turn to if they didn't have the old props to depend on. I wanted to be sure that this group could think as creatively and openly as possible.

In addition to the metaphor of the building that could withstand the test of time, the group began to refer to the new entity as a baby we were birthing. With that metaphor in mind, we were able to think about what kind of nurturing the baby would need, how we needed to prepare ourselves so that the baby would be born healthy, and what kind of nurturing the baby would need to survive. This exercise forced the Group of Eighteen to think about their values and the principles that guided their work; how their lives and work reflected those values; what resources they and their communities bring to the work; the meaning of their own experiences; and their own history and culture as well as the history and culture of social change. In other words, 'what kind of home could be provided the new baby, the new entity that would allow it to grow and survive?' There were many reflections from the group on the complexities of their work, the world and their lives. The metaphor of the 'baby' helped the Group of Eighteen to acknowledge the preciousness of what we were creating.

In all these ways, the 18 grantee leaders became a community fully engaged with each other. The Group of Eighteen saw themselves as a circle of advisors and counselors and as trusted friends who understood each other's communities and knew each other's stories. The new entity was birthed and became the Southern Partners Fund (SPF).

If ever there is a time when trust is needed, it is when people are going to deal with issues involving money. It was important for the group to talk about their stewardship of the Bert and Mary Meyer Foundation's assets. The cultural exercises we did ('I come from a place...', the metaphors, songs, rituals, cultural evenings, stories) prepared the group for the difficult decisions they had to make about money, policies, and structures.

People talked through the issues until a consensus decision could be reached with which everyone was comfortable. The group wanted to make sure that everyone had a chance not only to speak, but to discuss and understand why others were uncomfortable. They really wanted to make sure that everyone understood what was being said and were aligned with the decisions made. Of course there were conflicts, but the group didn't run away from them. They didn't drop them. They went **to** the conflicts and walked through the issues, staying close to who they were.

I saw the impact of the cultural process go beyond the Group of Eighteen, influencing the priorities of Southern Partners Fund. The founding of SPF was rooted in organizing, community; and the history, leadership and culture of the rural south. These roots gave SPF a unique identity. As a public foundation, the founders of Southern Partners Fund (the Group of

Eighteen) recognized that their identity would be a special contribution to the world of philanthropy and an exciting challenge for themselves and their communities.

I want to conclude with another reference to African-American culture. When I was a child we did a lot of ring plays. I loved those ring plays because each person had the chance to step in the middle of the circle or 'ring' and do something unique to their gifts. The ring plays were fun, exciting and challenging because each person had to participate until the 'play' was complete. We didn't always know who would step in the circle or what they would do once in the circle. However, we had all made a commitment to 'play.' We had to trust that the fun and the laughter were not at our expense but about what would make the 'ring play' interesting and sustain participation. For a few minutes we were a community in a circle that held our imaginations, our uncertainties, our experiences, our trust, our missteps and our joy.

To a person, everyone credits the cultural work they did together as key to the success and durability of the Southern Partners Fund:

*LeRoy Johnson: I think trust was built from asking the right questions. When Jane said, 'How do you build a building that will stand the test of time?' I thought about how important that question was in giving us an opportunity to clear our heads about other stuff and to focus on things that are important. We have all been in communities that have been flooded; we all have been in communities that have been hit by tornados, and a lot of times the wind didn't do it.*

*Janet Perkins: The cultural piece showed us a way to honor people's whole lives and experiences. We can't just do business from the head. If we are working for social justice, we need to examine the oppressions that exist within us and our own structures. There's a risk that we would transfer these oppressions into the work we are doing. Cultural work brought us to the level where we could ask these questions and imagine doing business in a different ways.*

*Tirso Moreno: Cultural work helped to build relationships and unity. It helped us to talk about the conscience of things, the importance of values and principles of the people. When we first met, I knew some of the people, but not all of them. The process gave us the opportunity to build a great relationship among us, a relationship of trust. I felt that we were all looking for the same goal: social justice for our people. When you know that people think the same way you think, and they are looking for the same things for the people, it feels like you have a family there. I felt I could trust anyone in the group. If I felt a certain way, I could express myself and not be fearful. For me, what made the process work was a combination of things. It was speaking honestly and expressing questions and concerns. It was spending time together and working out answers to people's questions and concerns. You don't build trust by meeting someone the first time. It takes discussing things, listening to each other, especially listening.*

*Joan Garner: It is the cultural work that makes us different...I saw how important it was to stop and make sure that we were building relationships of trust. It's not that we all have to be touchy-feely together, but we need a certain amount of comfort to put the hard issues on the table. When we are faced with challenges, it is that trust and those relationships that will keep*

*us strong. The joy comes from being able to get through the hard issues and celebrate on the other side.*