From Soil to Soul: A (slightly) alternative way to run a non-profit

A small organic farmer practices a different sort of economics than a banker or industry CFO. The economy of the farm depends entirely on the fertility of the soil, so an experienced farmer, even knowing that she can sell all that she produces, must limit her demands on the soil so that she doesn’t deplete its fertility. She concerns herself to care for the farm first, and then to make a sufficient living, and only then to think of the market’s demands and possible additional profit. The economy of a farm starts with conservation and ends with surplus, and is always in delicate balance. The farmer knows that unpredictable setbacks may await, and that care solves more problems than money.

An artist practices a different sort of management than a business administrator. Artists strike a balance between the interests of the market and their own creative process. Some work from theory toward practice, others work in the opposite direction. Often (though absolutes rarely apply) the artist is focused on process over product and journey over destination. An artist must be willing to meander, to change direction, to experiment, to respond boldly to subtle contexts, and to fail. The term for this journey is a practice, and while artists are interested in financial success, few start with business principles as their guiding motive.

Non-profits typically choose to act like bankers and business administrators. First, because it’s often those folks who fund us and sit on our boards, and who define the trappings of success for us. Further, a non-profit is simply a different form of small business, and so our college programs, management books and training courses cover much of the same information as an MBA.

But what would it look like if a non-profit, understanding the mainstream approach to management, opted instead to operate more like a farm and less like an industry? What would a non-profit run like an art project look like? And where could those two models intersect? I can’t tell you entirely, but I can tell you that ISLAND, the Institute for Sustainable Living, Art & Natural Design, is beginning to answer that question. Here’s what we’ve learned so far.

My wife Amanda and I co-founded ISLAND intending to develop a stable, successful and financially secure non-profit. However, instead of adopting business-school measures of success, we look to standards of ecological and agricultural health as our models. As a start, we aspire to the triple bottom line: achieving economic success while creating measurable improvements to the social and ecological communities we call home. Going further, we use the legal framework of ISLAND as a shell to creatively experiment, learn from our mistakes, fail and revise our work in the community.

A consultant at one of the above-mentioned training courses, servicing large, successful non-profits, would point out flaws in our approach. We lack an easily articulated mission. We are less consistent in our programming than they would recommend. We embrace short time frames for many of our projects, which complicates our ability to measure outcomes. We engage in a unique style of board development. We fundraise a little differently.
We budget differently. Nonetheless, ISLAND manages to balance the needs of our funders and partners while remaining vibrant, responsive and creative. We don’t claim that we’re reinventing the entire administrative structure. Much of what we do is still rooted in non-profit 101. We do, however, believe that we can shift away from orthodoxy and still have a financially stable and developing organization.

Before we go any further, it’s important to be clear: we don’t do this just because it’s fun, or cool, or edgy. We chose our operating structure based on five core values. These beliefs alternately daunt us and inspire us beyond measure.

● First: our work takes place in the context of incomprehensibly massive global predicaments: climate change, peak energy, unprecedented environmental destruction and species extinction.
● Second: global solutions don’t work. The old model of technology + money + urgency does not work.
● Third: all work must be local, small and humble. We need to think differently, and we need to match our intelligence to the living detail of the places where we are.
● Fourth: We need to ask questions that take longer than our lifetimes to answer. Our favorite starting point is how do we learn to care for small places? And more directly What does a 185 year plan look like?
● Finally, as Wendell Berry says “the culture is the way a community remembers or forgets how to live in its habitat.” Culture contains and constrains our capacity to respond. More than ever we need artists—visionaries, conceptual explorers and compelling communicators—to help us reconnect to the ecological, cultural, economic and social communities where we live.

We know that some people, including other environmental organizations, disagree with these values. We don’t concern ourselves with convincing the world that these statements are correct. We spend our time working, and let the results speak on behalf of our beliefs.

As eager readers, Amanda and I never lack inspiration. Great books serve as an unending source of new ideas that fold into and play against past ways of working. Authors Wendell Berry, Sharon Astyk, Gary Snyder, Stephanie Mills and John Michael Greer shaped our initial mission, and the continuing conversation with them through their blogs and books helps us evolve our work. These writers teach us the art of the long-view. Not prediction; humans consistently make a mess of that. Instead, by thinking of our work as one link in a long chain that connects us to the previous and future inhabitants of this place, we learn humility and patience.

Additionally, these writers have taught us to stay small. The soil, one of the most essential, complex and fragile compounds on the planet, is continually renewed and improved through work that takes place in millimeters and millennia, a scale we barely comprehend. Again, humbling. When we look at the world as a collection of small places, each with its own fingerprint, we begin to engage our intelligence in the specific problems and practicalities of that place. We steep ourselves in the ecology, economy, community and history of our place—and not through the distance of a microscope or telescope or quarterly report, but as engaged participants in the life of the community. We are learning about a place and creating a place all at the same time.
This is our region: chains of freshwater lakes and rivers, maple beech upland forests, wetlands, jack pine stands, sandy soil and bitter winters; the seasonal economy of cottages and planked whitefish; the rusted bones of the Detroit-driven manufacturing industry, the aging boomer retirement homes, the fast track from high school graduation to get-out-of-Dodge; the rural conservatism, the surprising tolerance for diversity; the progressive not quite “city” up the road, the big bridge to the real Northern Michigan, where abides deeper pride and the older traditions of the Yoopers; the love of traditional arts, the distrust of government; the hunters and ministers and drinkers and snowmobiles and jet skis; the small farmers and large farmers and permaculture gurus; the film festival and trout festival and beer festival and bluegrass festival and fiber festival; the super-rich (but not the ultra-rich); the watercolorists and spoken word poets and amateur comedians and artisan timber framers and mandolin makers and blues guitarists; the couple of pissed off old guy abstract expressionists. Ten counties and a handful of major watersheds, containing all this and much more. We work here, and this is what that work looks like.

Projects, Programs and Outreach

We came to ISLAND from non-profit and backgrounds, and with commercial art skills in writing, print design and web development. While we had, and still have, steep learning curves in many aspects of running ISLAND, we were able to quickly develop a strong public presence. We believe that consistent branding and a strong web presence were key to our early success. We made the mistake, however, of talking about our values, theories and vision before we had real projects on the ground. Because we didn’t have much to point to by way of concrete work, this led to the “eye-roll factor” where serious people thought we were just flaky, flighty artists. Our joke about the early ISLAND elevator speech: “here, read these (handing over a tall armload of books) and let’s grab a beer in a month.” was representative of our difficulty in explaining just why a non-profit like ours should exist.

Six years, hundreds of events and dozens of successful programs later, we now have work we can talk about. We can use our past work to help illustrate the bigger picture, and our track record gains us some credibility. The eye-roll factor has been drastically reduced. We use the idea of “community self-reliance” as the starting point for our event planning. Events focus on four categories: the green world (raising a garden or livestock, hunting, wild edibles, etc.), the real home economy (working in the kitchen or craft room to make cheese, beer, fiber, soap, pickles, jam, etc.), tinkering (making and using tools like a seed press or chainsaw, or building a timber frame, strawbale wall, etc.) and art (not workshops, but events like Chaotic Harmony, a multimedia performance piece based on the work of writer and printmaker Gwen Frostic, or the gallery show Rooting Deep, Branching Out, which invited artists to make work responding to the question “what does it mean to live up north?”). Our events are our most essential outreach tools, accessible to average folks while connected to ISLAND’s values. Events open the door to our potential supporters, while giving us the short term flexibility to experiment and take risks.

All of our programs are tied to the development of the ISLAND property, 10 acres of rolling hills located a couple of miles outside of Bellaire, MI. The property will eventually host our workshops and other events, will serve as a demonstration homestead with livestock, gardens and perennial permaculture plantings, and will eventually host
the artist residency.

**The Residency Program**

We developed our current program in May of 2010, a beta-test called the Hill House Artist Residency, when we realized that the full development of the ISLAND property could take ten to twenty years. We began renting a log cabin in the woods, located near thousands of acres of State Forest and one of Michigan’s finest rivers, and began hosting one artist or small collaborative group at a time. We accept writers, emerging musicians and a mixed category called “non-studio artists” which is largely defined by the fact that the cabin doesn’t have a studio and artists should respond accordingly.

We stock the kitchen with the best local food, we focus on simple, rustic hospitality and we cultivate an experience of solitude and nourishment. It’s working: in late 2011 we received feedback from one of our first residents, who was slightly shocked but gratified to say that his experience at the Hill House, particularly his access to fresh local food and the requirement for him to cook for himself made a long lasting change in his diet. His new diet improved his physical health, which improved his mental health, which has had a potent impact on his art making. We realized that we had stumbled onto an example of how small steps (the selection of a few groceries, combined with the solitude of the cabin) could make a large impact on a person’s life and art. While we knew that we wanted to create an environment of nourishment, we never predicted his specific response, and we have no idea what further ripples will come from that short moment in time. It gives us encouragement.

While the current residency focuses on a theme of nourishment, the future residency will focus on a theme of connection. That residency’s fullest expression will come once we move onto the ISLAND property. There, up to twelve artists at a time will interact closely with the life of the land, both as participants in the daily workings of the gardens, livestock and orchards, and through a number of spaces designed to connect them to the history, ecology, culture and economy of this small place. We’ve created a document entitled “Sense of Place: 10 ways to connect artists to a residency program.” that has grown from our ideas about how to use place as a touchstone for art-making. We don’t want to change the way artists make art, but we do want to make our space a potent presence in the lives of the artists while they are in residency.

**The ISLAND Board**

Rather than compete with hundreds of other non-profits for the standard board talent, business executives and philanthropists, we recruited young leaders who were eager to learn good governance. In particular, we looked to the community of farmers and artists. We recruited an attorney (who is also a songwriter), a cheesemaker/boatbuilder/tree surgeon, and a home energy auditor. The ISLAND board is gaining experience, which means we move a little slower than we would sometimes like, but we are able to invest in their growth (by hiring facilitators and conducting regular board trainings) and are helping to produce the next generation of non-profit leaders for our community.
Also, our board members create the kinds of opportunities we need. Whereas a major arts organization needs a boost to their endowment from the big bank on the corner, we need connection to small scale agricultural projects (like our chicken processing trailer that we lend to small farmers, or the seed press to produce both culinary oils and bio-diesel that we are considering), and to energy experts (our property is powered by an off-grid solar array).

Beyond that, we also want to see these kinds of people take a more active role in their community. While we appreciate the youth leadership program of the local business community, we also see a need to invest in folks who have made alternative choices in their life and work. We’re creating diversity in community leadership while we engage in a slightly unconventional version of good governance.

The ISLAND Staff

ISLAND is relatively under-funded (more on this below), so we don’t pay ourselves or our staff very much. We live in a rural, economically depressed area where young smart people get out of town as quickly as possible. That makes staffing tough. But we have been lucky to find a few smart people who resonate with the mission and who find value in being a part of this wonderful work. We also do our very best not to burn people out, including ourselves. That means lots of flexibility in scheduling and vacations, lots of check-ins for feedback and course correction, and being as hospitable towards our staff as we are toward our artists and other guests. We encourage the agricultural and artistic practice of our staff members, by giving them time off to pursue their own interests. We now have an accomplished bee-keeping expert on staff, which is paying dividends in ISLAND honey!

We have no full time staff. We respond to the madness of extra-full-time burnout schedules by capping our employees’ time at 32 hours per week. No doubt that rule is occasionally broken, but as a rule it leaves time to pursue other opportunities and to get away from stress at work. Obviously this also means that the paychecks are smaller, but we’ve found that the kind of person who wants to work with ISLAND also tends to have income generation on the side, be it shiitake mushrooms or another small-scale agricultural practice.

We seek to be small and dynamic. ISLAND has six staff members and we delegate well, which means we can tackle new projects quickly. This is the small quick part of the bee hive plan. The board helps with the longer view and keeping us on mission. We are able to produce new programs quickly, and then evaluate them and either revamp them (our Sunday Soup model, designed to support artists with community money), terminate them (the idea of week-long intensive, high expense workshops), transition them to other partners (our garden projects) or push them forward (the residency program and lots more).

There are two drawbacks here. First, it can be difficult to know what to measure and how to measure it. This is something we need to get better at and practice more often. Second, we lose efficiency. At any given month we can be drastically over-extended or not have enough to do. As founders, Amanda and I tend to work longer to cover the
added tasks, which keeps us aware of the need to improve our scheduling process.

**Founders’ Syndrome**

As noted above, we are very much a founder’s organization. ISLAND was born of the thousands of conversations, hundreds of books, dozens of past projects that Amanda and I had assimilated. So far that’s great. We’re young, energized, still in an early and rapidly growing lifecycle stage, and we enjoy the challenge of co-directing ISLAND. However, we know that at some point ISLAND will need to exist apart from us, with a new director and strangers on the board and as staff. We are acutely aware of the problems of founder’s syndrome, but it’s early days and we don't yet see the path to total independence.

At some point, as we grow and transition into the next stage of our life-cycle, we’ll face our largest challenge: the integration of our home and the non-profit. The ten acre property will eventually host the lodging and studios for the artists, along with our home and private spaces, as well as a spectrum of shared space: livestock yards, gardens, orchards, a barn, greenhouse, firepit, pond, etc. The long term vision is to transfer the property in its entirety to ISLAND upon our death, with the home becoming director’s quarters or additional artists’ lodging.

Currently we have a complicated legal arrangement in place. We have no wish to lose our home (in the case of a fallout with the board) yet we need to be sure our personal plans do not hamper ISLAND’s development. The financial and legal obstacles are tricky, and may cause problems as we seek funding to build on the property. We have some ideas, and have consulted with attorneys to find solutions, but we need to have a compelling and solid plan in place soon, because no one will fund capital development for a non-profit that’s on property owned by an individual. In other words, we don’t know how to start our first capital campaign.

The capital campaign will likely be a make or break point for our organization in general. We need to come up with strategies to make sure that campaign is a resounding success, and to have a fall back plan in case something goes wrong and we are not fully funded. No doubt this represents a major turning point and growth for ISLAND, or the moment when the support falls away and the scope of the final push is too large for us to carry forward. As with all things, we consider this an exciting project and a fun learning curve to climb. It will take the fullest extension of our creative and professional energy.

**How we think about development**

ISLAND’s development focuses on individual donations. In particular, we find success in building relationships with people who are attracted to our unconventional mission. We treat them as well as we know how and cultivate major gifts from them over time. Our part of the world includes many wealthy retired and seasonal residents, and the running joke is that any one of them could fund our program for the year and forget they wrote the check. We’re small enough that the four and five digit donations that these folks routinely give to ISLAND make a deep impact on our programs. One check for $16,000 from a local family foundation, given in early 2011,
created our community garden program nearly from scratch. The $14,000/year we spend on the artist residency is an easily achievable fundraising goal.

We also act as a fiduciary agent for larger events, like the Northern Michigan Small Farm Conference, which have their own non-competing revenue streams. We can bring the program under the ISLAND umbrella, which allows us to increase our annual budget without taxing our development energy. We don’t currently charge to act as a fiduciary. Instead, we benefit from the increased capacity and financial growth brought by adding these projects to our bottom line. Grantmakers appreciate our larger budget, which speaks to both continuing success and a stable revenue stream, while individual donors appreciate the programs as a feather in our cap. Further, we benefit from community good will, enhanced marketing opportunities and grateful partners. Beyond the Small Farm Conference we have also acted as fiduciaries for a modern dance project called Chaotic Harmony.

We also look to common fundraising sources. We write a year end letter which is the main entry point for first-time donors. As of 2011 we also run an annual summer matching gift campaign. In the spring we hold a benefit concert, in partnership with many of the musicians we have developed relationships with, and held at a local micro-brewery. We charge a sliding scale at the door, and we hold a silent auction (which pairs well with beer). We can raise about $6000 in one afternoon, while throwing a must-attend party that attracts lots of new faces.

We have a letterpress poster in our office saying “We have a strategic plan: it’s called doing things” (Herb Kelleher). Every once in a while, for one reason or another, a large check just shows up in the mailbox, from a person we are sure we’ve never met. We credit that to our ongoing attempts to captivate and delight, and our hope that people notice. Sometimes they do.

What success looks like

The budget for our current fiscal year is just over $100,000. We do not have a cash reserve. We do not pay Amanda, who works outside of ISLAND to pay the family bills. Financial success for us will include a cash reserve of at least 50% of a year’s budget; a capital campaign raising at least $500,000, and the ability to pay all of our staff a living wage, including Amanda. Program success will include building respect in our community, regularly creating captivating programs, staying ahead of the curve on the needs of our community while being responsive to the ongoing needs of our community. I am loathe to get too big. I fear the perception that we’ve gotten too big (which is a pretty good sign you’re too big). Most importantly, as a founder, I long for the sweet spot where we’ve built a stable, independent organization that can exist without us, but that doesn’t want us to leave. I look forward to retiring at sixty and spending my days on the ISLAND property, cooking dinner for the artists, working on my own music and printmaking, and having meaningful conversations with our new executive director about the future of the organization. What are the odds of that?
What’s left

We have a lot to learn, including how to do some things that larger, more mainstream non-profits take for granted: the endowment, the capital campaign, the planned gift. My hope is that we can continue to learn the intricacies of running a non-profit, while we also find ways to step outside of the standard model. ISLAND won’t function well as a standard non-profit, and I find it essential that we continue learning from agricultural and cultural models. I hope that we not only find ways to creatively engage with ISLAND’s growth, we find ways to communicate our work, our values and our management ideas to other non-profits, so that we can create more advocates practicing the ecological art of being native to place.

About ISLAND

ISLAND is a non-profit arts and ecology center dedicated to connecting people with nature, art and community. ISLAND helps people become native to place by:

- supporting artists — visionaries, conceptual explorers and compelling communicators — with dedicated time, space and resources to create new work;
- restoring the old and developing the new skills and traditions of community self-reliance;
- creating and sharing a broad collection of tools for ecological living.

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