

Weaving The Commons Together

The Tapestry of the Commons is the first part of AfD's Democracy Toolkit: a collection of interactive projects, games and ideas designed to be used by Alliance chapters and other community groups. The Tapestry of the Commons materials explore concepts of property, interconnectedness and sustainability, as well as the threats to both natural and Cultural Commons of privatization, globalization, commodification and corporate rule. Tapestry project materials can be downloaded from the Alliance website—www.TheAllianceforDemocracy.org—and can be adapted for use with different ages, interest groups and time frames. AfD is grateful for foundation support to create and produce this project.

by Linda Schmoldt

When asked for workshop suggestions at the Young Adult Unitarians Pacific Northwest Conference, I promoted using *The Tapestry of the Commons*. I had heard about the project through a Women's International League for Peace and Freedom contact, had looked at the website and seen it assembled at a conference in Portland. As making a suggestion often goes, I ended up doing the workshop.

Although I had seen the tapestry put together, I had not seen a presentation. Fortunately, Jan Edwards has done a terrific job of developing the workshop materials, including the instructions for making the interactive teaching tools.

Besides the tapestry itself, the instructions include words to be used on a magnet board. (I had these printed at Kinko's where they also sold sheets of adhesive magnetic backing. One can just glue the sheets to the backing and then cut the individual words apart.)

I knew from the start that condensing the extensive information that Jan has collected into a two-hour workshop would be a challenge.

We set the magnet board out at the beginning of our workshop and the participants were instantly engaged in trying to arrange words and concepts on a continuum of what is "common" property to what is "private" property. Just listening to the conversation around this activity gave me some talking points to weave into the session.

I did a brief power point presentation at the beginning, which summarized the script Jan had developed. This isn't totally necessary, but I wanted some visuals to reinforce what I was talking about.

I was attracted to the strong visual impact of the *Tapestry* and its hands-on use. I have led a number of discussion on the Commons, but Jan's research helped tie together many of the issues. Putting the tapestry together as we discussed those issues



Nancy Price and Jan Edwards display the Tapestry of the Commons at the Womens International League for Peace and Freedom Convention. photo: Martha Spiers

reinforced the ideas and gave it another dimension.

As always in a mixed, unknown group, it's hard to gauge how much knowledge individuals bring to a session. We had a range of awareness and it was helpful to have comments from the young participants reinforcing the importance of this topic, as well as many questions of clarification. The time restraint, however, meant we had to constantly be concerned with completing the presentation.

Assembling the tapestry took way longer than we had anticipated, even with a very necessary assistant. The next time we do the presentation, we will either have a longer time period or start with at least half of the tapestry assembled.

As it was, our discussion of how the tapestry is coming apart got short shift. As I loosened the ribbons and talked about how it is all unraveling, one young woman said, "I'm going to cry." I quickly started to reattach some of the ribbons and talked about ways we can reverse this process. I too wanted to cry, but it hardly seemed constructive to leave these young people without a sense of hope. It is obviously a very powerful visual.

Constructing the frame and preparing the materials for the tapestry itself is quite simple. We used bigger dowels. Although it's a little heavier to carry, the frame is sturdier. We also mounted some pipe holders on the bases. Finding my way around in a fabric/hobby shop was the biggest challenge for me. The guy at the hardware store was much more helpful. It's well worth the effort to add this fine teaching tool to your repertoire of presentation materials.

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