

FROM SOIL TO SOUL: RUNNING AN ALTERNATIVE NONPROFIT

By Brad Kik

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 she can sell all she produces – must limit her demands on the soil so 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 unpredictable setbacks may await, and care solves more problems than money.**

Likewise, 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 *practice*, and while artists are interested in financial success, few start with business principles as their guiding motive.

Nonprofits 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 nonprofit 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 nonprofit, understanding the mainstream approach to management, opted instead to operate more like a farm and less like an industry? What would a nonprofit 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 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 nonprofit. 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 nonprofits 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



Amanda and Brad Kik photo courtesy of ISLAND

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 we are reinventing the entire administrative structure. Much of what we do is still rooted in nonprofit 101. We do, however, believe 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 paralyze us with fear 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 some people, including other environmental organizations, disagree with these values. We don't concern ourselves with convincing the world 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 writing helps us evolve our work. These writers teach us the art of the long view. It's not about prediction – humans consistently make a mess of that. Instead, by thinking of our work as one link in a long chain connecting 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 taking place in millimeters and milliseconds, a scale we barely comprehend. Again, humbling. When we look at the world as a collection of small places, each 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 – 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.



Musician Melissa Sigh performing at ISLAND photo by Elly Johnson

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 and 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 snowmobilers and jet skiers; the small farmers and large farmers and permaculture gurus; the film festival and trout festival and beer festival and bass 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 nonprofit 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 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 nonprofit 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 economics (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 so much as 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.

And all of our programs are tied to the development of the ISLAND property, ten acres of rolling hills located a couple of miles outside of Bellaire, Michigan. The property will eventually host our workshops and other events; serve as a demonstration homestead of livestock, gardens, and perennial permaculture plantings; and 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 the full development of the 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” 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, focus on simple, rustic hospitality, and cultivate an experience of solitude and nourishment. And it's working: in late 2011 we received feedback

from one of our first residents who was slightly shocked but gratified to say his experience at the Hill House, particularly his access to fresh local food and the requirement 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 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 always knew 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” 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-residence.

“ We don’t claim we are reinventing the entire administrative structure. Much of what we do is still rooted in nonprofit 101. We do, however, believe we can shift away from orthodoxy and still have a financially stable and developing organization. ”

The ISLAND board

Rather than compete with hundreds of other nonprofits for the standard board talent, business executives, and philanthropists, we recruit young leaders who are eager to learn good governance. In particular, we have 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 board members’ growth (by hiring facilitators and conducting regular board trainings, for example) and are helping to produce the next generation of nonprofit leaders for our community.

Also, our board members create the kinds of opportunities we need. Whereas a large arts organization may need a major gift from the big bank on the corner, we need connection to small-scale agricultural projects (like our chicken processing trailer we lend to small farmers, or the seed press to produce both culinary oils and bio-diesel we are considering) and to energy experts (our property is powered by an off-grid solar array).



ISLAND’s Hill House Artist Residency photo by Elly Johnson

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 the paychecks are smaller, but we’ve found 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 a staff of six and we delegate well, which means we can tackle new projects quickly. This is the small quick part of the beehive plan. The board helps with the longer view and keeping us on mission. We are nimble enough to test new ideas quickly and evaluate them, and then revamp them (our Sunday Soup model), 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. In any given month we can be drastically over-extended or not have enough to do. Amanda and I, as founders, tend to work longer to cover the added tasks, which keeps us aware of the need to improve our scheduling process.

Founder's syndrome

We are very much a founder's organization. ISLAND was born of the thousands of conversations, hundreds of books, and dozens of past projects 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 at some point ISLAND will need to exist apart from us, with a new director and strangers on the board and staff. We are acutely aware of the problems of founder's syndrome, but it's early and we still don't 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 nonprofit. Our 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, for example) 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 nonprofit on property owned by an individual. In other words, we don't know how to start our first capital campaign.

“As a founder, I long for the sweet spot where we've built a stable, independent organization that can exist without us but doesn't want us to leave.”

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 much 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.



Brad Kik and ISLAND's solar panels photo courtesy of ISLAND

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 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-figure donations 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. And the \$14,000 a year we spend on the artist residency is an easily achievable fundraising goal.

We also act as a fiduciary for other projects, like the Northern Michigan Small Farm Conference and a modern dance project called Chaotic Harmony, which have their own non-competing revenue streams. We can bring the programs under the ISLAND umbrella, allowing 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 goodwill, enhanced marketing opportunities, and grateful partners.

We also look to the usual fundraising sources. We write a year-end letter that is a common point for first donations. 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. The musicians play for beer and food, the brewery benefits from a large spike in out-of-season business, and

we benefit from having the event almost run itself. We charge \$10 to \$20 as a sliding scale at the door and we hold a silent auction (which pairs well with beer!). We can raise about \$6,000 in one afternoon, while throwing a must-attend party attracting lots of new faces.

We have a letterpress poster in our office that says, “We have a strategic plan: it’s called doing things” (Herb Kelleher). Every once 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 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, and staying ahead of the curve on the evolving needs of our community while being responsive to its ongoing needs.

I am loathe to get too big. And I fear the perception 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 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 larger, more mainstream nonprofits take for granted: the endowment, the capital campaign, the planned gift. My hope is we can continue to learn the intricacies of running a nonprofit, while we also find ways to step outside of the standard model. ISLAND won’t function well as a standard nonprofit, and I find it essential we continue learning from agricultural and cultural models. I hope 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 nonprofits, so we can create more advocates practicing the ecological art of being native to place.

Brad Kik is the co-founder/co-director of the **Institute for Sustainable Living, Art & Natural Design** (ISLAND) in Bellaire, Michigan. The last 20 years of Brad’s life have been a jumbled mess of film study, environmental activism, graphic design, community organizing, woodworking, chicken raising, music, ecology, and permaculture. More recently, Brad found slightly more focus by falling in love with his partner Amanda and, with her, co-founding and now co-directing ISLAND. ISLAND is a nonprofit arts and ecology center in Northwest Lower Michigan 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