

## Stay Home—But Stay Connected

### Learning for Hope Born of the COVID-19 Pandemic: *CONNECTEDkind*

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#### Introduction

Latvia, one of the three Baltic states, is a small country with a population of approximately two million and a land area about one-sixth that of Japan. From the eighteenth century, it was incorporated into the Russian Empire, and although it achieved independence in 1918, it was subsequently placed under Soviet rule for nearly half a century beginning in the 1940s. In 1990, Latvia declared the restoration of its independence and has since joined international frameworks such as the European Union and the OECD.

A particularly moving episode in Latvia's modern history is the popular independence movement known as *the Baltic Way* (searchable on YouTube as "The Baltic Way"). In August 1989, people across the three Baltic states—Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia—rose up to demand independence from the Soviet Union. Approximately two million people joined hands to form a 600-kilometer-long human chain in a peaceful, nonviolent protest. Men and women of all ages, from mothers holding infants to elderly citizens, waved national flags that had been banned for decades and sang their national anthems, collectively expressing their rejection of oppression. Although this event took place before the advent of the internet, it stands as a milestone in people's history, demonstrating to the world the unity of the Baltic states and their shared aspiration for freedom and a democratic society.

There was a young girl who, upon witnessing the "Baltic Way," became convinced that small nations would henceforth assume leadership in the pursuit of world peace. That girl was Laura Belevica. At the time, she was eight years old. She later became an architect and is now based in Los Angeles, where she pursues a wide range of artistic activities. She also serves as Director of Exhibition Design at the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures.

Belevica gained international recognition during the COVID-19 pandemic. The author first learned of her through a Finnish acquaintance, who spoke of a Latvian artist bringing joy and hope to many people suffering amid the global crisis. It was through this account that the author became aware of an initiative she founded, known as "CONNECTEDkind," an activity designed to foster human connection during a time of widespread isolation.

## **What Is CONNECTEDkind?**

CONNECTEDkind was born on March 14, 2020, at a time when COVID-19 was rapidly spreading across the globe and school closures were being announced in Los Angeles. Alongside the spread of the virus, discrimination and harassment against people of Asian descent were also intensifying in the United States, casting a dark shadow over society as a whole. In this context, Belevica decided to share with the world an activity she had enjoyed for nearly two years with her three children: photographing natural objects found on the ground—such as fallen leaves and small branches—together with their shadows, and then creating drawings inspired by what they imagined from those images.

This activity was named CONNECTEDkind, and its description includes the following message:

“In times of chaos we must stay safe, but I (the founder) realized we must stay connected with nature, emotion, each other, and our dreams.”

Nature, emotion, mutual connection, and dreams are all elements that modern people—especially those living busy urban lives—tend to neglect. As discussed later, another distinctive feature of CONNECTEDkind lies in its positive engagement with “shadows.” Through this activity, Belevica believes that both children and adults can regain relationships that have been lost through modernization and globalization, thereby enhancing their well-being—that is, achieving a healthier state of mind and body. This conviction gradually crossed national borders, and on May 30, 2021, an international workshop entitled “*CONNECTEDkind: The Art Vaccine for a Sustainable Future*” was held as part of UNESCO’s *ESD for 2030* initiative.

## **Engaging the Imagination**

Experiencing CONNECTEDkind firsthand reveals it to be a joyful yet profound form of play. As Belevica often emphasizes, everyone is inherently an artist. Through this activity, participants can rediscover the artist within themselves, share their unique expressions with others, and gain new insights as well as intrinsic joy.

Although the details are discussed elsewhere, the process itself is remarkably simple. Participants begin by finding natural objects on the ground—whether on a roadside, in a park, or in a wooded area. They photograph these objects along with their shadows and then draw what they imagine from the image. The inclusion of shadows is essential,

as the essence of CONNECTEDkind lies in the process of creating something positive from shadows.

For example, one person might depict a fallen branch as a mountain, while another might see it as a bear. A dried leaf found in the forest may become an insect for one participant and a witch for another. Figure 1 presents examples of CONNECTEDkind works created by the author's graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the activity was conducted at the beginning of each class session. From a photograph of a seed pod ("saya") and its shadow, taken by Takashi Konishi—a forest guide and photographer—emerged images such as "Smiling Sisters," "A Melancholy Maiden," "A Tall Beauty," and "A Giant Snake Swallowing Two Doves." Belevica refers to these individual creations as *droplets*.



Figure1: Examples of "Droplets" created by graduate students in Japan

### **An Experiment in University Classes**

In the spring semester of 2020, many universities delayed the start of classes by about a month due to the rapid spread of COVID-19, leaving students with unprecedented anxiety. In response, the author launched a voluntary class with approximately ten students under the slogan "Stay home, but stay connected!" As the weeks passed, the students' anxious expressions gradually brightened, and many expressed gratitude for the positive momentum the Monday morning class gave them for the week ahead.

In the fall semester, as the pandemic continued to divide the world, reconsidering the "shadows" within society became a particularly relevant theme in sociology.

CONNECTEDkind was therefore introduced into an online introductory sociology course with approximately fifty students. Although the author initially doubted whether a participatory workshop could succeed with such a large group, the students' proactive engagement proved otherwise. Each week, several days before class, a photograph was sent to all students as an assignment. Students created their own drawings and then shared them in small groups of about four during the opening icebreaker session, asking questions and offering praise to one another.

Student reflections clearly indicated that, as Belevica suggested, young people struggling during the pandemic were reconnecting with nature, emotion, their peers, and a sense of positivity. One student commented, "Using my imagination to draw was genuinely enjoyable every time. I rarely used paper and pen to draw after entering university, so this was a valuable experience." Even after the pandemic subsided, the author continued to begin classes with CONNECTEDkind. As of January 2025, a total of 1,427 droplets have been archived online. Between April 2020 and January 2025, a cumulative total of 874 students across twelve semester-long courses participated in CONNECTEDkind and left behind their works. Viewed collectively, these works lend strong support to Belevica's belief that everyone is an artist.

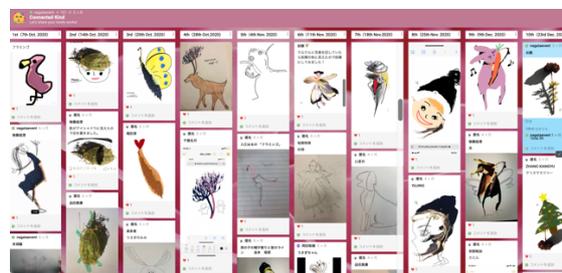


Figure 2: Students' 'Droplets' at a time of pandemic

As another student noted, "Through CONNECTEDkind, I learned the importance of valuing connections with others, especially during the pandemic. While drawing, I could immerse myself and relax, even amid many worries, and I am grateful for that." Such comments suggest that CONNECTEDkind was particularly effective precisely because of the pandemic context.

Opportunities to share artwork in small groups were also highly appreciated. One student observed, "Thanks to CONNECTEDkind, it was easy to talk naturally even in an online setting. Seeing drawings, in addition to hearing words, helped me understand what kind

of person someone is. It was a precious opportunity for conversation during the semester.” During the pandemic, some students spent entire days without speaking to anyone, and some scarcely used their voices at all. For these students, interacting with others through art became an especially meaningful experience.

Students were also exposed to Belevica’s own works. As one commented, “Laura’s pieces were overwhelming every time. They reflected perspectives I would never have imagined myself, and it was a joy to see them.” Importantly, CONNECTEDkind is free from conventional school-based value judgments such as correctness or skill level. Each piece is endearing and rich in individuality, and moments in which students praised one another’s work were consistently heartwarming.

### **Toward Research and Future Development**

The author began regular online exchanges with Belevica, sharing classroom experiences and arranging direct conversations with graduate students. As the pandemic drew to a close, these discussions led to the idea of developing research activities to further disseminate CONNECTEDkind, which had helped so many people cope with the hardships of the pandemic.

An interdisciplinary research team was formed, united by the question of whether CONNECTEDkind might also hold value in everyday, non-crisis situations. This question became the foundation of a funded research project entitled “*An Interdisciplinary Study of Imagination-Fostering Learning: Focusing on the Effects of CONNECTEDkind.*” If the ability to imagine others—particularly the “shadows” within society—is indeed key to peace and sustainability in the post-pandemic world, then examining its significance from multiple perspectives is well worth pursuing.

In March 2025, Belevica visited Japan at the invitation of the Graduate School of the University of the Sacred Heart, where she gave presentations, classes, and workshops at universities and elementary schools. During her stay, CONNECTEDkind celebrated its fifth anniversary on March 14 in Japan. A small birthday gathering held at the university was attended by a spouse of the former Latvian ambassador, who joined in a toast wishing for the project’s continued growth.

PS: Laura Belevica has also published a picture book in Japanese, which, like CONNECTEDkind, is imbued with warmth and sensitivity (*Sleeping Peacefully Until*

*Spring*, Kamakura Shunjusha). Readers interested in academic presentations conducted as part of this research project are referred to the following paper: