



*Proceedings of the Sixth International Permaculture Conference
September-October 1996, Perth, Western Australia*

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The Getting of Hope: Personal Empowerment Through Permaculture

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[Submitted Paper]

“The world belongs to those who give it greatest hope.”

Teilard de Chardin

In 1993, as part of a research project on permaculture education, I began surveying participants in Permaculture Design Certificate (PDC) courses. One of the most intriguing and exciting comments frequently made was the extent to which people felt empowered by permaculture and that for so many permaculture was a source of hope and inspiration. People from all walks of life talked of permaculture giving them a sense of hope and direction for the future, for the rest of life's journey.

Empowerment has been described as:

“increasing self-esteem, assertiveness, self-actualisation and a feeling of control over one's life rather than a state of dependency.¹”

This was exactly what PDC participants were describing:

“I feel wonderful. The feeling of power, of being able to achieve the plans I have in mind, is very strong.”

“I feel inspired, more optimistic, hopeful, enthusiastic, enlightened, more direction.”

“I feel as though I have had my eyes open to new hope.”

“I now feel empowered by the knowledge and skills I have gained and can't wait to start sharing it with others.”

“I see my life and contribution to the earth's environment and my community on a much broader scale.”

¹ Gross, S.J. (1985) Personal power and empowerment. *Contemporary Education* 56,(3), 137-143.

“It has given a whole new perspective to the future.”

“Because of what I’ve learned I have a responsibility to use the knowledge widely. I feel empowered by this experience and more hopeful for the future”

One comment in particular sums up the feelings expressed by many:

“The permaculture course was almost like a religious experience. I felt inspired with hope, excited that I could make a difference, touched by the realisation that I could be in control, empowered.”

On reflection I realised that I too had been empowered by permaculture. How else could I explain my continued interest, growth, understanding and participation as a permaculturist? And how else can we explain the phenomenal expansion of permaculture in less than twenty years into a worldwide movement with representation in at least eighteen countries on six continents?

My research took the direction of exploring the empowerment process, by immersing myself in two PDCs where I surveyed, listened, talked to, read and partied with a range of people, both PDC participants and experienced permaculturists.

The answers are wide-ranging and complex, varying in emphasis from person to person, but there are common factors. In retrospect, much of what I will say is probably blindingly obvious. But for me it has been a gradual unfolding of understanding the scope of this remarkable thing called permaculture. What follows is a synthesis of a range of ideas, concepts and insights gleaned from some of those inspiring people with a few of my own thrown in.

Twentieth century sickness

As William Blake reminds us, reason alone leads to despair. Information without the means to seek solutions can, at worst, lead to depression and apathy.

Although we in Australia appear to live in a time of greater democracy than ever before, paradoxically our economic and social systems have taken away from individuals and their communities the means of control over our very basic needs: shelter, warmth and production of food. In short we have become a dependent society. Our democracy remains representative rather than participatory, vesting power in representatives over whom we have little real influence. Our so-called leaders behave far more like followers – of Big Business and arid narrow economic dogma. Their thinking is linear, limited and short term, mostly as far as the end of next year’s election, next month’s investment return, next week’s balance sheet. They operate in a framework where resources are seen as infinite, human ingenuity for solving problems through science and technology as boundless; whose values are that growth is good and affluence is better.

As we enter the next millennium, we in the West find ourselves living in a society which is affluent in material terms but increasingly impoverished in environmental and social terms. Many of us live with a widespread sense of foreboding and pessimism about the future. Our lives have become highly stressful; we experience a growing sense of social isolation. We witness environmental destruction on a vast

scale worldwide, due largely to over-consumption made possible by the harnessing of fossil fuels. Many of us are employed in jobs which we are terrified of losing because we have bought into and are trapped by the economic machine. Our jobs may bring little meaning and see us working yet longer hours, taking us further from family and community. At least 10% of us are unemployed, subject to fast-dwindling, top-down government schemes which attempt to shoe-horn us into jobs which hold little attraction. We are using up our social and environmental capital at a frightening rate. Dependency is disempowering. We are not in control of our destiny.

How are we reacting to this gloom and doom? Psychologists refer to an epidemic of stress and neurosis in Western affluent societies. Depression is now the fourth most debilitating community disease. Australia has the highest rate of youth suicide in the world, surely rooted in a sense of loss of hope. Indeed, research on young people's views of the future paints a stark picture of hopelessness; of growing environmental destruction, violence and inequality in an increasingly dehumanised, machine-dominated world.² In one of his recent surveys, Hugh Mackay found that the majority of 35-45 year old Australians believe they lead stressful lives, and yearn for simpler ways to live. These people, unbelievably fortunate in the eyes of the poor of the world, have concluded that affluence is anything but synonymous with a high quality of life. We seem to have created an individualistic, competitive, anxiety ridden society.

The dominance of economic rationalism, particularly in English speaking developed countries, has reduced the daily discourse to a narrow economic one. The prevailing economic view is that we are not *Homo sapiens* but merely *Homo economicus* – beings motivated entirely by market driven economic interests.³ Our erstwhile rulers equate a casino culture with progress, while waiting with bated breath for the latest ruling on our credit to be handed down from on high by Standard and Poors. Telstra reports record profits while in the same breath announcing massive job losses without so much as a blush. We are given a health report on the stock exchange, the almighty dollar, currency exchange rates and the price of gold several times a day. Where is the daily pulse of the social and the environmental state of the world taken and reported?

Such a narrow view of human beings is deadening and dispiriting. It denies much of what we know is deeply and fundamentally important to us – our connection with each other and with the natural world. We know that in order to survive, we need to change to more sustainable and human centred ways of living. For many of us, permaculture provides the vision, ethical base and practical means to achieve this.

Permaculture education: holistic education for life

“I've learned more things of use in these 10 days (of the PDC) than in the whole of my schooling.”

² Hicks, D. (1996) A Lesson for the future: Young people's hopes and fears for tomorrow. *Futures* Vol. 28 (1) 1-13

³ Hamilton, C. (1994) *The Mystic Economist* Willow Park Press, Canberra.

Environmental education as taught in schools can be merely depressing, presenting issues and problems but offering few positive insights into ways forward. Such education often lacks both a critique of the social and economic structures underpinning the environmental crisis and indeed the contribution of the curriculum itself to the perpetuation of the consumer society.⁴

In sharp contrast, through permaculture education we learn to take back power into our lives; we become empowered through achievable actions in an ethical and, for some, a spiritual framework. Permaculture gives us the tools for personal action to take back our sense of control, whether it be growing food or growing community. It allows us to start where we are, be it the window box in the city, the back door or the large farm. David Holmgren believes that the home represents a crucible for experiments in redefining our relationships with each other and with nature.⁵

We don't need formal qualifications to practice permaculture, we just need to tap into our deep sense of wanting to work with nature instead of against her. For many of us, this journey begins in practical ways. I wonder how many of you began your permaculture journey by creating a no-dig garden? And I wonder if Robyn Francis realises just how many people she has motivated and inspired by her video "*The Mandala Garden*"?⁶ Permaculture's great contribution is the use of sane and natural design. Design for the garden, the farm, the house or design for our lives.

An experienced permaculturist describes this as:

"You can start where you are at, you do not have to have any prerequisites to do this... you can do it at home."

From learning how to lay a simple no-dig garden to harvest clean, fresh food to developing the ethic of conserving energy, recycling, reusing and distributing excess, we learn to tread more lightly on the earth. Living with less becomes the new ethic – an old car with its low embodied energy and the op-shop outfit become a badge of pride.

Permaculture is human centred, not techno-centred. It is a positive rather than negative response to, and critique, of the social and economic crisis. It operates at the human scale while keeping in mind the global picture. Permaculture offers a holistic, transformative view of thinking about the way we live. It gives us the means to re-examine and renegotiate our practices and relationships with each other, our communities and nature herself. It frees our minds from the limitations of the present and opens up a natural but often untapped creative energy to construct a sane, flowing, harmonious way of living our lives. The best permaculture teaching mirrors this view, valuing all participants, seeking to create connections between people and between areas of the curriculum.

Through permaculture we become less dependent on materialism; we experience a greater self-reliance in food production, a reduction in energy use and the chance

⁴ Fein, J. (ed.) (1993) *Environmental Education: A Pathway to Sustainability?* Geelong: Deakin U. Press

⁵ Holmgren, D. *Permaculture paths to a sustainable future*. (1995) 6th Australian Permaculture Convergence, Adelaide

⁶ Francis, R. *The Mandala Garden*. Lismore: Permaculture International

to experience a renewed sense of community through becoming involved in local groups, community gardens and alternative economic systems such as local economy/employment trading systems (LETS). This is empowering because it gives back control over those basic aspects of life in a way that is achievable, and a personal value that does not depend on our dollar earning power. A high standard of living is replaced by a high quality of life involving a renewed sense of belonging, be it in the community, with like-minded others, or to the earth itself. A permaculturist described the development of that sense of belonging as:

“I think (the home) is where you can start putting things into place, and then you can network in the local community. That sense of belonging with a group of like minded people is empowering.”

Permaculture gives people both a vision and the practical means to take back control into their personal lives, generating in turn a renewed sense of hope and purpose for the future. It gives us the means to move towards a sustainable world.

Passion for a cause, action involving sometimes fundamental changes in world view and lifestyle which Permaculturists articulate are the elements of empowerment.

Redefining our relationship with nature: the re-emergence of spirituality

I find it difficult to write about spirituality because for a long time I have been an agnostic and have largely rejected the traditional religion I grew up with. I still feel uncomfortable talking about this in certain circles. However, like many of us I have experienced intense and powerful feelings of connectedness with nature and the universe, both in the bush and through gardening. Practicing permaculture, working with soil and plants, getting down to their level, slowing down, being still, looking at the incredible way in which they grow together and attract a myriad of tiny creatures is to me a spiritual experience. The growing awareness of the incredible complexity and workings of nature is nothing short of awe-inspiring.

In this context, a definition of spirituality which appeals to me as a non-religious person, is that

“spiritual knowing is about our capacity to experience wholeness and unity, and our ability to experience connectedness with the larger order of things.”⁷

This sort of spirituality is far from the institutionalised notions I had grown up with.

Since the rise of rationality in Western thinking in the 17th century, we have been subject to, and constructed our societies within, the paradigm of scientific and technological reductionism. Indeed the economic rationalism described earlier is a reflection of this.

This way of knowing the world glorifies control over nature through the rise of technology. We in the so-called developed societies have been urbanised on a large scale for no more than 200-300 years – a very short time in the history of humanity. The

⁷ Catholic Education Office (1994) *Quality learning and teaching: Tutor training program*. Melbourne

dominance of science and technology, made possible firstly through the rise of rational thought and then embodied in the industrial revolution fuelled by fossil fuels, has brought obvious benefits to some of us. But it has also removed from many of us profound, crucial experiences which have been part of human evolution and culture for hundreds of thousands of years – a deep understanding of nature through food production, care of the land and human scale community living.

To construct a sane, sustainable future, we need to

“de-centre the machine and the technocrat, instead returning to a human scale vision.”⁸

In many cultures there were and still are ancient taboos which assign a sacredness to the land. Indeed indigenous peoples have spoken passionately and eloquently of their spiritual loss on being disconnected from the land. Many of us in the West, and now increasingly other cultures, have lost our ancient ties to the land, and I believe we too are suffering a spiritual loss deep inside us – our barren, materialistic existence offers little meaning and is unable to quench our thirst.

Through the practice of permaculture we are able to reconnect with this deep and ancient need. Through learning to grow our own food and to look after the land, we are able to reconnect with the cycles of nature. We experience the joy of seeing a plant’s whole life cycle from seed back to seed, and to save that seed for future abundance. We tune into the seasons, the angle of the sun, the wind, the dry and the wet, the cold and the heat. We celebrate the turning points in the seasons – the solstices and the equinoxes. We learn to recognise when to plant – not when the back of the seed packet says, but when that tree is flowering and those birds appear. We learn what will grow in our conditions and what will not. We learn to bring the soil back to life and marvel at its fertility. We learn that nature is at once predictable and unpredictable, and the nurturing of new life and new growth generates for us new hope. We begin to value precious time over money, we learn to slow down and tune into the ebb and flow of the natural world. We learn to design our lives around natural energies and cycles.

Literature on empowerment stresses the importance of supported participation. Through food production, allowing us to participate actively in earth-care, we begin to take back responsibility for the earth. With its emphasis on small and local communities, permaculture gives us back our sense of belonging – our place in communities which extends to our place in nature.

Although my background is in the biological sciences, it was not until I became involved in permaculture that I really understood the wonder of the cycles and energy flows in nature which I had studied in such a sterile way in the classroom. Through the practice of permaculture emerges our sense of belonging to a greater whole, a sense of power with the universe. Yes, Bill Mollison, nature is surely the best teacher.

⁸ Slaughter, R. (1995) *The Foresight Principle: Cultural Recovery in the 21st Century*. London: Adamantine Press Ltd.

Complexity, synergy, resonance and flow

In contrast to the mechanistic paradigm, natural systems exhibit the qualities of complexity and emergence, which arise as a result of a myriad beneficial synergistic connections. In a natural system this leads to abundance and a self-perpetuating system. At the level of design for food production, permaculture attempts to mimic a natural system, achieving high productivity by the use of high biodiversity through the construction of complex garden systems. But these same principles of connect- edness, diversity and complexity operate in a range of systems on a range of levels. Through trying to understand permaculture, I have come to believe that a perma- culture system by its very nature provides a model for our own lives, one of richness and diversity which leads to synergy. The synergy between elements in a perma- culture system parallels ways in which we can become energised and empowered, through the multiple positive connections to each other and to the earth. In the same way, learning about and practicing permaculture seems to release the locked or numbed energy we have about social and environmental concerns.

At some time in our lives we have all experienced the sense of connectedness leading to feelings of expansiveness, well-being, responsiveness, acceptance, tolerance. This sense of abundance and creativity is within all of us, unleashed by reconnecting with each other and with nature. This is the flow experience, described as:

“... an intrinsically rewarding experience, from doing something we love and are good at, we derive the pleasure of effortlessly stretching ourselves beyond our usual limitations, into a ‘peak performance’ ...⁹”

We recognise, respond to and flow with permaculture because deep down inside it touches us, there is a sense of resonance with its principles, it *feels* right. PDC participants often comment on this feeling:

“Permaculture is common sense, plain common sense, common sense illumi- nated. I can recognise it, I am instantly familiar and comfortable, I am not fighting any of it.”

and:

“I feel I am on the right track, I feel this is the thing that perhaps has been missing all along, this sense of connectedness with the planet. It has become the framework for our future, somehow for me it is a real framework for living.”

When you think about it, there are many examples of complex, effective connected systems, such as traditional polyculture agriculture, an insect colony, a rainforest, a mycorrhiza, a symphony orchestra. Such systems can be variously described by terms such as “belonging”, “connected”, “supportive”, “loving”, “integrated”, “mean- ingful”, “purposeful”, “constructive”, “functional” and “empowered”.

Indeed the father of the Gaia hypothesis, Lovelock himself, takes the view that the whole planet Earth acts as such a system; a self-regulated and reactive system

⁹ Bouchon, M. (1996) Business and its environments. *Earthwise Women* 3 10-11

which, through a series of feedback loops, creates and maintains the conditions necessary for life to exist, a system of increasing diversity, complexity and stability.¹⁰

It is also possible to describe in similar terms situations which are clearly dysfunctional. These have factors in common which are the antithesis of a diverse, functional system. They exhibit little diversity and few connections. Think about not only the monocultures in agriculture, the single isolated trees left after a clear-fell which quickly die, but also the lonely, disconnected immigrant who has left all networks behind, the socially isolated unemployed person, the school child who appears different, repetitive factory work, the secondary school timetable which places learning in boxes, Rhesus monkeys in Harlow's experiments, the untouched, unloved Mexican children who died before they reached three years old. These can all be described by terms such as "disconnected", "lonely", "unsupported", "unloved", "destructive", "isolated", "powerless", "hopeless", "purposeless", "meaningless", "desolate".

Journey to empowerment

The empowerment process through permaculture is a journey whose beginnings for some may even be forgotten. For others it has a definite starting point, a crucial event or realisation that things have to change. Empowerment emerges and grows through connectedness with each other, by supporting each other in our journey, by helping each other to acquire knowledge and insight. Our empowerment is synergistic, as we empower each other so we become empowered ourselves. It is far from the zero sum power games of deadening, outmoded authoritarian structures, where my power gain means your power loss.¹¹ Like love, empowerment is enabling, it is boundless. It grows when we are able to be affirmed for our work, when we participate, be it in our local group, at this conference, in our garden. We gain confidence, increased knowledge and understanding. We gain a sense of rightness, of flowing with nature rather than battling against her. Our empowerment manifests in passion, action, commitment and advocacy. As we continue to grow, experience and learn, we are continually confronted and challenged by the contradictions of life in this period of our history. Our sense of empowerment through participation and action will ensure new meanings and ways of seeing will continue to unfold.

In my worst nightmares I see a bleak, socially and environmentally degraded technocentric future, fuelled by nuclear power as the fossil fuels run out. It is a future where the worst of human values predominate.

In my sweetest dreams I see a just, sustainable future where the very best of human values are our guiding principles. Permaculture may not be the only solution to our crisis, the "global problematique". But it provides a powerful philosophy, ethic, knowledge base and practice upon which to build a sane, sustainable future. By its vision of reconnecting us to nature and to human scale sustainable communities in a practical, accessible way, permaculture offers purpose, energy, means to action and most importantly, hope.

I'll leave the last word to another PDC participant who described permaculture thus:

¹⁰ Lovelock, J.E. (1979) *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. Oxford University Press

¹¹ Macy, J.R. (1983) *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*. New Society, Philadelphia.

“This feels like following the soul or instinct ... the content of the course has confronted me with a huge sense of guilt, inadequacy, ... but also of great hope.”