

THE PERMACULTURE PATH TO HARMONY: A STORY OF PERSONAL EMERGENCE

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PERMACULTURE IS A PROFOUNDLY RADICAL APPLICATION of the principles of Harmony: because for most practitioners it is deeply based on such concepts as local democracy, social justice and equality. The term permaculture was coined in 1978 by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, and defined by them as ‘an integrated, evolving system of perennial or self-perpetuating planet and animal species useful to man’.¹ Mollison and Holmgren contrasted the then dominant and inherently unsustainable system of energy-expensive, mechanistic, soil-destroying agribusiness with what they hoped would be a sustainable (the ‘permanent’ in permaculture) low-energy, high yield model, working with local ecologies. For Mollison and Holmgren permaculture should be small-scale, intensive (rather than extensive), preserve diversity in plant and animal species, adapt to local conditions, plan for the long-term rather than short-term gain, and be applicable to urban environments as well as rural.²

There have been many updated definitions of permaculture since then but most emphasise that it’s about much more than simply growing food in a sustainable way. The UK Permaculture Association website explains:

Permaculture is a design process. It helps design intelligent systems which meet human needs whilst enhancing biodiversity, reducing our impact on the planet, and creating a fairer world for us all. People across the globe are creating thriving communities with permaculture.³

Permaculture magazine is equally broad in its view, and states that,

Permaculture is...an innovative framework for creating regenerative ways of living; a practical method for developing ecologically harmonious, ethical, human-scale and productive systems that can be used by anyone anywhere.⁴

I have been involved in permaculture since 1995 and am a founder member of the Lampeter Permaculture Group in West Wales.⁵ I am a permaculture teacher and a conservation & sustainability advisor, running regular courses on permaculture, forest gardening and conservation subjects at Denmark Farm Conservation Cen-

tre near Lampeter and the Centre for Alternative Technology near Machynlleth, as part of Aberystwyth University's Lifelong Learning programme.⁶ I also run my own rural permaculture holding with my husband and fellow ecologist Andy. It's now a gloriously abundant place where we've been 'practicing what we preach' for over twenty years – however, my ecological awareness began much, much earlier than that, as I'll explain.

I was five years old when I noticed what Harmony isn't – and what it could be – during my first day at school. As I raced outside with my playmates in the break, I was confronted by an endless, uniform sea of green – the playing field. It looked vast to my young eyes, monotonous and uninteresting. Luckily, one side was bounded by a rusty chain link fence – and beyond the fence was a narrow strip, only a few metres wide, of unfettered wildness. Here there was vegetation of different heights and colours, with flowers and seedheads bursting in exuberance. In my imagination, it was also where 'mysterious creatures' lived! I was hooked.

As an older child, escaping from exam revision and family disunity, I took solace in the wild, wet vista of the seascape that bordered my coastal home. Watching fishermen casting their lines, hearing the endless pounding of the waves, browsing the strandline for exciting new finds, the changing nature of the tides – all combined to show me a cycle of life in which humans were integral but not dominant. But this halcyon view was not to endure. As I grew older I became more aware of the damage we were inflicting on each other and the planet so, when I looked out to the watery horizon as a young adult, I dreamt of a better world beyond.

Upon acquiring my very own first home and garden, my overriding memory is of carrots – large, earth-covered and billowing with feathery foliage! It may be a simple thing to grow one's own food but it impacted me hugely. It seemed nothing short of a miracle that I could help nature to grow and share her abundance. I felt gratitude, and quite a bit of pride, for the vibrant, healthy, colourful sustenance that nature and I could co-produce. The natural world, as in my younger days, became my icon, my teacher, the way I saw meaning in life and my escape route from a growing disconnect with mainstream society.

It was obvious that I was going to study ecology at university. From being knee high to a grasshopper I'd loved playing in the mud, with worms and, perhaps most importantly, having quiet time in nature. As the oldest child and only girl in a noisy, bustling household, something in my psyche often preferred the company of creatures over people. My body, mind and soul craved wholeness and, to me, this meant embracing the complexity of ecology. I loved its intricate, dynamically changing patterns and the fact that everything, from the tiniest to the biggest being, is interconnected.

After university, I landed my dream job with a national nature conservation organisation. However, the term ‘holistic’ was virtually unknown back then and wholeness was definitely not on the agenda. Much as I admired the skills and dedication of those trying to save species and habitats, it seemed that humans weren’t included. Narrow-minded organisational reviews and punishing financial targets got to me. I survived by playing relaxation tracks to and from work but I still woke up in the middle of the night, my heart beating fast and anxious thoughts racing through my mind. I asked myself: ‘why is it OK to treat other species with awe and wonder but not care for humans too?’ It was then that I discovered permaculture and it truly saved my life!

Permaculture is a holistic, systems-based approach to designing sustainable human settlements, communities, businesses and other endeavours. It has a set of twelve guiding principles, modelled on natural systems, that teach us to,

Observe and interact; Catch and store energy; Obtain a yield; Apply self-regulation and respond to feedback; Use and value renewable resources and services; Produce no waste; Design from pattern to details; Integrate rather than segregate; Use small and slow solutions; Use and value diversity; Use edges and value the marginal; Creatively use and respond to change.⁷

These principles help to ensure that harmonious systems emerge, in the knowledge that everything is dynamic and nothing is set in stone. In short, we design as nature does, within an overall pattern or framework that allows individual elements and their responses not only to be expressed but also to teach us what to do next.

On my first permaculture course in 1995 I was taken back to my infant days - looking longingly over the fence at nature’s masterpiece, the abandoned strip of land next to my school field. But this time we were treated to a master ‘design-scape’ in the form of a forest garden visit. Here there were overlapping layers of vegetation, multiple yields, bees buzzing and birds singing and a beauty that I could hardly imagine from the boring, municipal plantings of my home town. I once heard someone say that beauty is sustainability in action – and it can be if we are tuned in to the Harmony of natural systems.

But the biggest revelation of all was that permaculture has three Ethics – a set of values – that underpins all that we design. *Earth Care*, looking after the earth, sits alongside *People Care*, looking after people, and *Fair Shares* - only using our ‘fair share’ of the earth’s resources. This was a light bulb moment for me – and was patently not what my conservation employer was practicing at the time. It all

made sense, rationally and emotionally, and I felt the next stage of my own path to Harmony beginning to emerge.

Moving *away from* disharmony and *towards* harmony was important for my process – and is, in fact, a feature of everything that’s alive. If they can, living beings avoid stimuli that don’t serve them, such as toxic chemicals, adverse environmental conditions, predators, and are attracted to those that assist survival, such as nourishing foods, warmth, shelter, companionship. My emotional survival depended on moving away from a dysfunctional workplace - and so it was that my husband and I used our new permaculture tools to design our move to a small land holding in West Wales in 1997.

By 2000, I had linked up with other local permaculture teachers to teach a Permaculture Design Course, at the suggestion of someone who saw more in me than I did myself at the time! Permaculture ethics guided our team to create a safe, comfortable, inclusive space to teach in, with scrumptious food, plenty of participative activities and time for self-care and celebration. The students bonded like no other group I’d witnessed and, by the end of the course, the Lampeter Permaculture Group (LPG) was born. And so began the next phase of my life!

The Lampeter Permaculture Group has a constitution and practices based on permaculture ethics and principles. Group meetings echo the format of the original course, sharing activities, company, food and business in one seamless operation. We use zones of influence (another permaculture tool) to reach out to the public through events such as Apple Days, Seed Swaps and Plant Swaps and to engage with decision makers in the local community. The Group has also helped to spawn Transition Lampeter (all Transition Towns reference permaculture) and this has led to further community developments in the shape of a community hub, local ‘People’s Market’ and other events for the community.⁸

Back home, our ‘design’ has been emerging as we *Observe and Interact* to see how the land and associated living things respond to our interventions. The permaculture principle of *Creatively Use and Respond to Change* comes into sharp focus as we we experience the effects of climate change on our weather. After 22 years of living here the changing patterns are clear and we need to consider growing some different crop and tree species as well as other ways to build resilience. Another principle, *Apply Self Regulation and Accept Feedback*, is also poignant in this regard – how long before the human race accepts that its impacts are causing dis-Harmony in the natural systems that serve us all?

We live in a very old Welsh stone farmhouse and have been very mindful of its heat leakage and associated carbon emissions. Applying the principle of *Produce No Waste* is incredibly difficult but we’ve managed to *Catch and Store*

Energy in several ways. Firstly, we've heavily insulated the windows, floor, roof and one of the interior walls, using materials that are carbon negative over their lifetime (*Obtain a Yield*). Secondly, we installed solar panels so that we can use our own electricity and export to the national grid, thereby helping to decarbonise the national supply. Thirdly, we've planted our own, diverse woodland to create a sustainable harvest of fuel for our incredibly efficient thermal mass stove (made in the UK and fitted by a local Welsh supplier).

One day, we might insulate the walls externally and install solar hot water but, applying *Small and Slow Solutions* and *Designing from Patterns to Details*, shows that our household is a really low energy consumer so we prefer to adjust our behavior rather than install expensive systems at the moment. A passive solar conservatory adds warmth both directly and via thermal mass in the walls and floor and has cut our heating season down by two months. This was made possible because we used permaculture tools to help us choose the right property in the first place, with a favourable aspect. If only all new developments were designed with solar gain in mind. Added to which, the conservatory is a multifunctional space where we can 'eat out' even when it's raining, enjoy gatherings with friends, hang and air the washing, dry crops and grow tender plants. A perfect way to *Integrate rather than Segregate!*

So what has all this got to do with Harmony? On a personal note I can honestly say that, whatever's going on in the world, when I walk around the land that we steward, I feel a deep sense of wellbeing. This is partly to do with a huge sense of satisfaction from having helped the land and wildlife to flourish, but more than this, I very much appreciate what natural systems can accomplish if we allow them to help us. The permaculture ethics of *Earth Care*, *People Care* and *Fair Shares* are all expressed perfectly in nature and will sustain us if we learn to cooperate rather than dominate.

My feeling of connection goes wider though, across to the broad surrounding hills of the Cambrians that are part of my sense of place. *Use Edge and Value the Marginal* applies here. Knowing that towns like Lampeter and Aberystwyth, with their myriad sustainable initiatives and community networks, exist within our bioregion sustains me immensely. Projects such as the Cambrian Mountains initiative, which aims to restore biodiversity to the well-known mountain range in mid-Wales and help our communities to vision a better world in response to the environmental and social challenges ahead, are food for my soul.⁹ We are all interconnected, and Harmony, for me, comes from learning about, nurturing and participating in connections that are an expression of the whole.

NOTES

¹ Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, *Perma-Culture One: A Perennial Agriculture for Human Settlements* (Tyalgum: Tagari Publishers, 1990 [1978]), p. 1.

² Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, *Perma-Culture One: A Perennial Agriculture for Human Settlements* (Tyalgum: Tagari Publishers, 1990 [1978]), pp. 6-7 and 90-4.

³ For the Permaculture Association see <https://www.permaculture.org.uk/> [Accessed 07 June 2019].

⁴ *Permaculture Magazine*, Issue 100, Summer 2019 see <https://www.permaculture.co.uk/>; Maddy Harland, Lush: 'Science shows how permaculture could be the sustainable future of farming', Lush, <https://uk.lush.com/article/science-shows-how-permaculture-could-be-sustainable-future-farming>

⁵ For Lampeter Permaculture Group see <http://www.lampeterpermaculture.org/> [Accessed 07 June 2019].

⁶ For Denmark Farm Conservation Centre see <https://www.denmarkfarm.org.uk/> [Accessed 31 May 2019]; For the Centre for Alternative Technology see <https://www.cat.org.uk/> [Accessed 07 June 2019]; For Aberystwyth University Lifelong Learning courses see <https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/lifelong-learning/ecology/> [Accessed 07 June 2019].

⁷ *Permaculture Principles*, 'Permaculture Design Principles', <https://permacultureprinciples.com/principles/> [Accessed 9 June 2019] And see David Holmgren, *Permaculture: Principles & Pathways Beyond Sustainability* (Hepburn, Vic.: Homgren Design Services, 2002).

⁸ For Transition Towns see <https://transitionnetwork.org/> [Accessed 07 June 2019]; for the People's Market see <https://www.facebook.com/thepeoplesmarketlampeter/> [Accessed 23 September 2019].

⁹ Land Use Consultants, Bangor University and Victoria University of Wellington, NZ, 'Cambrian Mountains Adaptive Landscape Project', 10353_DefraCambriansALPCase-StudyReportFINAL.pdf [Accessed 9 June 2019]; For Tregaron Community Hub see <https://www.facebook.com/whilenyporthmyn.droverswheel> [Accessed 07 June 2019].