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PermacultureDesignMagazine.com

May/Summer
2020
No. 116
US \$6.50
Cdn. \$7.95



Bringing Self to the Work

Learning by Doing: Permaculture for our Youth

Penny Krebiehl

I'M SPEAKING TO THE WORK of mentoring, teaching, and place through a personal narrative. In doing so, I'm expressing why I support sharing permaculture design with children and other adults via an educational experience.

I also want to represent and share some of the struggles and issues I see. Even though I have intentions of including all people in the People Care aspect of facilitating and mentoring permaculture, there are still people who are not represented in the "site-evaluation and assessment" in the distribution of permaculture education. My focus includes children and youth--but this also connects to issues of gender, class, racism, and land-ownership....

I'm entering the work and continued study and practice of permaculture as a privileged white woman and grandmother who lives on the ancestral lands of the Anishinaabek people. I begin by paying my respects to their elders past and present. I'm honored and dedicated to being a steward of this land I call home. I recognize that this privilege was afforded to me by many legacies of violence, displacement, migration, and settlement that bring me here today writing these words; trying to get at something as a woman who works as a permaculture facilitator and mentor.

I was seeing a living system of connection and relationship of people, places, and things.

I also identify as a divorced mother of two; a single, white, middle class person who is presently unable to afford owning a home or land and lives a form of voluntary simplicity. I have a known, personal family history in the Great Lakes region that reaches back into the late 1700s. I agree that Land Acknowledgement is not only a way of honoring the ancestral lands my family now lives on, but also that this naming is deeply connected to the work and sharing of permaculture education, especially for our children and youth, and is my responsibility as an adult, parent, and mentor.

I consider myself to be incredibly privileged. I've journeyed from growing up in a beautiful, rural farming and



Exploring the mystery of place together supports our connection and belonging.

working class community that I still have a loving relationship with, to taking my curiosity and learning adventure out into a variety of urban-city scenarios, with a blessed, diverse population of people, ethnic communities, and landscapes.

My first timid steps into the role of being a mentor and educator was as an artist and illustrator. I opened up my private studio to a handful of kids who were interested in drawing, cartooning, and painting and eventually to storytelling through puppet and mask theater. I moved even further into turning my work space into a "teaching" place, as my two children entered public school. I spent two years in this art studio with other adult artists. I then shared my idea about making more space for kids with a generous neighbor who became my landlord on a first floor urban studio building next to the Grand River in Lansing, Michigan. The first goal and intention of this new art-space was that when kids or adults walked through the door, they knew it was for and about creative-making.

My experience in connecting permaculture design and going "back to school" in my late 40s to my earlier training as an artist and illustrator was of WAKING UP. I was seeing a living system of connection and relationship of people, places, and things, and a design science involving living whole systems. To this day, I continue waking up, relearning, and discovering new ways to be a creative learner and a decent human being. With my creations and designs, I have responsibilities to people and the planet. At the center of my

passion is the concern that I continue to do the work that's needed to stay awake to what is happening in the world, and navigate through it as a responsible human being. It's a constant ride around a living-generational design cycle, from observation and goal setting, assessment and evaluation, implementation and maintenance, to the ever important pause for feedback and then right back around to tweaking what needs to be adjusted and on and on....

Like most mentors and educators, I think that there is an art-form and particular practice in supporting both a child's intellectual capacities and their inner life. Each child and relationship is unique. My intention and goal is to guide kids to stay connected to a sense of belonging and interconnection while discovering and staying steady on their own path. As they do so, they find a sense of purpose, meaning, and social consciousness. I find myself constantly asking: what does it mean to be a part of this big, wide, ever-changing world, and who we are sharing the land with? What do we need to learn: about the Earth, our planet home; the people—all of the people—those that are here and our ancestors; and the necessity and truth of the history of land-ownership, occupation, and sharing fairly? How are we going to be together, because we already truly ARE here together? And why do we have to keep asking these questions?

I believe we benefit from a serious review and gain a deeper understanding of social justice issues by examining learned patterns and behaviors that we were taught as acceptable, but truly are not. We benefit from finding ways to take action and dismantle what needs to be dismantled. Especially when it comes to child and youth education, I believe it is not an option to use outdated history that is rooted in white supremacy. Social justice and ecological justice are directly connected. We can contribute as permaculture designers, and as facilitators, mentors, and educators to this positive change.

Once we see it, we can't unsee it. Permaculture design methods, in theory, can be a good example of a positive structure, with the ethics, principles, and how-to/methods of design for our everyday lives. Permaculture is a place where we can teach engagement with the whole world and where white-



It is important to nurture and celebrate our youth through mentoring and action.

supremacy and all of the other “isms” should not exist. Presently, this is not the truth for many who may be interested in permaculture.

Lifting Up Voices

I'm pleased to be considered a mentor of a young woman, Chelsea Coy, who has experienced this disconnect and says,

“I believe the essence of permaculture is a reflection of the earth-based, indigenous ways of relationship between people and the land, before the rise of the capitalist patriarchy in all regions of the planet. Most permaculture courses are financially inaccessible to many of those within my age group, especially people of color and many of the working class who are desperately trying to break out of the capitalist system and return to nature. Permaculture is based on mimicking the patterns of Mother Nature. The key word being Mother, meaning feminine patterns of living design. I beg the question then, and I ask, “why is it that the dominant educational force in permaculture design courses around the globe are privileged white males”?”

***I started to think about
how we are driven
by natural rhythms
even in places we have
been taught are unnatural.***

When I think about the permaculture phrase “We are nature working,” I'd also like to share another brilliant excerpt from an interview on Milkweed Editions by a powerhouse of a woman writer from Minneapolis, Minnesota. Erin Sharkey, is the editor of the forthcoming anthology of Black archival writing as it relates to the history of slavery and freedom and migration for Black life in Minnesota and in the wider country. My thoughts turn to how we reckon with what she deftly calls “the politics of nature.”

Erin says:

“The seed for this project was planted several years ago when I lived and worked for a time on an urban farm in Buffalo, New York, learning to grow food, living in a rich vibrant community. During that time, I became fascinated with natural life growing in the midst of a city—the plants, animals, pests, people, elements, and weather. I started to think about how we are driven by natural rhythms even in places we have been taught are un-

natural.

I am interested in the politics of nature—who owns it, does it need to be tamed, where is it, what role does it play in our lives, are we natural? I think that so often the images we are fed about nature have this colonial conquering energy—folks climbing to the top of a mountain alone and planting a flag—but I think that that story is old and wrong and problematic.

Too often Black people are left out of nature stories. The state has worked to distance Black people from nature in our imaginations and in practice. Think about the sundowner laws that enforced curfews to exclude Black folks from communities or the Jim Crow-era laws that made travel dangerous for Black adventurers through many areas of our country or the ways government relegates Black communities for the dirtiest industrial uses or redlining and racial covenants, designed to designate the least desirable areas to Black and Brown communities.

I am interested in evidence of the long-standing relationship of Black folks to nature. The ways we have stewarded the land, the ways we are reclaiming relationships disrupted by slavery or displacement. The archive provides this evidence.”

We have responsibility to diversity and to social justice in all learning spaces.

As parental units, permaculturists, facilitators, mentors, or educators, we have responsibility to diversity and to social justice in all learning spaces. To not only talk about it, but to believe in it and also model it.

When we plan a permaculture program or sharing opportunity, let's ask ourselves who is invited, with a checklist of questions:

- Is the venue fully accessible?
- Is it on the bus route?
- How can you advertise the event so people of color, people from minority ethnic groups feel welcome?
- Have you considered the needs of single parents?
- Have you considered the needs of people with visual or hearing impairments?
- Is the content relevant to people from different backgrounds and cultures?
- Are traditional and Indigenous sources of knowledge being acknowledged?
- Is the work of women and black, Asian, and minority people being included and acknowledged?



Our work is meant to be joyful.

- Are computers accessible in the community if the event is online?
- What else?

Focusing on who takes on the leadership role in a permaculture program, here's a checklist of questions to answer:

- Do the mentors/educators/facilitators include women?
- Do they include Black people, Asian people, people from ethnic minorities?
- Do they include people from working class backgrounds?
- Do they include people with disabilities?
- Do the mentors/educators/facilitators speak the local language(s)?
- What else?

Are you interested in exploring the connections of social permaculture, and facilitating educational experiences with children and youth? Consider attending a three-day workshop with Rhonda Baird and myself this summer:



Co-creation is the name of the game.

Bringing Permaculture to Our Communities; A Workshop for Mentors, Educators and Facilitators July 30-31, August 6-7; online. Engage in a nature-based approach to teaching, mentoring, and anti-oppression work, learning the basics of designing children and youth permaculture activities, through practice, design, and information share. Presented by Northern Michigan Permaculture, Little Artshram, and Sheltering Hills Design, hosted by Commonplace, a community innovation hub and co-working space in downtown Traverse City. Δ

My name is Penny Krebiehl and I'm an artist, garden-farmer, mother, and grandmother and have been formally involved in the permaculture realm since taking a PDC with Starhawk, Penny Livingston Stark, and Erik Ohlsen in 2005. I'm passionate about bringing permaculture into the 21st century as an educational option that deepens the experience for women, children, and youth AND to shift, tweak, and fine-tune the facilitator, mentor, and educator roles while focusing on system redesign with social permaculture. I'm pleased to join other permaculture teachers who share an integrated anti-oppression, permaculture design language and approach while including children and youth rather than separating them from our living, learning, and doing communities. I'm one of 40 women teachers in an on-line Permaculture Design Course via the Permaculture Women's Guild, and a Co-Creator of: O'k CSA Cooperative, and Great Rivers and Lakes Permaculture Institute, Northern Michigan Permaculture. I'm the founder of Little Artshram aka Greater Lansing ARTSPACE, Permaculture Education for Children, Youth and Families.

References & Suggestions for Inspiration & Investigation:

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3. Karryn Olson, *A Pattern Language for Women in Permaculture*. *Permaculture Activist* #89, August 2013. <https://regenpreneurs.com/pattern-language-women-permaculture/>
4. Melanie Morrison, *Doing our own Work*, a program from *Allies for Change*. www.alliesforchange.org
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Permaculture Education for Children, Youth and Families is a project created and supported by Little Artshram creating a platform for global networking with permaculture educators and learners, offering community discussion, designing learning opportunities, facilitator and mentor training with collaborative partners specifically in Michigan and the Midwest United States. The objective of this project is to design and develop the container/framework, process and content of a series of workshops, programs and training, using Sociocracy and Permaculture pedagogy as both a model for further K-12 education and development. We believe this project is developing the means to incubate nourishing, alternative learning opportunities for children, youth and their families at a critical time of need. With a long rich history of programming for children and youth in many Michigan communities for over 20 years, we are targeting the Summer of 2020 to bring permaculture design into a greater social-system and anti-oppression networking capacity, through facilitated workshops and introductions of leadership training. We are learning by doing. Δ