

# Permaculture



# Design

Regenerating Life Together

## PERMACULTURE WORKS

**Accelerating Succession  
Working with our Youth  
Using Our Work in Service  
A Permaculture Workforce  
Emergency Preparedness;  
Staying Grounded  
Update on IPC-14**

[PermacultureDesignMagazine.com](http://PermacultureDesignMagazine.com)

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





---

## ***The Cart Before the Horse***

# ***Putting First Things First in Our Work***

Rhonda Baird

**P**ERMACULTURE WORKS. It does, and it doesn't.

Permaculture works fantastically well at solving complex problems. As a design system, its principles, strategies, and techniques can be used to establish beautiful forest gardens, heal waterways, build amazing soil, and retrofit neighborhoods into dynamic, vibrant villages, and regenerating local economies. There are so many possibilities, and those are very exciting to contemplate and plan for in a dynamic moment with new limits imposed on the world.

However, complex and complicated problem-solving (1) can only be accomplished if and when the problem-solvers practice self-awareness and develop personal and communal capacities that define edges and boundaries for problem-solving. In other words, what is the context? Where is the focus? A permaculture system on a property can work for the owners of that property, but how does that solve the problem of the neighborhood? The region? The country? The world?

---

***Permaculture design offers a solid platform from which to develop novel responses.***

---

Navigating the complexity can feel overwhelming. Permaculture design is good at solving complex problems, but how can it respond to chaotic ones such as the global pandemic we've been enduring?

I believe permaculture design offers a solid platform from which to develop novel responses—especially when it includes a wholistic approach to human development and health. My faith is in the capacity of human beings to grow and learn and make choices that bring them into right relationship (2) with the Earth and each other. On the road to right relationship, we have a lot of mending and healing to do within ourselves (3), our communities, and our landscapes. Our inherited civilization, which dominates the globe, doesn't work, and it is unraveling. (If you find yourself resisting that message, I invite you to consider why you do.)



*Violet-infused white vinegar for use in summer cooking on the way. This kind of self-responsibility can also play into gifting economies.*

It is time for the novel solutions to emerge. These may not be found within the permaculture message developed in the 80s or 90s. It is something which must continue emerging as a response to our current context of civilizational unraveling.

Years ago, Toby Hemenway recorded a talk (4) about how he was not interested in saving civilization. What we are clinging to is the comfort and safety of a system which has become the normal. It is normal to be able to buy a t-shirt on Amazon prime for \$7.00. It is normal to be able to go to three grocery stores to buy meat at one, veggies and bread at another, and our favorite desserts at the third. It has been normal to buy what's cheap and replace it as needed. How aware are we of our habits? Are our needs met? Our wants? Our whims? Are we aware of others' needs and the impact of our choices?

Increasingly, I find myself making the things I need and want for my household. It's not because I long to be a home economic queen, or a totally self-reliant person, but because I want to take responsibility for and intimately know what went into producing that item (food, shelter, clothing, etc...). It slows me down and helps me to distinguish needs from wants.

As someone who does love fiber arts, I have rhettled and spun nettles from my garden for fiber; spun sheep's wool, and run a "fiber CSA." I weave, knit, crochet, and sew. I understand very well what it takes to make a hat or a sweater

or a pair of pants. When I homeschooled my children, they each learned to spin with a drop spindle and to knit, so they understand these things as well. I wonder how we would be with our clothing, if we all had to make several articles of clothing as a child or on a regular basis. I do this because I enjoy it as a part of my creativity and relaxation. We don't have to use stone-age technology to solve the problem of weather-appropriate clothing.

We have several appropriate technologies to solve our problems on a physical level, but it is very evident that our civilizational experiment in either secular or religious capitalistic culture is failing spectacularly. Social technologies developed by indigenous cultures throughout the millennia have been torn apart by dreams of empire and conquest and righteousness. People have been pushed off land by policy and by violent conflict for millennia. Conversations have turned to arguments about identity politics.

Our capacity to govern ourselves and seek equitable return for our efforts has been undermined by growing gaps in the arenas of governance and economy. We bought into a story of righteousness based on differentiation and accumulation based on wants. We needed the means of meeting our real needs: actualization, connection, and mutual reciprocity. Who we are and what we own are relative markers based on who we are interacting with. This interaction is the place, I believe, from which to begin finding the path toward an emergent community.

### **Connection leads to emergent community**

Let's start with connection. I put forward the idea that we all long to be seen and honored for who we are. Our identities carry within them cultural stories. What we inherit, what we own about ourselves, and the radical practice of loving ourselves and each other help us to contribute in meaningful



*Communities are built through individual relationships and networks of overlapping relationships. If we can tend to those and take responsibility for how we show up, we can build strong foundations. Too much of our lives are spent in needless isolation these days (and some needed quarantine for safety). Image via Pixabay.*

ways to the communities we belong to. At the same time, we have particular skills, dreams, and choices which shape our path and allow us to support others. I know from experience that I can have a generalized love for humanity, but it is much more practical to give the love and contribution I have to share when I'm present with someone. This becomes the bridge across our differences.

Putting people in the "other" category, or highlighting our differences based on assumption creates division. If I tell you I'm a married woman with a family, you can make many assumptions about who I am. Many of them might be right. If I tell you about a past challenge or trauma, you might also

---

## **As parents, teachers, and mentors, we have a responsibility to recognize the gifts and growing edge of our young people.**

---

make many assumptions about my state of growth, personal development, or capacities. Based on my physical features, you'll make one set of assumptions. My language will indicate another set of assumptions. And we keep carrying on with layers of assumptions about the person we're encountering. To make matters more confusing, our own histories, wounding, and needs encourage us to continue projecting onto a situation. How do we ever relate?!

We succeed by getting curious about the person we are encountering. We stay open to what they are saying, and clarify what is needed in the moment. We connect—and we do so in a way that is in integrity with ourselves and allows others to be in their integrity. We do this even if it means disagreeing respectfully. Each time we are present with someone, we build our connection to them. As much as I might appreciate you, dear reader, we are only loosely connected through this medium. Wouldn't it be much more wonderful to have this conversation in person—maybe in a forest garden in bloom with a cup of tea?

### **Sharing our best gifts**

Now, let's turn to actualization. Every day we depend on others. Someone brought me my mail. Someone provides electricity, water, and internet service to our home. Someone grew the grains that went into the bread, and someone else raised the goats that went into the goat cheese I just put on



that bread. I hope so—I hope they feel an incredible sense of purpose in doing their work. I believe each of us is here on this planet for a reason right now. Certainly, there are enough problems to be solved—and each of us has an important part of the puzzle. We share that best when every part of ourselves is alive and humming with energy and intelligence. Counselors, mentors, and supporters—or a healthy community—can help you achieve that. It is very much worth building that support team (including people who can challenge you).

As parents, teachers, and mentors, we have a responsibility to recognize the gifts and growing edge of our young people. This is where we have to do our work, so that we are ready to support the next generation through times no one has seen before. In permaculture design, we speak of working from our home system outwards into the neighborhood and then into the larger community, region, and outward. In the network of permaculturists, we've bridged between communities in order to find mutual support. Support and understanding within our communities is sometimes mixed. But, now it's time not only to work from our home systems outward, but through the generations.



*Breakout session at a gathering of urban women farmers in Indianapolis. This gathering was so successful, it has inspired a mutual aid group sharing food, resources, seeds, and encouragement.*

## **Mutual aid: societies of the future**

This is where mutual aid becomes critical. The term “mutual aid” is used a lot these days. By mutual aid, I am referring to several things: mutually supportive relationships; systems that offer physical, material support leading to a sense of abundant well-being; and, services which support our needs. In the coronavirus pandemic, I have seen many people move forward very quickly with creating mutual aid groups.

Because I am connected to many communities throughout my region, I am pleased to see the formation of mutual aid groups in service to those neighborhoods and communities. It all happened very quickly, but I suspect if we look at who was involved, we can see the concentration of activity and focus among networks of networks based on the greatest need. There is a lot of gifting among these groups, and that is a beautiful thing to see. It renews hope and faith in the idea that our needs will be met if we just ask. Generosity is contagious.

## **A Brave New World**

We have many choices to make in the coming days, weeks, and months. Permaculture design, as a process grounded in ethics and principles has much to offer us. Perhaps it's time to re-evaluate and tweak the design of your life? Or perhaps your successful design and practice equipped you with surplus to share with others in your community? What have you mastered well enough that you can pass on to others?

As we emerge from our Great Pause, how are we improving our communication and presence with others? How are we fostering right relationship with the Earth and all her peoples? How could we bring the brightest gifts of ourselves to our communities? Where can we move into mutual support? When we've re-evaluated our personal designs and life, what help do we need from others? How can we keep mutual aid groups in good health and see if they might grow into something greater in our worlds?

We are in a time when households, neighborhoods, and communities are shifting, and people are open to trying something different than they are used to. For many of us, the grind of daily tasks has shifted, and we are waking up to potentially new patterns. Why not intervene in the flow of this to make the least change for the greatest good? Why not connect more deeply with people of all ages—even if it is at a distance or over a video call? It's a brave new world. Δ

*Rhonda Baird is senior editor of this publication as well as a permaculture designer and facilitator of educational experiences. She is excited about “tea time” with her neighbors over video this month, and very much missing the women farmers of Indianapolis.*