

Like a Phoenix from the Fire: Cultivating Hope at Earth Activist Training by Katie Renz

The Problem is the Solution

You know the tagline: "Radical Solutions Inspiring Hope." You know HopeDance is all about exploring neat answers to modern social, ecological, and political ills, and I assume that's why you read it, for if you wanted to bombard yourself with tired, standard complaints, you wouldn't be here, right?

Like HopeDance, permaculture is all about solutions too, as was a program I completed last May, an official two-week permaculture consultant's design course called Earth Activist Training.

On April 26, 28 students of widely varying ages and sexual preferences from across the American soil converged on the forested hills of Cazadero, Sonoma County, to learn about permaculture, activism, and magic. We were primarily taught by two powerful women: Penny Livingston Stark, co-founder (with husband, James) of the Permaculture Institute of Northern California and strummer of Pink Floyd ballads on the campfire guitar, and Starhawk, the famed author and activist instrumental in reviving indigenous European paganism and a creative presence in the anti-corporate globalization movement.

In the coming non-stop 14 days, we studied everything from intentional communities to the remediation of Superfund sites using mushrooms.

"We didn't come here to go down the slippery slope of despondency," Penny said. "We came here to understand what to do." Sounds great, but what, exactly, is this "permaculture," and what, specifically, are these solutions?

Permaculture is a holistic set of ecological design principles that help answer how we can provide, in the city, suburbia, or rural boonies, for our food, energy, shelter, and other needs for an indefinite amount of time. And it is dedicated to providing these things well: it is not some last-ditch effort in the emaciated face of scarcity, but a cultivation of an intimate relationship with one's natural surroundings to create abundance for oneself, for human communities, and the earth.

Especially attractive are the ethics explicit to any permaculture system—take responsibility for our own existence and that of future generations, always give away surplus, cooperation not competition, and of course, the problem is the solution. It's easy, especially as green capitalism (and a sometimes related greenwashing) gains popularity, for operations to appear nice and ecologically friendly without any core commitment to sustainability.

For example, is Bakerfield's Grimmway Farms, growers of both conventional and organic plastic-packaged baby carrots, more stoked on regenerating the land through not using pesticides or on the premium they get for their section of farm they grow organically?

On the day we learned about natural building, Starhawk told us, "'It depends,' is the answer to almost every permaculture question."

Fortunately, there exist over 20 principles to guide the permaculturist toward a more definitive idea of what to do with her or his land. Some are pretty standard, concepts commonly associated with organic farming, such as increasing diversity (not just in numbers, but especially in the functional relationships between elements), using biological resources, maintaining natural cycles, working within nature, creating small-scale yet intensive systems, and focusing on the local.

Others are more uniquely within the purview of permaculture (though of course, all the principles reflect nature and transcribe it in human terms). My favorite was "the problem is the solution."

One year, Penny had huge brush piles. She decided to plant pumpkin seeds in the piles, which loved the carbon-rich



Brenda and Wind listen intently

environment and thrived. She harvested the orange orbs, then exchanged them with the local bakery for pastries. The lesson? Brush piles can be converted into yummy baked treats, with a little ingenuity and a willingness to rethink the "problem."

The Land and Beyond

Application of these synergistic principles can manifest in a beautifully productive plot of earth. Permaculture provides a vision of What Can Be and, in many cases, What Is, like Penny's PINC in Point Reyes, or Larry and Kathryn Santoyo's Center for Natural Design locally in Los Osos.

"Permaculture is a very powerful form of activism," Penny told us early on.

Yet the principles and ethics that make this approach so unique are hardly exclusive to growing food, building homes, or creating energy, but can (and should, in this subjective journalist's most humble opinion) be applied to other areas, such as political activism or personal exploration. Plant guilds, for instance, are species that, if planted together, will have multiple effects on the soil, namely fixing nitrogen, accumulating nutrients, and attracting beneficial insects. In community activism we can form analogous "institutional guilds," composed of city government, educators, farmers, students, residents, businesses, etc., all working as an ensemble to birth some common good, such as a permacultured skatepark, as another EAT instructor, Erik, is working on in Sebastopol.

And if there's any doubt about the power of a system that, like permaculture, fosters self-sufficiency, abundance, and cooperation, it should be eliminated by the following story.

Starhawk had returned from Palestine as part of the International Solidarity Movement a mere three days prior to the first day of EAT. She told us she had visited the Sustainability Institute in Marda. Yet instead of being greeted by bounty and beauty, she walked into an office with files and photos strewn across the floor. Marda's epicenter of permaculture had been attacked, and not, according to Starhawk, because it sheltered any suicide bombers (no such terrorists had ever been from Marda), but because "they were doing something much more dangerous."



Fertile Minds. Katie Renz, center

"They were teaching people to detach themselves from Israeli economic control and become self-reliant," she said, bringing home to a roomful of American peaceniks the understanding that permaculture embodies incredible significance beyond just composting poop and planting pretty gardens.

Throughout the next two weeks, between building cobb benches and completing a greywater system, we learned about consensus-based decision-making, direct action, and "Nine Ways to Intervene in the System" a spectrum borrowed from the late Donella Meadows, which stretches from the baseline of "changing amounts" to the overarching "changing the whole paradigm."

Holding the Vision with a Special Hocus Pocus

After teaching Meadows' changing-the-system continuum, Starhawk facilitated a late-night, group tarot reading, asking

the colorful cards, "How can we create a paradigm shift?."

The last card, The Outcome, was the Ace of Pentacles. I can't claim any knowledge of tarot (or even pronounce the word correctly), but it was collectively interpreted that the mindset we need to offer is one that radiates abundance, hope, and beauty. And this is what permaculture, ultimately, asks: Do we want to shirk in a state of scarcity—sending people screaming in fear—or revel in world of abundance—a living, seething, green and proven way of existing?

So, considering permaculture and communities, how do we transform the brush piles of disorganized, isolated, possibly hostile people into rich, sweet pastries all brightening the same baking sheet?

Perhaps magic provides an answer. "Changing consciousness at will" is one of Starhawk's favorite definitions of this mythically contested term.

Recognizing what state you are in (mentally, emotionally, physically: how are you?), or that the system is in, and using tools—be they "grounding" yourself or walking away—to shift this state is magic, then. From spiral dancing amidst flying tear gas canisters in Quebec City to taking advantage of beneficial relationships between fungus and heavy metals on a toxic landscape, it's really all about assessment and flexibility and choice. And courage, too.

Another essential point of this magic business is knowing, proclaiming, living what you are for, not just shouting, whining, shoulder-schlumping about what you're against. Starhawk asserted this logic in her newest book, *Webs of Power*: "You can't cast a spell for what you don't want."

Magic and permaculture can similarly apply to the personal level to make headway in the community sphere. James Stark, Penny's husband and co-permaculturist, empowered us near the end of EAT to work with vision. Dubbing this a "preventative" plan, he said everyone should have an idea of what they want their community to be, lest they want someone else to create it for them.

"Your only limitation is the size and quality of your vision, and the vision of your ability," he said, encouraging us to become "unstoppable."

Like a Phoenix From the Fire

Prone to a hopeful cynicism as I am, I keep James' words rotating in my head like the daily playing of Brittany Spears' latest hit on a Clear Channel radio station.

People I know derisively label me "idealistic." What, though, is so far-fetched about regarding verdant and practical food-, shelter-, and energy-production systems as more realistic than war, monocropping, and endangered salmon? Why should I refrain from being idealistic, from embracing possibility and abundance, and instead join the crowded ranks of grayness and despair, or, at best, choose to fill my sadness with the adrenaline rush of an unfettered consumption of junk? I didn't think this was viable or fun before, and now, a certified trained earth activist, I really don't think so.

But...the problem, you know, is the solution.

Just got back from the frontlines of eco-camp, and no doubt about it, we are rising up.

QUOTABLE QUOTES

"We have a Bill of Rights. What we need to start having is a Bill of Responsibility."
—Penny Livingston-Stark

"The fortress falls when the ground beneath it shifts."
—Starhawk (realized during a ritual vision in Brazil)

"A city that is well-designed for insurrection is a city well-designed for living."
—Starhawk

"You are the leader you have been waiting for."
—James Stark

Hints for an Effective Action (as described by Starhawk)

Certainly, there is a magic, as well as sometimes a necessity, in spontaneity. Yet it can greatly bolster the success of an action, and the "grounded-ness" of participants, if the following six components are considered, pre-event.

1. Intention - What is your motivation behind undertaking this action?

2. Goals - What are you attempting to accomplish with this action?
3. Message - What symbols, images, sound bites, etc. will you use to convey the purpose of this action?
4. Structure - How is this action organized? For example, are there individuals within your group carrying green flags (we can proceed, everything's okay), yellow flags (if you come this direction, we may interact with police), and red flags (we will definitely encounter police, expect possible conflict)?
5. Logistics - How exactly are you going to get your giant paper-mache monarch butterfly down the street?
6. Exit Strategy - How are you going to get out of this action? (Sometimes it's getting arrested, but you probably don't want to depend on this option.)

How to Make an Herb Spiral

We built an herb spiral where a patch of sunshine falls between Starhawk's Cazadero cabin and the surrounding redwood forest. This planting design—a sort of raised bed in a spiral pattern—is used to take advantage of microclimates and optimize water intake by the various herbs. It looks cool, too.

First, clear an area (preferably a flat one) and trace out a circle. Don't make it too big—ours was about four feet in diameter. Also, pay attention to where you're locating the spiral in relation to the kitchen (if you intend to use the herbs for cooking). You'll probably want it in Zone 1—closest to the house, visited at least daily, maybe in robe and slippers.

You can use large rocks or bottles to form the spiral. We used wine bottles (permaculture principle: turning waste into resources) but rocks are nifty, too, as they provide lizard habitat.

If using bottles, dig shallow trenches along the outlined circle to push the necks of the upside-down bottles into. Make sure the bottles are stable, upright, and close together, then fill the circle to the edge of the bottles with cured compost. You can put fresh compost in the center, as you are not planting directly in this, and it will inoculate the whole spiral system with beneficial microorganisms.

Add more cured compost to build a mound, and break the circle to begin the spiral, placing more wine bottles within the mound until you have the spiral. Make sure the compost is to the top brim (which is really the bottom) of all the bottles. Design the tail end of the spiral on a downhill so water can flow out.

Now, plant yer herbs! Species that require less water, such as rosemary, dill, or anise, are good for the center of the spiral, while herbs that like lots of water, perhaps valerian, parsley, or lovage, should be planted on the lower levels so they receive water that seeps from the raised center. Practice that protracted observation before planting: notice where the sun hits the spiral throughout the day, if the wind plays a role, what critters may be sharing that space, and plant accordingly.



Creating swales