

Earth Activist Training

Learning Permaculture Principles to Live in Harmony with Nature

by Fred Meyer

Living in harmony with Nature is a downright frustrating effort in America. As a culture we have unconsciously decided that we are not part of Nature—instead we are above her; we are her caretakers at best. Over the centuries this mindset has manifested itself in crazy ways, from designing towns exclusively for the automobile, to shipping food thousands of miles, to spending endless hours captivated by television. With no other paradigm to follow we reflexively continue this distancing from Nature leaving a hole where peace, harmony, and spirit ought to reside. We attempt to fill this hole with more rubbish society tells us is gratifying and the separation process reinforces itself.

What would the world look like if this unintentionally placed veil that separated me from Nature was lifted? Why could I see and experience that natural world, but not feel it within me? These questions sent me down a path to understand how I got here, how Nature truly operated, and what I could do to free myself (and perhaps the rest of the America) from this unfulfilling socialization.

Discussions with like-minded souls led to fun and lively ranting, but were ultimately as fruitless as an American's backyard. So for months I exposed myself to more and more information about our culture and the complexities of Nature. This caused the veil to become progressively thinner, but simply exposed more pieces of a puzzle to which I lacked the final picture. It was a daunting and frustrating way to live and it just had to stop.

Permaculture

Then in the fall of 2004 I ran across a concept called “Permaculture” while researching ways to improve the sustainability of my garden. Permaculture is a contraction of "permanent agriculture" and was established in the early seventies as a model for sustainable living. At first this simply seemed to be an excellent resource for exploring relationships between the elements in Nature and integrating them to create vigorous, thriving ecosystems. But I soon discovered that within its principles were tenets for how to live in harmony with Nature. “We are Nature working” is a central theme and “care of Earth, care of people, and return surplus” are its ethics.

I soon discovered Permaculture classes that would not only teach the basic principles, but also provide a full-blown consultant certification in the subject. After narrowing down the country-wide candidates I finally decided (despite its hokey acronym) on Earth Activist Training (EAT) at a place in northern California called “The Avalon”. While every class described our role in Nature and how to work with her, EAT also taught what to do with that knowledge and how to use it to directly improve our world. Starhawk is an instructor at EAT and exploring my spiritual relationship to Nature with her as a guide was also a significant pull. EAT seemed like a no-brainer so in early March I signed up for the September 2005 two-week class.

During the months leading up to EAT I became increasingly excited. Here was this far-off place in the middle

of California, off the grid and with no water hookups. I would spend two full weeks sleeping in a tent. I felt that this primitive living arrangement was exactly what I needed; it would give me the opportunity to literally be with Nature every minute of the day.

It was difficult to describe to people what I was going to do at this class. “Sustainable living” was my typical awkward response, followed by much stammering about gardening, swales, and greywater systems. The truth was I didn’t really know what I was going to learn or what it would be like.

Avalon

The Sunday morning of my flight finally arrived and, via planes, buses, and cars, I completed the twelvehour trip from Iowa to The Avalon. Nothing was as I had expected, but my expectations were so undefined, I was surprised by little.

The Avalon is a homestead on 120 acres of rolling hills in Sonoma County, California. Located on what seemed to be the only flat area on the entire acreage are two small homes built about 35 years ago by two families. The houses are heated by wood, powered by solar panels, and watered from streams. A few years ago one of the families left and their small, one-room home is now used as the EAT classroom and kitchen.

The class was composed of four instructors and twenty-seven students.

Connecting

After a few days at EAT I noticed something eerie: time moved two to three times slower than normal. Others reported a similar sensation. I believe this was caused by the complete immersion into Nature and the elimination of the artificial time constraints induced by our culture. The endless rush and toil was replaced with euphoric energy, learning, and emotions.

Each morning I woke and watched the sun slowly brighten my small, yellow ceiling. I shivered in the cool, fresh air as I dressed. The same clean air rushed into my lungs as I made the fifty-yard trek along a wooded path from my tent to the classroom. I was joined by wonderful, positive, smiling classmates. I shook dew from my spoon, filled my bowl with steaming oatmeal, and learned a little more about someone else’s world while seated on a bale of straw.

After breakfast each day began with a circle and a grounding ritual. An exercise to understand and intensify our relationship with Nature followed. We felt the aura of friends and plants; we expanded our awareness seeing the world with new eyes; we related to plants and felt their spirit. I looked upon the world as a child, marveling at the veins in a strawberry leaf and the profound blueness of the sky. This was a most brilliant part of the day; it reminded me of and instilled in me the wonders of Nature.

The renewed connection with Nature was a foundation upon which was built a series of principles and lessons. Without this connection the larger picture would be missing and concepts would be abstract and less meaningful; like attempting to teach the virtues of yeast to a person who has never tasted bread.

We then funneled into the classroom for lecture and projects until Noon. From old sofas and floor pillows, I learned the basic principles of ecological design which were reinforced through hands-on exercises. I learned of the vital importance of observing and emulating Nature's precious balance, cooperation, patterns, and processes. I learned of the contribution of soil, mushrooms, worms, compost, and plants. I learned how to design gardens, homes, farmsteads, and communities. I learned how Nature works and how we are an integral part of that work.

Humans belong here. This is a key idea lost on many environmentalists. (It is difficult to sustain a movement when its core message is that we are plague on the planet). Just like all other organisms we play a role in maintaining abundance and balance in Nature, but we have simply forgotten how to play that role. That memory, however, is locked within us and emerges in the form of relaxing trips to the wilderness and pictures of nature on our windowless walls. We have severed ourselves from Nature, but still desire to have her in our lives only on our terms and under our control. When we replace this relationship of control with one of partnership, our existence begins to feel more... well... natural. Permaculture provides a framework for remembering this natural connection.

Afternoons were spent getting dirty. I dug swales (which are ditches on a hillside to catch rainwater), created garden beds, restored an eroding stream, pieced together a greywater system, winnowed seeds, built a small bridge, and constructed a bench from stone, straw, sand, and clay. The labor was hot and fun. It is truly amazing how much can be accomplished when a coordinated group of individuals work in unison toward a common goal.

All projects were completed using natural or repurposed materials. The innate message was that consumption of resources is acceptable so long as responsibility is taken for that consumption. Like every other organism that follows Nature's rules we must find a way to create and return surplus from our endeavors. Small redwoods were felled to construct a bridge, but that bridge would make it possible to haul supplies to areas that required restoration, thus creating more abundance than consumed. Rabbits are voracious eaters, but they fertilize plants, aerate ground, and provide food to predators. Living in harmony with Nature begins by achieving a balance between what I consume and what I return. The infrastructure created by American culture makes this effort extremely challenging.

Anarchists

In the evening we were introduced to "direct action" by activists from the front lines. One man spent two long years in jail simply for burning his draft card in protest of the Vietnam War. Another had been jailed for locking himself with others around a pear tree in a beautiful park that was to be bulldozed and replaced by a parking lot. They had marched against the WTO and held peace rallies all over the United States and Europe. They were anarchists; leaders who were courageous and inspiring. I realized that our culture was messed up, but these folks exposed an entirely new perspective: common citizens who attempt to clean up our mess are not welcome in America. In fact they are subjected to powerful forces that will do anything to maintain the status quo... and their power.

The way our culture lives is quite insane, but it is far more insane to revel in that culture rather than

try to change it. Not long ago I would have thought these folks to be outcasts from society; dangerous and unknown people that should be avoided. It turns out that they have the exact same ideals as me, but they simply choose extreme ways to express those ideals while I prefer to operate in the background. I looked upon these individuals as outcasts because I lacked the courage to question my way of (insane) living. Changing my way of life—my American-made belief system—required more than just questions, it required a replacement system. It was only by understanding that Nature is a system, and accepting that I am vital part of that system, that all the disparate puzzle pieces began to lock into place.



Fred presents

Rituals

During two evenings powerful and magical rituals replaced the activist training. We spent one morning learning from Starhawk the basics of ritual design. Unlike most others at the training, I had no experience with this so I sat back and learned. The first ritual involved cleansing ourselves of unwanted attributes and replacing them with things we desired. The second ritual took place during the Fall Equinox and was in the context of balance: balancing the extremes within ourselves and recognizing the monumental shifts in balance that are occurring in Nature today. The phases of the ritual were lead by Starhawk and it was a truly amazing experience.

Most fall days in the Cazadero Hills are cloudless, but during the afternoon of the Fall Equinox wispy clouds hung high in the sky and swirled into soft shapes that kept me looking upward as evening approached. As we circled to begin the ritual, I could feel the energy of my friends whirring in anticipation and excitement. While striking out a rhythm on a drum tucked underneath her arm, Starhawk led us through a ceremony to remember how we were created. The earliest life was made up of trillions of microbes which filled the seas. Through endless experimentation these single celled organisms eventually merged to become the first plant life. These plants took in and used the heavy concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. After millions of years, however, the plants that filled the seas also filled the atmosphere with oxygen. This excess of oxygen began to destroy the

plants, but a new balance was achieved through the creation of organisms that would take in and use that waste from the plants for survival. The Breathers were born and, through balance, the carbon dioxide waste from their exhalation would feed the plants. We recognized the precarious symbiotic relationship and the balance that exists between ourselves and all plant life on Earth. We exist for a reason, not simply because of some divine providence or due to a weird hiccup in evolution.

The energy of the ceremony continued to build and shadows of my friends glided toward the center of the circle. We each took turns stirring worm castings into a cauldron of water. With the castings we also stirred in those characteristics that would bring balance to our lives and stirred out those characteristics that caused imbalance. The clouds above us swirled in unison. Now this was magic.

The circle re-formed and the chanting strengthened and we fell into a Spiral Dance. Holding hands I spiraled and sang and felt the Earth's energy. I looked into the smiling faces of my brothers and sisters as we gently glided in front of one another. We broke from the spiral and danced and sang and concentrated the energy around us. I could feel the Earth's energy channeling through me and I felt it join with the others as I visualized a balanced Earth full of abundance and joy. The chanting changed to a steady hum of rising voices and a cone of power was formed. It focused our intent and, as if on cue, we all stopped chanting in unison and released that intent into the world.

River of Life

"And our hands remember how to spin. We spin freedom on the rising wind, We spin threads of life, the cords of fate, We spin love into a river that can overrun hate." "We spin justice burning like a flaming star; We spin peace into a river that can overcome war. And if you want to know where true power lies, Turn and look into your sisters' eyes." –Starhawk



Garden builders take a break

Starhawk

I had not met any famous people so I was unsure what to expect from Starhawk. She is a self-proclaimed witch, eco-feminist, anarchist, and author, but that gave me little to go on. I suppose I had

a loose vision of a distant, mystical woman who spoke of metaphysical concepts in a musical and enchanting voice. Like everything else at EAT, my blurry expectations were not even in the ballpark.

Starhawk is a nice, middle-aged farmer. That's it. She is approachable, has a sense of humor, talks like you and me, and dresses in well-worn jeans and t-shirts. Unlike other middle-aged farmers, however, I could always feel an undercurrent of power—a power she did not often reveal. That undercurrent carried with it the hum of frustration and concern for Mother Earth and its inhabitants. I knew that everything she did was an attempt to alleviate herself of that humming and return balance and sanity to the world.

I was fortunate to have extended periods of one-on-one time with Starhawk. I wanted to know how she was able to accomplish so many great things and how she was able to lead so many into action. Although she thoroughly answered all my questions about her past and her books and her magic, I was a bit disappointed with her responses. While she spoke, I kept thinking, “Well, damn... I can do that.” There just was not anything “great” about the way Starhawk went about doing things. Through my questions I now realize I was unconsciously attempting to prove to myself that there was no way I could make a difference; no way I could be as great as someone like Starhawk. But Starhawk has no master strategy to end the world's problems; she simply goes where she feels needed and makes friends along the way. Now Starhawk is brilliant and her years of activism have given her a breadth of wisdom that aids her greatly in her pursuits. But what she does is just not that complex or difficult; with a bit of courage and community, anyone can do it. A few days after the EAT session she headed down to New Orleans to help with the flood restoration efforts. She felt she was needed there and invited everyone to come along. Simple.

Abundance

“Sustainability” had been a comforting goal to strive for as a solution to our energy and material needs. Many scientists and a few politicians have touted it as a way for humans to live happily on Earth. After returning from EAT, however, my mindset quickly shifted and I realized that the “sustainability” model was yet another byproduct of our culture. We can do better. The system of Nature is not just geared toward simply sustaining life—it is geared toward providing abundance for life. Forests and oceans have teemed with huge diversities of life for billions of years and they all thrive off the abundance provided by Nature. These organisms are part of Nature and they work in unison with her to create that abundance. Humans can do this too.

Nature is not going to change her rules to accommodate my beliefs. To live in harmony with Nature means understanding and living by her rules and changing my beliefs to be congruent with those rules. Producing no waste, creating relationships, encouraging diversity, focusing locally, and endlessly experimenting are just a few of the rules Nature follows to create abundance for all life. As an integral part of Nature's system, I too will create abundance by applying those same rules to my life, my garden, and my community.

Permaculture has provided a solid framework for living in harmony with Nature, but I feel my

learning has just begun. Through informal workshops, presentations, and hands-on projects that heal the Earth, I will connect with others, share knowledge, and continue learning. Please contact me (BackyardAbundance@yahoo.com) if these words have stirred in you the same fire for deepening your connection with Nature. Together we will participate in Nature's endless experimentation and leave abundance in our wake.



Breakfast at the tea house, The Avalon