

Earth Activist Training, Permaculture, and Simple Techniques for Saving the World!

by Jonathan Furst

For the first time in a very long time, I have hope.

Hope that we can make it. That it is possible to clean up toxic waste. To re-green our damaged planet. To halt the cycles of war and exploitation. To provide abundance in just a few acres per person, and restore the majority of land back to the wild.

This is not just hope, but certain knowledge. We can do it with the technology we have, with the resources we've got. I know because I've seen it with my own eyes, done it with my own hands.

I know, because I went to Earth Activist Training.



Building a cob bench

Crash Course in Planetary Survival

For two weeks, Starhawk and Penny Livingston-Stark led fifty people to learn, live, and practice skills for ecological living and magical activism. Kind of a "Save the World 101."

What it comes down to is permaculture—an outlook and method for working with nature's processes, rather than against. It's not just about growing large amounts of food on little land; it's about building houses for \$500 or less, redesigning urban environments, restoring damaged lands, and living on the planet in harmony. It's a huge leap beyond simple sustainability. It's about giving more back to the planet than we take out.

And that's what humans are good at. I know it might not seem like that's true—most of the time it feels like all we really do is create war, suffering, and destruction. We do still live under the shadows of pollution and the bomb. Still on the brink of killing off not just ourselves, but all life on Earth.

But that's only half of the story. For example, did you know in nature it takes about 100 years to create a quarter

inch of topsoil? But in a compost heap, humans can help create a full inch of soil in just four years. We're natural soil-builders. If we have an evolutionary niche, it's to work with the worms, fungi, and other little life-makers—and we're phenomenally successful at it. Look at China, where they've been doing it religiously for thousands of years.

Enhancing natural processes is our biological right and our inheritance. When Penny explained that, I felt like she'd given me back a piece of my soul. Right after, she and Starhawk took us outside and showed us how to put a pile together. We got in there with our shovels and pitchforks. We piled manure on straw, layered on buckets of kitchen scraps, and finally brought in those wonderful worms.

Then—this is a key piece—we left the compost pile to do its own thing. "If you have a choice between two equally good options," our teachers advised, "and one takes less work than the other, always choose the one with less work." You can turn and fuss with a pile a whole lot. But if you set it up right, you can just walk away—heck, you can even plant your crops right in the compost pile—and only deal with it when you're adding more material.

That's a major principle of permaculture: minimum effort for maximum return. To put it another way, life demands we conserve as much energy as possible. And that means setting up self-perpetuating, synergistic systems that work with nature ("weeds," "pests," and other "nuisances") rather than trying to eradicate them. In one example, we saw video footage of a permaculture site that had been untended for several years. Left to its own devices, the garden had developed into an Eden of fruits and vegetables, without human guidance or interference.

Structure and Spirit

The workshop was a non-stop, total immersion course in options. After an early breakfast, we'd gather and cast a circle for the day—playing games, grounding, singing, and invoking the directions. Then off to the first of three, three-hour sessions (usually two lectures and one hands-on) plus affinity group gardening, permaculture design group projects, and individual offerings from other students in the course.

Daily themes were divided by elements—Earth: natural building, gardening, and how to finance the land you live on; Air: windpower, design process, and global climate; Water: water harvesting, roof catchments, global politics, graywater and remediation; Fire: renewable energy, biodiesel, and direct action; and so on.

Without the morning's spiritual foundation (plus Witchcraft mini-lessons throughout the day) we could easily have become exhausted by the pace. But most days I felt invigorated rather than overwhelmed. The hands-on activities really helped, too. Actually digging earthworks and building graywater systems took the knowledge out of our heads and planted it firmly in our bodies. The work was hard, but when you're planting trees or digging swales (strategic ditches for erosion control and remediating the water table) with the intention of working with nature it feels a whole lot different than doing chores in your parents' backyard.

In fact, I was often struck by how counterproductive much of the yard work I'd done as a kid had been. So many

weekends my parents had me digging up dandelions and other "weeds" that we could have eaten, raking and tossing leaves that would have provided excellent ground cover, and spraying noxious chemicals that probably seeped into the water table long ago. How much easier if we'd simply let the trees mulch themselves, rather than spend all that effort and money trying to manage Nature.

Working with and for the Earth can take a host of forms; most days we'd have guest instructors, bringing a variety of views and knowledge. Hilary McQuie (of the RANT activist training collective) and her partner, Mike Dolan (Green Party organizer), discussed grassroots organizing from the anarchic global justice and traditional political models. Joe Kennedy from Builders Without Borders taught us cob construction and other low-cost housing options. Folks from the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center showed us how to look at the land from a permaculture design standpoint, taught us a history of the rise of corporations and resources for curbing their power, gave us the tools to set up land trusts and other financing options, and discussed group process and how to live in community.

The first few days were a little difficult, as many of the lessons focused on discussing the full extent of the world's political, economic, and ecological challenges. You've got to know what you're dealing with before you can start to fix it, but the sheer load of information had many of us on the edge of despair. Luckily, we were also learning the elements of magical activism—grounding, nonviolent action, how to cast a circle, how to ground while moving, how to read each other's energy patterns, and a host of other skills for nourishing ourselves while standing up to power.

There was an amazing water trance, where we envisioned ourselves as a pure drop of water, rising to the clouds, falling to earth, joining other drops in a torrent from stream to ocean and back to our unique selves. Lisa Fithian (long-time activist and EAT co-student) led several non-violent training and simulations, and also gave us an inspiring history of the Global Justice movement. We also discussed trauma and how to heal from the perils of activism, from physical violence to emotional exhaustion.

Spirit sustained us throughout the course. My companions came from a wide variety of locations and cultures, including activists from India, Croatia, Montana, and the Pomo nation. Some identified as Pagans, others as Christians, Hindus, Jews, Atheists, or Seekers. Given this variety of backgrounds, the techniques we learned were introductory. But the lessons ran deep as we applied them directly to the tasks at hand. The lessons were also pretty much dogma-free (beyond a basic love for the Earth), making magic accessible to everyone in the class.

Organic Magic

For me, the most magical technique we learned was bioremediation—using biological processes to restore damaged lands. In Australia, techniques for digging swales hundred of miles long have replenished water tables drained long ago. Planting trees along those swales has re-converted deserts back into forests. Those forests serve as windbreaks and build rainclouds, tempering the (human-exacerbated) weather and encouraging re-greening beyond the original sites.

Living machines—mega-terrariums of increasingly complex pond life—can convert the most toxic sludge into drinkable water and healthy soil. John Todd originated these machines as a series of artificial ponds or tubs, but you can apply the same principles to constructed wetlands, taking these techniques out of the lab and into your neighborhood. Chemical pollutants are broken down by common bacteria (easily found in most smelly, standing water). Then selected wetland plants act as "dynamic accumulators" pulling heavy metals and other toxics from the water and soil. Snails and other small organisms start moving in, further purifying the environments and paving the way for larger plants and animals to join in creating a healthy system.

One of the easiest, most hopeful techniques is mycoremediation: bioremediation with mushrooms and other fungi. Mycologist Paul Stamets found that oyster mushrooms thrive in some of the most toxic environments. Spread spores on a diesel fuel spill, and not only do the fungi absorb the petroleum; they break it down so completely you can even eat the mushrooms. E. Coli, nerve gas, PCBs and many of the other nastiest pollutants can also be eliminated within a relatively short time. Some early experiments even seem to indicate that mushrooms can clean up radioactive wastes! Stay tuned to your local permaculture network for more details.

It seems like Mother Earth is producing solutions to our thorniest problems. It makes sense that the planet, like any other living being, would contain systems for defense and repair. But I got the feeling that she is actively working with us right now; innovating, desperately evolving answers to our questions, if only we have ears to hear and the will to act.

Three Hours That Changed My Life

In a fortnight of amazing options, one session changed my life forever. In just three hours, Osprey and Todd from the Wilderness Awareness School taught us how to sense and move like other animals do, how to walk in the forest without disturbing the wildlife, and how to interpret bird language.

We started with "owl eyes," shifting to wide-angle vision to take in movement and the total environment. As we opened our other senses we began "fox walking": moving with careful steps, rolling from the outside of the foot to the ball before shifting our weight and stepping forward. Walking without goal or agenda, with gratitude for just being there, we gauged our success by attending to the alarm system of the forests—bird calls telling us whether they were agitated or accepting of our presence.

A new world opened up. So many times I'd passed through the woods feeling like an intruder, but not knowing why. I could tune in but I couldn't join in the flow because I lacked the basic skills. Here was the key.

That evening, I skipped dinner and went out to practice. Stalking slowly, I strained to perceive the edges of vision. I listened for the furthest sound, smelling and tasting the life in every current of air. Most of all, I walked with thankful heart, grateful for this opportunity, for my life, for the whole web of creation. I fell into a hyper-alert meditation, senses more alive than I can recall.

As I turned to walk back, I closed my eyes. Hands stretched as antennae to keep me on the steep road, I stepped carefully, only occasionally peeking to check if my instincts were on track. Closing my eyes again, I stepped forward again in rapture. Suddenly I "saw" a white light in the rear of my head and froze. Something was there.

Stretching out my senses, I strained to feel what was watching me. I turned slightly, hunched down to present a less threatening profile. Minutes passed by, then with a bolt, something crashed through the brush on the hill to my left, passed swiftly by me and was gone. I could feel the air rush past as something about the size of a large coyote or small deer ran by. Too surprised to even open my eyes, I never found out what left my veins racing and heart hammering.

It was the first step on a path I'd always wanted to take, but could never find the door to. Thank you, Todd and Osprey. And thank you Tom Brown, who taught several of the instructors at WAS. Their brief lesson led me to enroll in a week-long tracking and wilderness survival class, an amazing experience which has set the direction for my next major lifestage.

The Wisdom of Radical Change

Another lesson with great consequences was Sustainable Sonoma's MASH workshop. MASH (short for Making Amazing Stuff Happen) helps people in communities, schools, and workplaces understand their impact on the planet. The information given is fairly simple, even obvious, but the combined impact was shocking and visceral.

I try to live simply, consuming about half the resources of the average American. So I was shocked to find out that in order to exist at what I consider a sustainable level, I'd need to reduce my consumption by over five times. As one presenter pointed out, that's a lot more than recycling a few more cans. It means that if we—and most every species on Earth—are to survive, we need to radically, fundamentally change the way we do things.

When I tell this to my friends, many become depressed. "It's hopeless," they say, "we'll never make it." But I found the information inspiring. To me, it's a complete validation of the work we do. It's an impetus, an imperative from the Earth that we go farther than we ever imagined. Now is not the time for half measures—take your wildest fantasy and go for it! There is no other way to survive.

Making It Real

That's the real lesson of Earth Activist Training. Dream big, then go out and make it happen. Not just because it's fun and it's the right thing to do. We have to. There's no waiting around for technology to save us. In fact, all the technology we need is right here, right now. Not just pipes, and systems, and theories. But spirit, and magic, and most of all, hope.

Go to EAT (or most any permaculture course) and you'll learn enough to grasp the world's challenges and the web of interconnected options for solving them. You'll be overwhelmed with options, but one will call out, "This is what I can do, and here's how I can start."

For me, I decided that my goal is to reduce my consumption to less than zero—to give more to Earth than I take out. If I can do that one thing with my life, it will be a success. If I learn how and pass it on to others, I can be part of the miracle.

So can you. If you feel alone, if you doubt there's hope for us as a species, take heart. The options are out there right now. I know. I've lived the possibilities. You can, too.

It's a beautiful future, just waiting for us to make it happen.



The puppy pile method of attending class

About the Author

Jonathan Furst is a Jewish-Pagan artist, writer, and hero. He lives and works at Sunbeam Farm, an intentional community and permaculture household in Boulder Creek, CA. When not chatting with the redwoods next door, he occasionally checks his email: jfurst@popbox.com

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