

**ZONE ZERO:**  
**WHERE PERMACULTURE MEETS THE ARTS**

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*PERMA-CULTURE*

As many of us know, the field of permaculture is overflowing with talented and creative people. It perhaps not surprising, then, that the word *culture* is so prominent in the name of our movement. In fact, so much open-mindedness and creativity is required of its practitioners that permaculture may be considered an art form in itself. Yet, the reality of so many creative people trying to work together on a day-to-day basis presents one of the central challenges of permaculture: how do we get along? If we are to serve as midwives for an emergent sustainable culture, how do we avoid wasting precious energy on intracommunity friction and conflict? Since our personal and social health is a precondition to efficient progress along the path of sustainability (or any path, for that matter) how do we tend to this health?

The answers to these questions are intimately related, as they have always been, to the arts. In that the arts foster healthy connections with Community, Self, and Earth, they have a central role to play in permaculture designs and village building efforts. As an artist working within the sustainability movement, I am particularly interested in highlighting and creating meaningful dialogue around this exciting and juicy topic: how can we specifically address and nurture an *art* of permaculture which transcends outdated separations between the arts and sciences, allowing them to freely crosspollinate?

CONNECTION PREVENTS COLLAPSE

There is an astonishing diversity of talent on the permaculture palette—from visionary designers, philosophers and teachers, to roof thatchers, grafters and herbalists. Yet, a study of basic permacultural principles tells us that diversity in and of itself is not sufficient: for any system to achieve true stability, resilience, and health, meaningful connections must exist between the diverse elements of the system. This *stability principle*<sup>1</sup> is as applicable to human socio-cultural systems as it is to a garden or a

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<sup>1</sup> See Mollison, Bill (1998) *Permaculture: A Designer's Manual*, Tagari Publications, Sister's Creek, Australia.

watershed. A rainbow of color alone does not ensure a beautiful painting unless there is an artful and harmonious blending of those colors.

We have unfortunately seen many intentional communities collapse, not because they lack proper gardening techniques or competent solar system design, but because unresolved interpersonal conflict can slowly poison a project from within. Groups can have extremely high levels of skill and motivation, but if they have no history of creative play and celebration to encourage connection and social revitalization, they often end up with the “activist burnout” syndrome. This situation can be remedied by resurrecting buried customs of gathering for festival, ceremony, and performance. Through participatory and collaborative art ‘play,’ the bodybased arts help us to redefine and custom-tailor our own rituals to suit current needs.

### THE BODYBASED ARTS: *BODYREMEDICATION* AS BIOREMEDIATION

We use the term *bodybased* arts to refer specifically to those arts which require no canvas, camera, or any other tool besides the human body. Improvised theater, song, dance, martial arts, yoga and storytelling are *immediate* arts, meaning both that they are happening *now*, and that *no media* need translate between the artist and the art. Since the involvement of media can often mean prohibitively high costs of materials, and translation risks censorship, *immediatism*<sup>2</sup> can be an extremely valuable quality—especially when considering today’s runaway corporate advertising and media.

The bodybased arts offer their practitioners a very direct, *experiential* method of understanding nature, its spirals, cycles and harmonies, its rhythms and sequences being literally *in-corporo*-rated without first being filtered by the rational brain. After thousands of years of intense rationalist focus on science and intellectual achievement in Western societies, this is a perspective that is sorely needed. And, anyone who has a body can participate, at no cost, at any time. In a world where almost everything has been turned into a commodity to be bought and sold, these free arts are a rare gift.

It becomes more and more apparent each day that human beings will be required to deepen our understanding of Earth’s processes, and harmonize with these processes if we are to thrive on a long-term basis. Since our bodies are quite literally made from (and of) Earth, the bodybased arts provide us with a way to connect to the Earth without intermediaries—we simply consult our own bodies, thereby reducing the risk of information being lost in translation. This ‘direct-line’ of communication with the Earth is invaluable to permaculturists, and to the flow of communities to which they belong.

### BODY IS EARTH

The basic building blocks of Earth and atmosphere— carbon, water, nitrogen, oxygen—are the same that comprise our own blood and bones, our breath and our brains.

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<sup>2</sup> *Immediatism* is a term coined by philosopher Hakim Bey. See Bey, Hakim (anti-copyright 1994) *Immediatism: Essays by Hakim Bey*, AK Press, San Francisco, CA.

Our shedding hair, skin, tears, and eventually our entire bodies are all returned to the Earth where they break down again into these same materials and are recycled over and over.

Interestingly, an etymological inquiry into the word *Earth* reiterates this basic knowledge. The modern English word *Earth* shares its root sound *-er* with other words in our Indoeuropean language family that mean “to exist” and “to be.” We recognize this sound in the Old English word *earth* or *art*, as in “thou art,” or the Spanish word *ser* which means “to be.” Over time, the roots evolved into the sounds *-ergh* and *-orgh*, recognizable in the Greek word *orkheisthai*—“to dance”—and the word *orchestra* in English.

Thus, when we utter the word for the living, planetary web within which we make our home, we are speaking aloud the sum of linguistic history, affirming the knowledge that our very existence is intimately related to Earth. When we dance and make music, we are actually describing, reflecting, and participating in the processes of Earth, and gaining a profound understanding of them.

## ART IS NOT A LUXURY

*“Ritual is a tool that allows us to think not only logically, but analogically, and ecologically.”*

-----Dolores LaChapelle<sup>3</sup>

In indigenous societies all over the globe, festivals, celebrations and rituals of all kinds are always part of life. Dance, music, theater, song, and storytelling are not mere frivolities. On the anthropological stage, they are cast well in their roles of social lubricant and tonic, purposes that are crucial to the health of any social species.

By emphasizing and reinforcing cooperation, harmony and symbiosis, art-gatherings that involve music, dance and performance help to bond the group together. Because they are *bodybased* and *participatory*, these gatherings have a profound ability to dissipate tensions both within the body and between people. And, importantly, they serve as a method for people to explore a sense of union with natural cycles, patterns, and time scales that are simply too vast to understand rationally. The way humans use the arts to physically harmonize with each other and recalibrate our behavior with an ever-changing world can be considered a type of therapeutic experience that is indispensable to social health and sustainability.

## NO-TECH IS THE NEW HI-TECH

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<sup>3</sup> See Devall, Bill and George Sessions (1985) *Deep Ecology: Living As If Nature Mattered*, Gibbs Smith, Inc., Salt Lake City, UT.

Marshall Sahlins' *Stone Age Economics*—a fascinating exposée on the economic activities of indigenous groups from the Kalahari to Tierra Del Fuego—indicates that *most* of the waking hours in tribal life are spent in social and leisure activities: talking with neighbors and visitors, napping, dancing, singing, and making music. Sahlins achieves a staggering upending of popular belief by documenting peoples worldwide who accomplish all 'work' in just a few hours.<sup>4</sup> It seems our Paleolithic past—which accounts for roughly 99% of human existence—was not as harsh and brutish as we moderns suppose.

Sahlin's studies suggest that so much time is spent in social activity, creative arts, and rest precisely because these activities are crucial to human health well-being and therefore, to sustainability. Cultures overly focused on scientific, intellectual and technical achievement tend to devalue these important activities, resulting in a myriad of energy-sapping social, mental and physical ills. Ironically, the abundant leisure promised by technology seems always to elude us in techno-industrial societies, but is actually achieved in low-tech hunter/gatherer societies, whom Sahlin calls "the original leisure society."<sup>5</sup>

If we in the permaculture movement are to avoid type-one error,<sup>6</sup> we might ask ourselves, are we investing enough time in these social and leisure activities? Or, by ignoring their importance, are we making the same mistakes as the society which we seek to change?

A social 'toolkit' containing consensus facilitation, conflict resolution, and nonviolent communication is greatly enhanced when we take a cue from indigenous peoples and add play, ritual and celebration to the list of tools. Explorations of storytelling, music, free-dance, yoga and other bodybased arts help us establish healthy new village life. Many permaculture and village-building organizations are now including these arts as part of their teaching curriculums.<sup>7</sup>

I have frequently witnessed how physical theater games, for example, can act as a modern gateway into the territory of ritual and celebration, and grease the social wheels. It is amazing how the shyness, tension and hierarchies in a room can dissipate when we get everybody making strange faces, sounds and movements. Seeing your friends and colleagues jump around the room making monkey sounds makes it difficult to hold onto rigid assumptions about who they are. Laughter is a great lubricant, and should not be underestimated as a consensus tool. How might these games be used to create group harmony before your weekly house meeting? A lunchtime play session in the garden,

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<sup>4</sup> Sahlins, Marshall (1972) *Stone Age Economics*, Routledge, London.

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent treatise on the pitfalls of technology, see Mander, Jerry (1991) *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations*, Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>6</sup> *Type-one error* is a permaculture term used to refer to a fundamental error which causes a continual negative spiral of dysfunction until it is corrected.

<sup>7</sup> Some examples include the Village Building Convergence (City Repair), the Village Design Institute and the Wilder Institute.

perhaps, to loosen up sore arms and legs? At the cob building party, a rhythmic song to get the feet stomping and the cobs flying? We are always more efficient when we are having fun.

## CULTURAL CLEARCUTTING

Here it may be helpful to compare our own human communities with another community found in nature. A healthy, mature forest is comprised of a network of countless overlapping and interwoven relationships which coevolved over millennia. The connections between leaves and air, roots and fungus, birds and bark, worms and soil, and so on creates a rich tapestry as functional as it is beautiful. When this forest is clearcut, the intricately woven fabric is left in tatters, its functions badly shredded and connecting threads broken.

When we use nature as a model to provide guidance and understanding, as we regularly do in permaculture, we recognize that human cultural and social structures, which also evolved over long periods of time, have been clearcut in tandem with our forests. Sustainable cultures all over the globe—within which each and every one of us have our ancestry—have been uprooted by colonialism, slavery, inquisition, military violence and, more recently, industrialization and globalization. Just as we take great care to replant and repair our ravaged landscapes, we must also tend to the important task of reweaving our *social* fabric, worn thin by systemic domination and oppression.<sup>8</sup> Participation in the bodybased arts helps us with this reweaving.

## LEARNING PERMACULTURE THROUGH THE BODY

One of the most fascinating things about improvised, bodybased art forms is the striking similarity of their basic, underlying principles with those of permaculture. Principles such as:

- redistribute the surplus
- oversupply is pollution
- minimum effort for maximum benefit
- the problem is the solution
- work with nature, not against
- there is no such thing as waste
- the edge is where the action is
- diversity and connection equal strength and resilience
- the three O's: observation, observation, observation

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<sup>8</sup> *Forum theatre*, developed by Brazilian dramatist and activist Augusto Boal, is a valuable social remediation technique in which groups improvise solutions to oppression and conflict. See Boal, Augusto (1985)*Theatre of the Oppressed*, Theatre Communications Group, New York.

have precise physical corollaries in movement and theater. And, learning these principles with the entire bodymind system, instead of just the intellect, is deeply beneficial. I will offer three short illustrations of these similarities.

In organic, release-style movement forms, for example, we practice moving from one position to another using the minimum amount of muscular and energetic effort required. Through breath and relaxation, the mover is encouraged to relinquish surplus tensions in the body that are counterproductive and ultimately dangerous to health. Previously stuck energy is released into the floor, or, in the case of contact improvisation dance, into the support of a partner, making it newly available as precious momentum to keep the dance moving. Sound familiar? See Mollison's *Principle of Disorder*<sup>9</sup> in which oversupply equals pollution.

Improvised storytelling and theater traditions provide another example when we use games based on spontaneous gesture, character and speech to explore the diverse contents of our memory and psyche. Improvisors learn to value their "edge"—material that is funny, surprising, strange, or even frightening at first. Instead of retreating into familiar or known material, we are encouraged to explore this edge, as it inevitably indicates we have stumbled into a most rewarding territory. When embraced, material which at first seems to be problematic can indeed become the solution, and we remain in the *ecotone*—that boundary terrain which is always the most productive and diverse of any system. Improvising with sounds, movement and characters we didn't even know were 'in there' liberates us from habits, and contributes greatly to personal diversity of expression and choice.

Lastly, the single most valuable skill a person can gain in the improvised arts is how to simply observe your surroundings. In many bodybased artforms, we learn how to witness our partners in a dance or a scene without judgment, and only then respond. Acting upon assumptions or habit in an improvisation quickly creates a confusing tangle that is difficult to repair. In permaculture, we see this same emphasis upon proper observation as the key to good, efficient design.

By practicing improvised art forms, the principles of permaculture are absorbed directly into the body, rounding out our intellectual understanding and transforming it into true, wholistic knowledge. What we learn in the studio, on the stage, or around the campfire are skills that make us better permaculturists and members of the community. And, improvisation in itself is an adaptation strategy that becomes more and more valuable as the pace of climate and social change accelerates.

## ZONE ZERO: LOCALISM BEGINS WITH THE BODY

In studying permaculture, many have become familiar with the concept of using zones to organize our landscape and our lives. We place elements that we use intensively or require daily tending (i.e. water tap, kitchen herbs, chicken coop) within a few paces of

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<sup>9</sup> Mollison, Bill, *Permaculture, A Designer's Manual*.

the home in *zone one*, thereby conserving energy and promoting efficiency and ease. The home itself is considered to be *zone zero* since it is the natural center or focal point from which all activity radiates. It is useful, then, to include our own body—indeed our first, true home—in our concept of zone zero.

Localism—starting small, using locally available resources, supporting local economies—is a fundamental principle of good permaculture design. Many forward thinkers have envisioned a sustainable future comprised of an interlacing network of locally self-sufficient communities. If our bodies, zone zero, are the first units of localism from which healthy homes, villages and communities are built, we must both care for our bodies and accept what they have to offer us. We put the cart before the horse if we work in zone one or two without first tending to our physical, mental and social health. Practicing the bodybased arts demonstrates a sincere commitment to localism.

## HEALING THE TYRANNY OF THE TALENTED

*“The artist is not a special sort of person, but each person is a special sort of artist.”*

*--A.K. Coomaraswamy*

When we gather to practice in improvisational arts, there are no experts or virtuosos that experience the art *for* us. Since bodily knowledge can only be gained by using our own body, we each take the responsibility of participating to the best of our ability. The notion that art is only for the ‘talented’ or the ‘gifted’ is a misconception that keeps us from experiencing deep healing. Art is a practice and a learned skill, not a mysterious gift bestowed upon a rare few. The knowledge and healing offered by the arts are our birthright.

In many bodybased arts, such as *authentic movement* and *action theater*,<sup>10</sup> we practice dissolving that internalized critic that tells us how things are ‘supposed’ to look, or ‘supposed’ to be, encouraging diverse ways of expressing our uncensored selves. And, importantly, we learn to witness others in our community as *they* practice, transforming judgment into clear observation. The acceptance and acknowledgement one feels by having others witness the stories we tell—through movement and sound as well as words—is listed by psychologists as one of the critical steps in the process of healing trauma.<sup>11</sup>

In her article that appeared in the Spring 2006 Issue of *Permaculture Activist*, Lisa Rayner points out that even in the safest of homes, constant bombarding with news of war, torture and ecological collapse means that none of us are spared exposure to

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<sup>10</sup> See Adler, Janet (2002) *Authentic Movement*, Inner Traditions, Rochester, VT and Zaporah, Ruth (1995) *Action Theater*, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA.

<sup>11</sup> See Herman, Judith Lewis (1992), *Trauma and Recovery*, Pandora Press, London, UK.

trauma.<sup>12</sup> The long and continuing legacy of violence against and oppression of the body compounds that trauma, and affects us all. Retraining ourselves how to tell and witness our stories thus empowers us to be the instruments of our own healing.

In order to reclaim diversity in our bodies, voices and minds, our new villages must establish a supportive environment for the cultivation of expressive freedom. As we reverse the trends towards industrialization and homogenization of the body and self-expression, we strengthen ourselves, our communities, and our species.

## CONCLUSION

When abundant connections and healthy relationships exist within a community, accomplishing great things becomes possible. This is perhaps not surprising, since human relations are a natural system, and all natural systems require proper connections and relationships to function smoothly. The arts contribute greatly to healthy relationships and healthy bodies, and are therefore an integral part of permaculture and ecological living. If human relationships and cultural infrastructures have been damaged, artists play a key role in the reparations, and indeed, we are all artists.

Many generations of exclusionary focus upon scientific and rational thought has created enormous imbalance and myopia in human socio-cultural systems. As permaculture artists at this critical point in human history, we have the opportunity—and responsibility—to restore balance between scientific knowledge and a more intuitive, bodybased wisdom. When we absorb ecological principles thoroughly into the entire bodymind system—not just the frontal lobe of the brain—we are better able to innovate wholistic and ethical solutions to mounting environmental and societal problems. Contained within the boundaries of permaculture is the seed of a new, and yet very ancient art which is connected to ecology, spirituality, community and activism.

Notes to Editor/Reader:

1—I have intentionally chosen to spell *wholistic* with a w. This is an alternate spelling of the word which I consider important in order to connect people with its true meaning..

2—I have also intentionally chosen NOT to hyphenate *bodybased* or *bodymind* to reflect current practices of people in the field.

About NalaWalla

NalaWalla is a transdisciplinary artist, teacher, and activist living at the BCollective: an off-grid arts and ecology project on a tiny island near Port Townsend, WA. Her work as

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<sup>12</sup> Rayner, Lisa, “Ecological Collapse and Trauma Theory,” *Permaculture Activist*, No. 59, Spring 2006.



a homesteader frequently overlaps and feeds back with her work facilitating Bodyecology and Bodyversity workshops, and performing dance, theater and music everywhere from organic farms to preschools. For more information about upcoming shows and workshops, or just to get in touch, please visit [www.bcollective.org](http://www.bcollective.org) or email [nala@bcollective.org](mailto:nala@bcollective.org).