

The Art of Our Common Place

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Concluding Chapter in "Urban Homesteading"

The most important thing about localism is getting along with the locals.
– Erik Gage, from the band White Fang

In some ways, this whole book is about creating community structures to support us all as the dominant systems of our culture continue to spiral out of control. It's about remaking a generative local economy to counter the destructive forces of globalism. The stronger our relationships are to the places where we live and the people we live with, the more we can reclaim the means of production and reduce our dependence on the global economy, and the more secure and stable our lives and communities will become.

We've focused on the many different things we can do at home to direct our actions toward the tasks or repairing the urban earth, and in every instance we've highlighted the projects you can do yourself and with the people around you. We've put forward ideas for community-based strategies like food co-ops, energy collectives, seed banks, tool sharing collectives, educational forums, natural building projects, community gardens, and homegrown guilds. Existing groups that can be retooled to suit a regenerative agenda include neighbourhood associations, condo associations, or school boards. Working together toward a common goal builds greater community integrity while flexing our atrophied "learning-to-share" muscles.

Building true community and making relationships with neighbors around common needs even when we don't have common background, ways of doing things, or agreement can be a huge challenge. We live in a diverse, multicultural, and divided world, but we all need the same thing to live healthy lives: a renewed ecosystem; right livelihood; respect for our beliefs, needs, and feelings; nutritious food and medicine; and safe homes where we can live with dignity and joy. We've been raised in a culture that over-idealizes independence and this self-reliant streak shows up as much in people who identify with politics on the left as on the right. On a cultural level, we have little experience with sharing, asking for help, or offering our hand to one another. Embedded in our understanding that our single biggest mistake lies in separating ourselves from nature is the idea that our single most important action at this time in human history is to turn around, forgive and reconcile the past, and learn to work together.

Community building, like all the practices outlined in this book, is best started small so that one success can build upon another. In the localized future, working with our neighbours is a





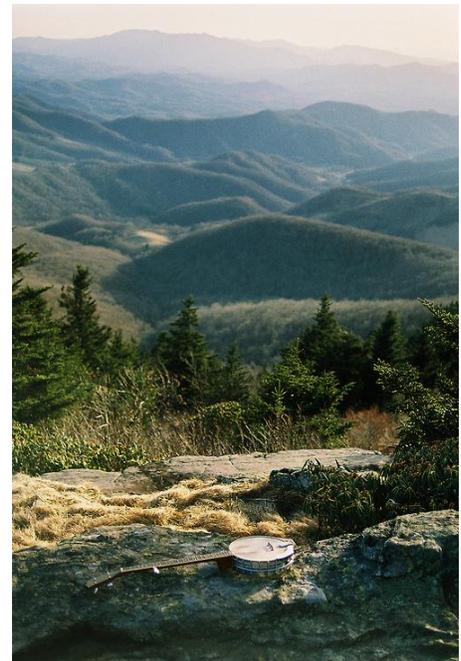
manageable and achievable goal, and one that can bring us the human and material resources we need. It's good to learn to grow your food, raise the animals you want to eat, identify plants in your area, and source and eat what's local. But in the city, we are our own greatest resource. The most important things we can do are to learn to get along; to communicate; to listen; and to respond wisely to our collective needs. The more we craft networks of support, camaraderie, friendship, and family, the more a positive response to the need for food security, healthy food, and water and waste management, is a partial solution, at best. The irony is that as we seek self-sufficiency, we come up again and again against how interdependent we are, and how self-sufficiency is not our true goal.

Here's another secret: Growing food is easy. Dealing with people is hard. It might take you two or three years to understand important things about gardening and start producing much of your own food. But learning to communicate effectively, and to shift the fear and hatred that exist between people, is a practice that will occupy you for the rest of your life.

In the midst of writing this book, I had a run-in with my neighbour's chickens. I noticed that something had been digging and pecking in my front garden. I couldn't tell what it was from the markings, but it was making a serious mess. A few days later, my partner told me he'd seen the neighbour's chickens strutting down the driveway. I went to ask them to pen the chickens in and offered to help if they needed. They promised they'd do it, but a few days later, a chicken was back in the yard, pulling up the tender vegetable shoots. Did I go to my neighbour and ask her to get the chicken? I did not. I cornered the chicken in the alleyway alongside the house and flung her in an empty cage on the back patio. Did I go tell my neighbour I had stolen her chicken? I did not. Here I was, Little Miss Community Homesteader, *stealing chickens* from my perfectly nice neighbours who were just too busy to pen in their birds.

I knew I'd done something wrong when I wouldn't tell my daughter about the chicken, and I left the marauder with my flock for almost a full week before my chicken coop partner called and told me my neighbour had come to collect the chicken. How did she know where it was? What would she say now? I had to suck it up and apologize. Did I want to apologize to her? I did not. Was it the right thing to do? You bet. Did she give me hell? She sure did. Has it affected our relations? It certainly has. Are they repairable? Maybe, over time, but I truly wish I had taken a breath before I acted, rather than stealing that chicken.

I tell you this embarrassing tale to underscore the simple fact that it's easier to get mad than it is to be good. It's simpler to seek vengeance than justice. Protecting ourselves when we feel threatened is an automatic response, but this kind of reaction is the enemy of change. I can laugh about it now, but looking at



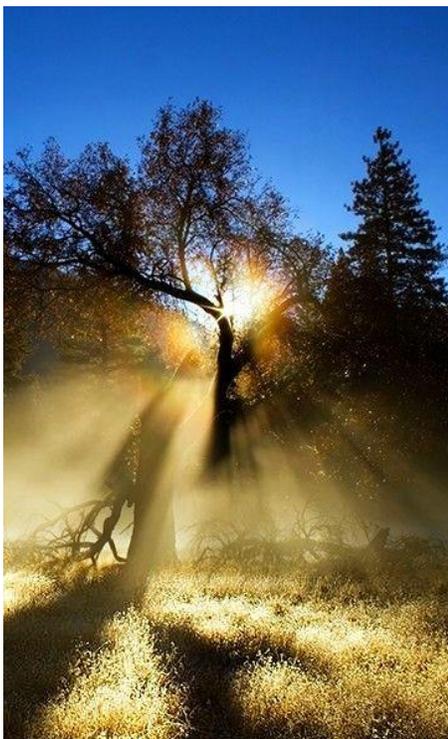
this minor skirmish as just one small bit of conflict between humans gives insight into how wars start and never end. Magnified one thousand times over hundreds of years, the weight of human conflict is almost too heavy to bear. We have to do better than this. Community change ultimately begins inside, with each one of us. Every day is an opportunity to confront our prejudices, our desire to control, and our fear of the other. A big challenge in front of us is the inside work we need to do, so that we can start looking at other people as assets, rather than liabilities.

So we end on much the same note as we began: change begins at home, within each one of us. Learning to rig up a greywater water system is important, but not if you're running on the fumes of fear. Resolving conflict is as important as growing your food, and making relationships with the people and creatures around you is the ultimate practice of truly living in place.



In order to re-organize our culture, we're going to have to work with one another in a different way than we've mostly been taught. Organizing at the grassroots and working for social change demands inspiration, outreach, connection, and communication. It also calls for a democratic power structure that gives voice to different perspectives and peoples, and makes it possible for people to take independent action on behalf of the group. Community works best when we listen, invent freely, empower one another to act, respect leadership, decentralize power, and resolve conflict with respect and non-violence.

When we begin projects aimed at generating community resilience, the first step is to outreach to find our collaborators. It is important to bring people together with a clear intention. Community projects all begin by meeting with interested members; sharing and listening to needs, concerns and intentions; and starting to make step-by-step plans toward accomplishing the goal. Integrating a practice where people can share their feelings and concerns in a non-judgmental environmental helps pave the way for deeper relationships, good working alliances, and a personal feeling of satisfaction and inclusion. Implementing a conflict resolution process that people can learn and practice is absolutely essential.



Some of the most interesting urban homesteading projects take a community-based approach to the problem. They recognize how systemic failures affect us individually and collectively and that change can take place on both levels. Food security projects, intentional communities, burgeoning transition town initiatives, community supported agriculture, food co-ops, garden wheels, and educational projects all have the intention to share information, resources, and relationship in the quest to rebuild the city.

Still Knitting

The world is smaller than it once was, the abundance of resources a dream of the past. The need to streamline and coordinate our actions and resources and energy is essential and becoming more so every day. Our timeline for turning things around for our civilization is very short – some scientists and ecologists believe that the next ten years are the make-it-or-break-it moment for planet Earth and her current inhabitants. This means that all of us have a role to play in waking up and stepping up to the tasks at hand. We need to break down the walls of silence within and between us and unify against the enemies of life: greed, complacency, cynicism, and fear.

Yet, even as we scale towards sustainability in our cities, we have to face the fact that the likelihood of reaching it in our lifetimes is slight. This should not deter us from doing all we can to participate in the great work of our time – renewing the earth and reclaiming our culture from the ashes of hundreds of years of grossly misperceiving our place in the garden of life.

Growing our skills not only in food production, but also in making decisions with a diversity of people who may have different ethics and values will be one of the challenges of the coming decades. The final frontier for our country cannot be the conquest of land as it was for the first wave of homesteaders. It is the work of learning to collaborate fully with one another, tending the earth within a living web of relationships, and building resilient communities where we do not leave anyone behind. This is the knitting together that must be done if we are to survive and thrive as a species. Without a healthy environment or reparations in our relationships or a reclamation of the skills that link us to the land, what is left for us? We need to engage in the profound work of rewriting our story on earth – from dominator to collaborator, from destroyer to sustainer.

Urban homesteading is part of the global project of knitting together, unraveling, and knitting some more. We have before us an opportunity to take what works, and leave the rest behind. We have left the garden through our own design. We can re-enter it with our creative imagining of another way to live in relationship to the earth and one another. The goal is radical interdependence, a revitalized economy that serves our families and our communities, and a way of living with nature that honours and respects the intelligent patterning of which we are a part. Even as the global situation grows more urgent, engaging in the work that is being done toward this goal, and all the work we can each do at home, cultivates hope and possibility.

The fabric is being rewoven with the threads of care, camaraderie, and community. In every city in this country, people are opting out by digging in, turning their life energy toward composting the dominant paradigm into something life-giving and fine. There is a place for you at the table, in the garden, in your body, on the piece of urban earth you inhabit. There is so much work for us to do, together. Join us.