

The Myth of Self Reliance

A mass emailing went out a while back from a prominent permaculturist looking for “projects where people are fully self sufficient in providing for their own food, clothing, shelter, energy and community needs. . .” There it was, the myth of “fully self sufficient,” coming from one of the best-known permaculturists in the world. In most US permaculture circles, the idea that anyone could be self sufficient at anything past a very primitive level was abandoned a while ago, and the softer term “self reliant” replaced it. But even self-reliance is barely possible, and, other than as way of expressing a desire to throw off the shackles of corporate consumerism, I don’t think it’s desirable.

I took a Googling cruise around the internet and found that “self sufficient” shows up as a desirable goal on several top permaculture websites. I’d like to hammer a few coffin nails into that phrase. My dictionary says that self sufficient means being “able to maintain oneself without outside aid.” Who lives without outside aid? No one. Let’s unpack that a bit further. The meaning of “self sufficient in food” is something most of us can agree on: supplying 100% of your food needs from your own land and efforts. I have never met anyone who has done this. I’m sure there are a few people doing it, but even subsistence farmers usually raise, alongside their food, a cash crop to buy the foods that are impractical for them to grow.

I hear people say they are growing 30%, 50%, even 70% of their own food. What they usually mean is that they are growing fruits and vegetables that make up some percentage of the total cost or weight—but not calories—of their food. Vegetables are high in wet weight, but low in calories. If you are growing 100% of your own vegetables, they provide about 15-20% of your daily calories, unless you are living mostly on potatoes or other starchy veggies. Most daily calories come from grains, meat, or dairy products. So if you’re not raising large-scale grains or animals, it’s unlikely that you are growing more than one-quarter of your own food, measured honestly by nutritional content. In that case, it’s not accurate to claim you are “70% food self-sufficient.” If you are getting most of your calories from your land, you’re almost certainly a full-time farmer, and I salute you for your hard work. Now we begin to see how difficult, and even undesirable, self sufficiency is. You won’t have time for much else if you are truly food self-sufficient, even in a permaculture system.

But even if you grow all your own food, can you claim you are self sufficient if you don’t grow all your own seeds? Provide all your fertility? Where do your farm tools and fuel come from? Permaculturists understand as well as anyone how interconnected life is. At what point do you claim to be disconnected from the broad human community in anything? Is there really a way to be “fully self sufficient” in food?

Let’s take a quick pass at clothing, shelter and energy. Even if you sew all your clothes, do you grow the cotton, raise the sheep? If you milled all the lumber or dug the stone for your home, did you forge the glass, fabricate the wiring? In the off-the-grid house, what complex community of engineers and factories assembled the solar panels? We’re reliant on all of that.

Claiming self sufficiency in almost anything insults and ignores the mountain of shoulders we all stand on. US permaculturists are a pretty politically correct crew, and it became obvious to some of us that “self sufficient” was not just impossible, but was a slap in the face to all those whose sweat provides for us, and was another perpetuation of the cowboy ethic that puts the individual at the center of the universe. So the term morphed into “self reliance,” to show that we know we are interdependent, but are choosing to be less reliant on others. At its best, self reliance means developing skills to provide for basic needs, so we can stop supporting unethical and destructive industries. But I see much less need for self-reliant people who can do everything themselves, and much more need for self-reliant communities, where not everyone knows how to weave or farm, but there is clothing and food for all.

There is still a deep prejudice in permaculture, as websites and emails show, that doing it all ourselves, and on our own land, is the most noble path. And insofar as our skills make us less dependent on corporate monopolies, developing the abilities that we think of as self-reliant is worth doing. However, the more we limit our lives to what we can do ourselves, the fewer our opportunities are. Each connection outside ourselves enriches us. When we create a web of interdependencies, we grow richer, stronger, safer, and wiser. Why would you not want to rely on others? To fully probe that would take us down a psychological rabbit-hole, but some of it is grounded in a belief that others are unreliable or unethical, and that we weaken ourselves by interdependencies. But the old saying “if you want a job done well, do it yourself” simply shows poor management skills.

If you're still skeptical, I'll resort to scripture: a quote from the Book of Mollison, Introduction to Permaculture, page two: “We can also begin to take some part in food production. This doesn't mean that we all need to grow our own potatoes, but it may mean that we will buy them directly from a person who is already growing potatoes responsibly. In fact, one would probably do better to organize a farmer-purchasing group in the neighborhood than to grow potatoes.”

As veteran permaculture designer Larry Santoyo says, go to the highest generalization to fill your needs. Thinking “I must grow my food” is painfully limited. Thinking “I must satisfy food needs responsibly” opens up a vast array of possibilities, from which you can choose the most stable and appropriate. Individual efforts are often less stable and resilient than community enterprises. And they're bad design: self-reliance means that a critical function is supported in only one way. If you grow all your food and get hurt, you are now injured, hungry, and watching your crops wither from your wheelchair. That won't happen in a community farm. And for those worried about an impending collapse of society, the roving turnip-bandits are much more likely to raid your lonely plot while you sleep exhausted from a hard day of spadework, and less likely to attack a garden protected by a crew of strong, pitchfork-wielding farmers who can guard it round the clock.

Creating community reliance gives us yet another application of permacultural zones: Zone zero in this sense is our home and land. Zone one is our connection to other individuals and families, zone two to local commerce and activities in our neighborhood, zone three to regional businesses and organizations, zone four to larger and more distant enterprises. Why would we limit ourselves to staying only in zone zero? We can organize our lives so that our need for zone-four excursions—say, to buy petroleum or metal products—is very limited, while our interactions with the local farmers' market and restaurants are frequent. This builds a strong community.

Self reliance fails to grow social capital, a truly regenerative resource that can only increase by being used. Why would I not want to connect to my community in every way that I can? If we don't help fill our community's needs, there's more chance that our neighbors will shop at big-box stores. An unexamined belief in self reliance is a destructive myth that hands opportunity to those who are taking our community away from us.

If you love being a farmer, then yes, grow all your own food. And sell the rest for the other things you need, in a way that supports your community. But is there really a difference between a farmer exchanging the product of her labor—food—for goods and money, and me selling the product of my labor—education—for goods and money? We both are trading our life energy within a system that supports us, and I'd like to think that we are both making wise ethical choices.

A good permaculture design is one that provides for the inhabitants' needs in a responsible and ecologically sound manner. But there's nothing in permaculture that says that it's important for all yields to come from the owner's site! If I can accomplish one thing in this essay, it is to smash that myth. Permaculture design simply says that our needs and products need to be taken care of responsibly in our design, not on our own land. That design can—and must—include off-site connections. If you are an acupuncturist whose income is provided by your community and you are getting most of your needs met from mostly local sources you believe

to be ethical, then that's excellent permaculture design. Your design will be stronger if your needs and products are connected to many off-site elements and systems.

It's very permacultural to develop skills that will connect you more deeply to land, home, and community. And sometimes the skills that we gained in search of self reliance are the same ones we need to be more community-reliant. But self reliance, as a goal in itself, is a tired old myth that needs to die. It's unpermacultural.