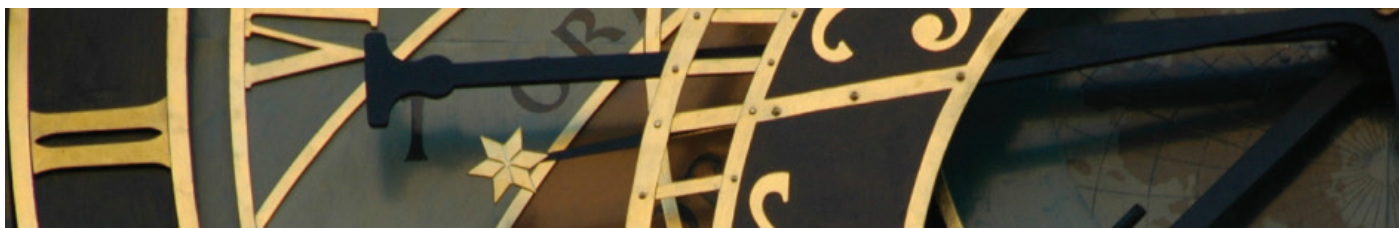


Temporal Belongings



Interview Series Number Five

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September 2014



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

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This interview was conducted as part of the AHRC-funded Sustaining Time project (www.sustainingtime.org). The project asks, if clock time helped build industrial capitalism & the idea of a speeded-up, networked time supports late capitalism, what kind of time would support alternative, sustainable economies? It took place in September 2013 and has been edited for length and clarity.

Alternative economies?

MB: This interview series explores the relationship between time and alternative economies and so to start off, I was wondering if you see the Permaculture Association as contributing to developing alternative economies, and how so?

AG: Absolutely, of course. It must be a different economy. It's interesting because permaculture claims to be, and is, an ecological design approach, so its focus is on learning lessons from nature. And I've been saying more and more over the last few years that we talk about ourselves as ecologists, but really we need to start moving into becoming economists. Ecology, going back to the roots of the word in Greek, shares the same root with economy, which is *oikos* or household. Economy is then the study of the relationships in the household and it involves a focus on the stewardship or management of resources in the household. Making this shift would mean that within permaculture we would move from an observing, studying mode into a more active process of managing and stewarding resources.

So a permaculture economy would basically be about managing the world's and human resources, in a way that was consistent with nature. I think it was Gregory Bateson who said most of the world's greatest problems are to do with the gap between human perception and the way that nature works. A permaculture economy, then, would be like a natural economy in the sense that the outputs of one system would become the inputs of another system. It would be a kind of circular economy. There would be no waste. The output would become an input. There would be much more focus on high quality, durable products and more focus on service and care. If you were looking at it from a taxation point of view, for example, we'd be trying to limit the use of resources and maximise the use of human creativity and effort.

One of the big challenges coming up in the next ten years is that there will be a lot more people looking for work, a statistic I've seen is that it could be a billion extra people. What are they all going to do? Imagine there are a billion more people wanting a job, and at the same time the forces of capitalism are reducing the requirement for labour because the whole point of capitalism is to invest your surplus funds into production systems that are more efficient and need less people or resources, so that you can make more profit. This means less and less people are needed and more and more people need a job. So fundamentally we need to change the way we think about how we live, and that then means a different way of thinking about work. We need to ask what is work, what is play and what is rest, and how do they all work together.

A permaculture-type economy would be a modest economy, in the sense of using just what it needed to meet our needs. It wouldn't use a lot of resources. It would be about really celebrating and finding ways to value and use people's creativity and time so that everyone had a meaningful opportunity to be engaged in some sort of livelihood. It would be much more creative. There'd be much more culture. There'd be poets and artists and dancers and musicians and writers. We'd focus much more on recreation, on the re-creation of ourselves as a culture. So yes, we can discuss this all more, but fundamentally it's about shifting towards a natural economy, and a different ratio of the time spent on work, rest and play. There'd be much more rest, much more play and less work shared more fairly amongst more people. That probably sounds a bit grandiose, but--,

MB: No, it sounds lovely. It sounds really lovely. Thank you.

The time of permaculture

MB: So just to ask quite generally, have you noticed in your own work, or in permaculture in general any issues to do with time? I'll ask more specific questions later, but I wondered what comes up for you when you think about the relationship between time and permaculture?

AG: Okay, well maybe I should just start from my own experience; because that's one of the things I'm most certain about. One of the things that was interesting was when I took on this role within the Permaculture Association in 1999 I started to think about how to approach it from a long-term perspective. In the first few weeks of taking on this office, I was unpacking it all and looking around and I realised that every two to three years a new administration system had been put into place because the office had moved. It made me realise that there had been a kind of burnout phase, or cycle, where someone would take it on,

maybe on a voluntary basis, and two to three years later they would burnout and feel that they couldn't do it anymore and hand it on. It just went on and on like that until it got to me here in Leeds and I thought what this organisation needs is persistence. So one of the things I think about when you mention permaculture and time, is that we need to really think ahead and see that things that are really important will need a lot of time. If we commit ourselves to that, it all gets a lot easier, because instead of having to rush and make everything happen tomorrow, we can plan things out in a much more considered manner, and we can move towards what we think is needed step by step. So, for example, there are things that I'm doing this year, in my role as chief executive, that I had as an idea in 1999, but I'm only just being able to implement, and I'm absolutely fine with it taking fifteen years because there's fourteen years of other stuff that needed to be put in place before this was possible. One of the ways that permaculture touches on time then is that effort to really think ahead, to keep a long term view, and trying to take out the urgency, so you can go from the urgent to the important in that step-by-step process.

Then the other side of that is the focus on the personal, since I realised that the only way there could be the kind of persistence I thought was needed was for me not to burnout. So I was thinking, 'Right, okay well, burnout, what's that?', and I remember reading about it and looking particularly at the signs of burnout. There were some really good simple indicators like you start feeling angry with people, you get frustrated and annoyed by the simplest things, you get bitter and other things like that. These were all different kinds of emotional signals. I really thought about that, and one of the things I decided to do was to just make sure I got enough rest, which I didn't always do. But I could spot the signs, and I would have more rest when I needed it.

So one of the things about time is recognising the value of different sorts of time, or recognising the way you use different sorts of time. This approach worked really well, but around 2004 or 2005 I thought "I've been doing this for nearly five years now. It's really full on. I need to have a break." So I took four months off, and my family and I went off to Eastern Europe visiting permaculture projects and other sustainability projects, going to beaches, and climbing mountains. It was a bit of a busman's holiday, but we had a fantastic, fabulous time. One of the time-related aspects of this that was interesting was the way that when you're having new experiences, and your brain has more to take in, it extends the length of the

day. It feels like a richer experience. I got back four months later and we had so many new stories to tell, whereas people back home felt like nothing much had happened to them because they'd just been doing the same things every day. So another way permaculture and time are related is that it's about having a diversity of things going on. By having a diverse life and multiple livelihoods, you can really enrich the experiences you have in your life. You can actually have a longer life in the same amount of time.

Ratios of work, rest and play

But just to go back a bit, the discussion about burnout reminded me of a project I was involved in when I first discovered permaculture in the early nineties. I had met a chap called Wolf White in a course I was doing at university on Environmental Design and Permaculture. After the course he asked me to join a project he was doing in Leeds called the Human-Scale Development Initiative. As part of the research for this, we found that there's a remarkably consistent set of ratios to how different species spend their time. If you look broadly at work, rest and play, I can't remember exactly what the ratios are, but there's a very consistent ratio between the time that an animal is asleep, the time the animal is resting, and re-creating (the sort of social metabolism, recreation and re-creation stuff) and then the work.

The species that most deviates from the natural pattern is human beings, and they do this in two different ways. So on one level there is the massive pressure to overwork. At the time, there was a kind of epidemic of people throwing themselves off skyscrapers and committing suicide in Japan because of their workload. An executive would do a 16 week project, hardly sleep, hand in their report and then go to the top of a tall building and throw themselves off because they were totally exhausted. This was called *karōshi*, which literally means death through overwork. Human beings have created what you could almost call a *karōshi* society.¹ We are literally killing ourselves through overwork. And not only are we killing ourselves personally, but our society is killing itself through unsustainability.

The *karōshi* society is the far end of the spectrum, but on the other end of the spectrum you have human-scaled societies, which was what we focused our project on. We characterised human-scaled societies as having around 150 people in them. The vast majority of human existence has been in groups of 150 people or less, that is usually 150 or subdivisions which made up inter-groups of 150. Robert Dunbar has written a few very interesting books about why that is.² In these human

¹ *Karōshi* refers to work deaths from stress, and would also include heart-attacks and strokes. There is also another term, *karōjisatsu*, which refers specifically to work-related suicides.

² Robert Dunbar is an anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist at the University of Oxford. "Dunbar's number" is the suggested limit of

scale societies we worked less than most other species. For example, I don't think there was any Australian aboriginal tribe that originally had a word for work. It didn't exist as a separate concept. Human-scaled societies had a much richer experience of life because work was fully integrated into their cultural activity. It wasn't a separate thing. Work, rest and play were very integrated so that playing, laughing, joking, and singing whilst you worked was the norm. In that context, what is work? Where does work start and play finish? Where's the learning? Is it a separate thing? No, it's part of it all. The children on the back of woman collecting berries, learning, being nurtured, playing - it's all connected.

That was really fascinating. It made me realise that the ratio of work, rest and play is probably one of the most fundamental indicators of sustainability in a society. Human-scaled societies absolutely categorically were the most sustainable *modus operandi* of human beings. There is no doubt about that. It is civilisations which have destroyed environments, not human scale, hunter-gatherer, tribal people. They just haven't done it. They have made significant interventions. It's not that they haven't changed the environment, but in terms of devastating change – possibly clearing the larger mammals from Australia, and the Americas, that was a major impact – but broadly speaking it's industrial societies, and kingdoms, and empires that have had a devastating impact. And what has shifted in those societies – from tribal people, to kingdoms, to empires, to industrial civilisation – is basically the way that time is used. The concentration of work increases, and work is the bit that has the most impact on the environment.

If we want to have a sustainable culture, then, we literally have to play more. It's not an option to not play more. We have to rest, we have to play, we have to be in our communities. For all the activists, all the earnest campaigners, and all those people for whom sustainability is a must-do activity, they're not getting the most fundamental thing. They are working themselves into the ground and burning out, when fundamentally you've got to rest. Rest is part of the deal; play is part of the deal. A permaculture economy is quite part-time. It's not like we're against business or trade, that's fine and we can do it. But it's not the only thing. Playing is just as important. The community side of life is just as important. It's about getting those proportions of work, rest and play right. It's really critical. David Holmgren, for example, has an interesting ratio that he uses to split his time: a third is for family, a third for community and a third for business.

MB: That actually connects up really closely with the next question I wanted to ask, which was whether you thought the permaculture emphasis on diversifying inputs and outputs might offer a way for individuals to think about how they might diversify their time-use. You have already answered this in a way, but I wanted to see whether you might have anything to add? I'm particularly interested in this because a key issue in the project so far has been around the way time, money and value seem to be knitted together in a particular way within capitalism. For example, there can be the sense that the only valuable use of your time is to earn money, and the only valuable time is the time you are getting paid for. Quite a lot of people I've been meeting seem to be trying to unpick that knot and develop a more diverse sense of what counts as a valuable use of their time. But they still experience a lot of pressure to focus on maximising their income. There is a risk in diversifying your use of time, because you might still need to pay off your mortgage or other debt for example. On the other hand, the ways of thinking developed within permaculture seem to be able to offer a strong account of why it's important to have multiple kinds of time providing different kinds of value.

AG: Yes, but there are practical issues involved, aren't there? Because the way people used to think about their time and the way we do now is quite different. I don't think that is because people's values have shifted, but because economic pressures have shifted. I've been looking at a lot of the work that Positive Money do, and they point out that the way that money is created in this society is essentially through the creation of debt by banks.³ With the increase in people's debts it has gone from a family having only one person working, and their wage covering the mortgage, the food, and a bit of a holiday, to this intense pressure because we are all paying back huge debts. So fundamentally we need to change the way money is created, because when we are in debt they've basically got you. You have to work really hard just to make ends meet. It's a con basically. We are being conned.

For example, we are all living in houses that shouldn't have to cost as much as they do. I'm very lucky, partly related to the permaculture principle of 'use edges and value the marginal,' because I found a house in a marginal area of Leeds that cost me £25,000 and so I don't have a mortgage. My wife and I work part-time and have plenty of time for our family, for ourselves and for each other. She has a part-time business and I'm a part-time chief executive. I've got time to play with my kids, not that they want me to play with them anymore because they are sixteen and seventeen, but if they

³ Positive Money is a not-for-profit organisation focused on raising awareness around banking and money creation. Find out more at: <http://www.positivemoney.org/>

wanted to I could. I'm really lucky because I got a house that was really cheap, that's the lucky bit, but the side that is more much about design and about permaculture is that we took the opportunity and we really minimise our need for money. We grow some of our own food, we have mostly second hand items in the house, we don't have a TV, we borrow books from the library, etc.

However, most people don't have the same kinds of opportunities we had and feel constrained by peer pressure to have the next thing, the bigger house, the fast car and all that kind of thing. So there is an element of this that's linked to values, I agree with you that there are values that can shift and that would make a bit of a difference. But there are also structural issues about how the economy works. Basically it is designed to extract wealth from the poor and the middle classes and to pass it onto the super-rich. According to Positive Money, it could be around £170 million per day that is going from the poor to the rich and this is also concentrating wealth from the regions of England into the city of London. There's really a quite dark side to all of this discussion which is the way that the economy has been structured to basically extract wealth from the majority of the population. It is affecting our every moment, and our time is being manipulated in order to make a small number of people very wealthy. Fundamentally, people would love to spend more time with their kids, they would love to spend more time sitting with their feet up and watching the flowers, but they can't because they've got to pay the mortgage.

MB: And perhaps this pressure is also compounded by the influence of school and paid-work and society more generally, where proving your worth comes from how much you work and how much money you earn. Time at work can be given much more validation than time spent with kids or relaxing.

AG: I think that's true as well. I do agree with that. There's a core Protestant work ethic. In many ways that was the beginnings of capitalism wasn't it? The Puritans even when they were gardening were thinking about how they were going to do an account of themselves. And then not only did they think that they had to be busy personally, but then they thought they should make sure that their money was working hard as well. So yes, we're weirdly affected by the Puritanism from the 1600s.

Re-valuing Time?

MB: Yes. So I've found that with a lot of people I've been talking to on this project, there is a lot of personal work that people have felt that they needed to do, which has involved challenging their own values and beliefs (which might have been very implicit) in order to re-value those parts of time that have been seen as 'just wasting time.' So it seems like there's something in there

about the amount of effort that is needed to shift the way different parts of time are valued.

AG: Yes and I think this is where natural systems can help. Understanding how your body works, for example, and how much time and effort your body puts into metabolising, and how important it is to metabolise properly for the health of your body. That makes you realise that the body's metabolism, on a personal physiological level, that sort of metabolism is like recreation. It's that re-creation time. But we need that socially too, and that's how nature works. We need that time; it's really important time. It's not wasted. It's actually what makes it all work properly. It's part of being efficient. Maybe we need to make better arguments for making this kind of time a priority, and show how it's about being healthy. Then maybe staring into space can be seen as having value.

Rhythms & Seasonality

MB: Definitely. So to move onto the next question, in the project so far I've found a range of examples where in order to help make the world a better place, in whatever way people were interpreting that, part of what was involved was shifting how people understand time and/or live their time. So I was just wondering whether you thought that in order to do permaculture that part of that process requires shifting your sense of time? For example, shifting how far forward, or back you think, or learning to pay attention to different kinds of rhythms?

AG: Yes, absolutely. I mean there's certainly the perspective I mentioned earlier about permaculture emphasising a longer term view. Another side of that is the sense of seasons, the living in place, bioregionalism, living seasonally, eating seasonally, getting yourself more attuned to the rhythm of the year. That's an important shift for a lot of people, where they go from a supermarket mentality of expecting particular foods to be available at all times, for example, or immediately turning on the air conditioning when it gets a little bit warm, to being much more in tune with the flow of the year. This includes starting to notice the opportunities at different times of the year, such as picking different things at different times, wild harvesting, starting to see how you can use the produce from your garden and moving towards more self-reliance really.

When you are in a society where you are pushed to just be a consumer, you don't really need the seasons very much. They might be convenient or inconvenient, but it doesn't really matter that much. When you make a shift from being a consumer towards being much more of a producer as well, then what time it is matters. Right now I'm thinking when I get off the phone I'm going to get my bucket and I'm going to go for a walk, and I'm going to pick a whole load of elderberries because if I don't do

it soon, they'll be gone. And I'm going to process those elderberries and they're going to help me store vitamin C – they're really fantastic for coughs, and colds, and flus – and I'll be drinking that all through the winter with my family. They're just tasty anyway, so I'll probably make some into wine and I'll get drunk one night. So my sense of time is about how I can use the time I'm in to meet some of my needs in a creative way. It's that time of self-reliance, a sense of time where it matters what time of year it is because of what you can do in it – or not do, such as in the quieter times in winter when you're not doing as much. Even then, you're thinking about how you are going to use the year ahead, and we might do some projects in the house to make it a bit more energy efficient. So there's that sense of designing your time to be productive and to make good use of the different seasons. That can be quite a big shift. A lot of it is around self-reliance but there's probably more to it.

The Time of Change

MB: Well and perhaps that leads onto the next question about how the time of change is understood as well. I've always thought that the permaculture ideal of spending at least a year observing a place before you try to intervene into it, or change it, challenges the more dominant attitude that can value change in and of itself, where constant change is a sign of progress, and showing how quickly you can 'turn the situation around' is a sign of success.

AG: The time of change, yes, certainly that's another issue. There's so much to this isn't there? I guess taking a design perspective is very interesting, because broadly speaking in permaculture you have the process of survey, analyse, design, implement, maintain, evaluate, and then returning back to survey and observation in a cyclical process. It maps very well onto action research approaches, which focus on working out what the challenge is, think about what your intervention is going to be, plan your intervention, do your intervention, observe your results, evaluate how that went, reflect on your next opportunity for change. Again, that is a mixture of planning, doing, reflecting and observing.

For both of them there is an emphasis on realising that each one of those activities is important to give a rounded understanding and view. In this framework 'the change' isn't just the bit when you're doing, effective change also includes observing how things went, reflecting on that and then thinking about what you are going to do next. The 'work' bit or the 'doing' bit then becomes part of a bigger cycle. I think it's important that thinking time is more clearly valued and actually there's all these fantastic quotes that already emphasise this, e.g.: "an hour's reconnaissance is never wasted"; "proper preparation and planning prevent piss poor performance." All these lovely phrases that suggest that

taking time to think about your work is worthwhile and that you shouldn't just be working all the time.

Working with multiple times

MB: And what about the idea of stacking as well? It seemed to me that stacking offers an interesting challenge to linear ideas of time, which suggest that time consists of individual moments following one after the other, where you can only do one thing in each moment. The idea of stacking seemed to instead emphasise that there are multiple rhythms and processes that happen at the same time. Within permaculture good design tries to take advantage of that and allow multiple things to happen in the same moment, rather than assuming, like project management systems sometimes do, that you are just going along doing one thing then the next, then the next.

AG: Yeah, that's true and it definitely takes time to master it. Also I think things can be over-stacked. There is a certain sense in which it is very difficult to give your proper attention to more than one thing at a time. I can't have a conversation and check my email, for example, ultimately you only give one of them proper attention. But you can get in your share car, put on your learning Spanish tape, whilst going to do something and drop recycling on the way. Or you could be teaching a course and have an apprentice who is learning from you and also design the course to produce real practical results that relate to the subject of the course. So you can stack things up.

What that leads me to is the idea of developing a sense of more poetic living. It might sound like an odd thing to say, but it comes from something that has influenced me a lot which is *A Pattern Language* by Christopher Alexander, et al.⁴ In the *Pattern Language* there are a range of patterns from Pattern 1 "Autonomous Regions" to Pattern 253 "Things From Your Life," and then everything in between. The idea is that you take the highest level pattern for your project, you could be trying to create a balcony, and so would look at the balcony pattern and then explore which of the more specific patterns you might draw in to support the larger project. You might have ten or fifteen different patterns that you put together or 'stack' together. Alexander says that what you are doing then is creating spaces that are poetic, that are dense with meaning, but without being too much. Poetry has fewer words than prose after all. Really good stacking is like that. It's when there's lots of different things going on simultaneously in space and in time and it's also dense with meaning. To do that is challenging but it's wonderful when it really comes together.

⁴ Alexander, C., Ishikawa, S., & Silverstein, M. (1977). *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (Center for Environmental Structure Series). Oxford: Oxford University Press. Find out more at <http://www.patternlanguage.com/>

For me that's the epitome of where we're trying to go with Permaculture. We're trying to create spaces that are hugely productive, beautiful, that smell fantastic, look visually wonderful, there is community interaction happening, we are meeting our needs in the smallest possible space, so that all the other species on the planet can also thrive. And in that intention you can imagine a rich life in which more is happening, and the space is really alive.

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Living things are characterised by huge amounts of synergy, and synergy is all about shared work or joint work and connection. I should probably stop there, but I suppose that is what I mean by stacking.

MB: Thank you, that was really lovely. It was great because one of the key questions for the project, which hasn't had a chance to come out quite as much yet, is whether a shift to more sustainable economic forms might also question the 'time of nature.' There can be an assumption that nature is a timeless resource for capitalism which remains fairly static.

AG: It's just so wrong, isn't it? We need to become dance partners, basically.

MB: Yes and perhaps some of the work that needs to be done in shifting to less destructive economies is to start thinking about nature as dynamic, as having time. I think that kind of shift is coming out in a really clear way in what you were just saying there.

AG: Oh, good.

Representing progress

MB: So a further way to approach the question of time is through a focus on past, present and future. We've talked about this already, but I wanted to particularly pick up on the way the flow between past, present and future has been mapped onto an idealisation of progress. One result of this is things that are associated with the past can be dismissed as old fashioned, or no longer relevant, while 'the new' can be seen as a good in and of itself. So I wanted to ask you about that idea in general, but particularly about the way that certain alternative movements might have been caught up in that rejection of the past. There can be the idea, for example, that permaculture or the cooperative movement might have been popular, but are now associated with the past, rather than the future. Is this

an issue that you have come across?

AG: I like the idea that co-operation could be old fashioned and no longer relevant [!] or that ecological thinking could be no longer relevant. It just becomes more and more relevant all the time.

MB: Yes, but I've heard people talking about cooperatives, for example, with a certain level of nostalgia. They might remember their co-op membership cards and other things from when they were young, but might not feel that the co-operative movement is modern or contemporary.

AG: Co-operatives are engaging 1.6 billion people around the world. That's quite a big deal. Corporations might like to suggest that co-operatives are not contemporary, but they are becoming more and more current. In relation to the idea of the past being worse than the present, well they had more holidays in the Middle Ages than we do now. We're not on an endless progress trip; some things are clearly much better now, but some aren't as good as they were in the past. Change also doesn't happen all at the same time. There are all sorts of things happening simultaneously. The industrial revolution is still happening in some places, the agricultural revolution is still occurring in some places. It's not as if humanity is on a single step-by-step path. Permaculture explicitly recognises the value of what people knew in the past. It really gives value to ancient wisdoms, tribal people, indigenous people, vernacular wisdom etc., because there are a lot of things that actually worked really, really well in the past.

Personally, I recognise that on one level there is only 'now.' It is the only kind of time that really exists – this minute, this second, the present moment. Past and future are concepts which are really helpful, and things definitely change in an observable, predictable manner. So you could say there was a certain sense in which there are future moments, but I think that within permaculture, as well as more widely, there has been a real growth in the mindfulness movement and the desire to be much more grounded in, and really alive to, the present moment.

So to move onto notions of progress – this is just such a massive topic! – some claims to progress are completely unfounded, but some are well justified. In health, for example, there have been enormous gains, though of course even that isn't as clear cut as everyone would like us to think. There is still a lot to learn from the past there too. Even then we can't go back, there is no 'back,' the universe as we know it goes forwards, but that doesn't mean that progress is uniform.

Finally, in terms of the future, it is by no means determined. We might have many different and contradictory ideas about what the future could be

like, but it doesn't exist. There isn't a future. There are only our thoughts about what the future might be like and how we use 'now' to think about the future determines what 'now' will be like in the future. One of the really critical roles for permaculture, then, is to present a different vision of what it could be like. We need to present a different narrative, a different scenario that might reassure people (there needs to be more reassurance) that the future could be really okay, in fact it could be wonderful. So we need to suggest some ways that we could think about what is possible in the present, about what we can do now, in order to make the future wonderful. Doing this would help us counter the idea that there is any sort of inevitability about the future. All these claims that we need to double food production in order to feed everyone in 2050, for example. Well that's not true; we are perfectly capable of growing enough food. That's not the problem, it's a narrative put forward by agri-business to justify consolidating the global food supply under a small number of corporations. They are scaremongering, using fear of the future to try to make us change our course towards something that suits corporate interests.

MB: Yes, the question of who gets to represent the future is a really important problem. Small-scale food production fits into the same model I was talking about before. It is painted as being older, less developed, while mass industrial farms represent the future.

AG: And yet it's so untrue.

MB: Yes, but it's still really powerful.

AG: Yes, power relations are key and one of the most important things we could usefully do for the wider movement that permaculture is a part of, is talk about the permaculture ethics of earth care, people care and fair shares. They are a good simple summary of what we're trying to achieve, but these ethics reach beyond permaculture. One of the things that we could really think about doing together – Transition Towns, Permaculture, Eco-village movements, the La Via Campesina, the bioregionalists, the Schauberger enthusiasts, you know, all the wonderful, fantastic people out there trying to make a difference – one of the things we need to do is start to control our calendar, together, and plan together. I think Julius Caesar said 'he who controls the calendar controls the future.' Setting out our future together would give us the potential to work together with greater synergy. So it's not just a question of who controls a narrative about the way the world is, it's how do we co-create our own narrative about what we're going to do together.

Thinking forward via the past

MB: I suppose part of the reason I was asking about past and futures is also because I had noticed quite a

few examples where people were taking inspiration from the past, rather than from stories about the future, whether that be imaginative fantasies, or science fiction. There seems to be an interest in retrieving ideas that might not have had the chance to develop their full potential, or revisiting paths untaken. It seemed to suggest that the past is not something that is simply over and done with, but that it could be seen as a potential resource, even that the future could be found via the past. Of course, as you say, there are many things that we wouldn't want to return to but the past doesn't seem to be viewed as obsolete or no longer relevant.

AG: Perhaps, but maybe science fiction still has a part to play. I mean personally I'd love to go to Mars.

MB: Oh, well yes, I've read the Mars Trilogy – Red Mars, Blue Mars, Green Mars – by Kim Stanley Robinson...

AG: Have you? They're great. They're really helpful in terms of thinking about how we deal with the current politics of now. I think it was a very interesting sort of take on it all. And there have been a couple of things that really affected the way I think about our relationship with technology. One, my son got pneumonia when he was about eleven and he probably would have died if he had been sick a hundred years before. And two, my daughter was involved in an accident while our family were out hiking. We were all up on Snowden and a huge gust of wind came and took us all off our feet and threw us down and she had quite a bad accident basically and about 35 minutes later, some heat-seeking helicopter turning up and wow, that was fantastic. We got to Bangor A&E in about five minutes, which was incredibly fast and were then straight into probably one of the world's best accident and emergency units that deal with all the climbers on Snowden. Afterwards we were whisked off to a maxillofacial ward near Rhyl, just in North Wales, and I spent the next five days with my daughter looking after her because my wife had been injured as well.

It made me ask how do you make sure you don't throw the baby out with the bath water? What does permaculture at a whole society scale look like? You know, if the Permaculture Association was in charge of the economy, what would we do? How would we still make sure that people's health was supported? Because there's some great stuff about the NHS – there are a whole load of things that we don't need to do – but there's really good, useful, valuable stuff in there too. It made me think, that while yes, the yurt is wonderful, homeopathy is wonderful, it's lovely to have herbs in your garden, and to grow your own salad, but actually there's that much bigger scale that we need to deal with and work at. When we are thinking about sustainability at a national or even a global scale, we're going to have to go beyond just what we can do in our back gardens.

So one of the challenges is how do we create a narrative that makes people realise that we're not saying get rid of the NHS, and we're not saying get rid of everything that's industrial – some of those things are really helpful – but how do we get the balance right and have a much better respect for nature? It's really complex and we mustn't be too simplistic.

There is a place for technology, but the challenge is to not have technology dominate. That's the trick with time isn't it? Your phone's beeping, and your Twitter's going, and Facebook is going. You feel like you must, you must, engage. Trying to get the balance right is the hardest thing.

Designing Time

MB: Yeah it is, and I think it's really interesting to think through how we design time. The idea that time isn't just something that flows along by itself, but that we can design it, that we do design it. Permaculture is very well understood as a practice of spatial design, but then there are different types of design, non-land based permaculture projects for example. It would be really interesting to explore how the ethos of permaculture might contribute to attempts to redesign time, to design the way we measure it, think about it and use it in ways that might support more sustainable ways of life.

AG: I think you are right. Absolutely, it would be wonderful to do it. At a sort of personal scale, or a social scale and really think about the consequences of time and its effects. Ultimately it would be good to see whether people who felt that permaculture really influenced the way they lived, if that actually changed their ratio of work, rest and play.

MB: Yes. So that was all the questions I wanted to ask – was there anything else that you wanted to add?

AG: Well, just that I do think that looking at the question of time is right at the heart of what we need to think about. Joe Polaischer who was an Austrian permaculture designer who moved to New Zealand and set up Rainbow Valley Farm, he was a deeply inspirational person, an absolutely amazing person, he said time is your most valuable resource, there is nothing more valuable than your time, and how you choose to spend it is probably the most important thing you do.

MB: Ok, what a great quote. Thank you so much, it was really lovely to talk to you.

AG: Yes, great. Thank you very much, I really enjoyed it.

Temporal Belongings

The Temporal Belongings research network supports the development of a more coordinated understanding of the interconnections between time and community. We provide opportunities to share research and practical experience and to develop new collaborations. We also produce resources that will support the development of this research area. To find out more about our activities go to: www.temporalbelongings.org

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