

Obituary for Joe Polaischer

It is with great sadness that I reflect on the death of Joe Polaischer. I met Joe only four years ago, although his reputation had well preceded our meeting. In recent years I have had the privilege of being hosted by many wonderful permaculture activists and teachers during a series of overseas teaching tours. Joe Polaischer and his legacy is one of the brightest points in my picture of the global permaculture community.

No one who has met Joe could fail to be struck by his passion about nature and permaculture. Such passion is common in the younger generation eager to explore and change the world. It is rare in someone in their 60's, so experienced and world weary as Joe. Passion is often associated with a strong ideological position. Within the spectrum of leading permaculture activists I have met, Joe was closer to the ideological than the pragmatic end of the spectrum. His use and promotion of simple appropriate technologies, serious food production from diverse integrated systems and radical simplicity of personal needs, he was by no means unique in the permaculture network. But Joe was also a practical realist who dealt with design problems and technical issues in a systematic way so permaculture solutions could be seen to work. This is not so common amongst us ideologues. Joe also understood that radical ideas and novel systems also needed to be attractive if they were to succeed in luring ordinary people away from mind deadening consumer dependence. His work was characterised by art and beauty as much as it was by ecological function.

Most leading permaculture teachers have at least some practical knowledge and skill in either food production, animal husbandry, building and construction, or other practical arts that contribute to permaculture, some are jacks of all trades. Joe was a master of most. His attention to detail, maintenance, quality and art that we associate with his native Austria were combined with the "can-do" innovation of his adopted home, New Zealand. He was constantly experimenting with new information and systems.

The personal lives of many permaculture leaders reflect a pattern of relationship instability, mobility and sometimes a lack of ability to practise what we preach. Whether by his wisdom or good luck, Joe was ably balanced and complemented by his partner in life and livelihood, Trish Allen. Trish's good nature, organization and pragmatic commitment to permaculture as everyday life, blended and balanced with Joe's vision, passion and skill. Between them, they made Rainbow Valley Farm, their small rural property at Matakana, the permaculture icon of NZ.

For myself and Su Dennett it is always inspiring to meet other older couples who have managed to make the personal and domestic expression of permaculture, a central focus of their work in permaculture. Rainbow Valley Farm has all the intimacy of Joe and Trish's hands, heads and hearts but it is also a place where many thousands of people from New Zealand and overseas have experienced permaculture, many for the first time, through regular tours, courses, Woofing and internships. Many more have vicariously enjoyed some of the bounty and beauty of Rainbow Valley through innumerable magazine and newspaper articles, books, television and radio programs. For even the most committed activists, the difficulties of maintaining a strong personal permaculture space which is also a very public demonstration and education centre are great. Joe and Trish managed to do both for as long as anyone.

I believe one of the secrets of their success was that the rules and routines at Rainbow Valley Farm were always clearly laid out. For many easy going Aussies and Kiwi's, Joe's germanic precision and expectations made him a hard taskmaster but one who commanded respect. Perhaps he was a perfectionist, too head strong to be able let Rainbow Valley Farm evolve into a more public environmental education centre. Part of Joe's legacy in New Zealand is a whole network of people with the passion and skills to see Rainbow Valley Farm continue to be a venue for inspiration and learning in some way.

Joe's contribution was not confined to Rainbow Valley Farm. As well as being involved in local community and wider environmental issues, Joe has been one of the most influential permaculture teachers in the German speaking world. I am not familiar with the full history of his Permaculture Design Course teaching but I remember being astounded by the intensity of the program of his most recent series of courses in Austria in which Joe was ably assisted by fellow Austrian, Christoff Schneider. Getting to know Christoff emphasised for me the calibre of permaculture students and activists who have been drawn to work with and learn from Joe over the years. I am sure that Christoff and many others who shared in this legacy will use it to good ends in New Zealand, Austria and around the world.

Japan is another country where Joe made a substantial contribution to permaculture education, having taught several PDC's there and hosted many Japanese Woofers and interns at Rainbow Valley Farm. In fact it seems to me that everyone I have met in the Japanese permaculture network has visited or knew about Rainbow Valley Farm. The Japanese influence on Joe's work at Rainbow Valley Farm was evidence of his great ability to recognise and apply the best from other cultures.

Everyone who knew Joe would acknowledge that he was an independent thinker with strong opinions. Some might think of him as a character in the mold of Mollison, a rough rural philosopher and storyteller with his own conception of how things should be. Over the decades I have seen many capable and opinionated (mostly) men of this ilk, who for one reason or another have dismissed Mollison and permaculture in favour of their own version of sustainability. Joe Polaischer on the other hand showed a sincere deference to Mollison and a passion for permaculture as a great influence on his life and work. While he was steeped in the "Mollison school of permaculture" I also found him very warm, respectful, open and influenced (in recent years) by my own contributions. Perhaps a stronger example of Joe's ability to get on and learn from others, even the most abrasive, was his good, if argumentative working relationship with Sepp Holzer, a fellow Austrian and brilliant permaculture designer and practitioner, completely outside the lineage of permaculture teaching, who has clashed with almost everyone within the European permaculture community.

Most permaculture teachers have grown up in a world of relative stability and affluence, and typically, with some personal disconnection from land and community lineage (?). Joe was unusual in having experienced the self reliant way of life on his grandfather's farm in an Austrian village where he could trace his ancestry back more centuries than the Maori lineage in New Zealand, as well as being old enough to have experienced a time "without money, economy or government" in the immediate aftermath of WWII. These experiences informed his teaching and allowed him to understand and communicate both the creative possibilities and the harsh challenges of the energy descent future we face around the globe.

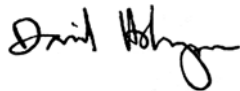
In a group discussion, at IPC7 in Croatia in 2005, on the implications of peak oil for the global permaculture community, Joe held the participants spellbound with his stories of the aftermath of WWII. He reflected that he once believed that he would never live to see such times again but that he was now not so sure. Well, Joe is safe from the risks and uncertainties of the future but he left us with the best he could give to help survive and even prosper in a world of climate change and energy descent.

Maybe I can finish this obituary with a story told by the American philosopher Gregory Bateson to illustrate the characteristics of a “mature culture”; one that I have retold many times.

The dons of New College, Oxford were gathered as usual for dinner under the great oak beams of the dining hall. One of the dons got up on the table and poking one of the beams, showed it was riddled with borers. The college council met in consternation. Where would they get oak timbers of this size to replace the beams that were all in varying states of decay? One council member recalled that the forester who managed the college’s forest investments maybe able to help. The forester was summonsed and asked his opinion. He nonchalantly replied that they had the trees and that when he had come to the job, his predecessor had instructed him that this particular stand of great oaks should not be cut and sold as they had been planted at the time of the dining hall construction to replace the beams when they eventually decayed.

During an advanced permaculture principles course at Rainbow Valley Farm in May last year, Joe told us a variation of this story that came from his own experience. As a very young child, he was following his grandfather around the farm. The old man pointed to a particularly fine grove of trees saying they were only to be used to replace the large beams in the farm barn when that became necessary.

Was Joe’s story another rare example of “mature culture”? Maybe Gregory Bateson’s story was not an exceptional case confined to ancient and august institutions of learning, but a normal and natural behaviour of people connected to nature, the ancestors and the decedents. I’m still not sure but I am certain that Joe Polaischer was an exceptional man who leaves a great legacy of experience, story, vision and hope for all our decedents.



David Holmgren

Melliodora 14th Febuary 2008



Joe explaining permaculture concepts to tour participants at Rainbow Valley Farm Feb 2004