

A DESIGN FOR CONSCIOUS OPTIMISM

Design by Peter Simon for the Applied Permaculture Diploma with
Permaculture Association Britain

This design is inspired by the overwhelming events of 2020 and the way they have been presented to us.

My idea was to use permaculture methods, tools, frameworks to design myself out of the constant bombardment of toxic content (mainstream media). Stuff that's causing a low (or sometimes high) but almost constant level of anxiety around our future.

To redesign my "inner garden".

PRESENTATION AND COLLABORATION

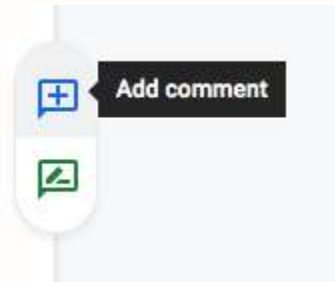
The way I'd like to present this design is to be useful and applicable to anyone who feels overwhelmed by pressures of media and worldly events, but I will provide specific examples for each section, examples of what I did to uplift the situation. This may make it more personal, more relatable to people and give them some ideas too.



My personal experiences during the implementation of this design will be marked by this highlighted box and accompanied by this happy plant icon.

I invite you, dear reader, fellow permaculture enthusiast, to expand on ideas presented in this design, so feel free to add more ideas and suggestions to any section via commenting in this document!

Just select the word or section you'd like to comment on, and press the 'Add comment' button.

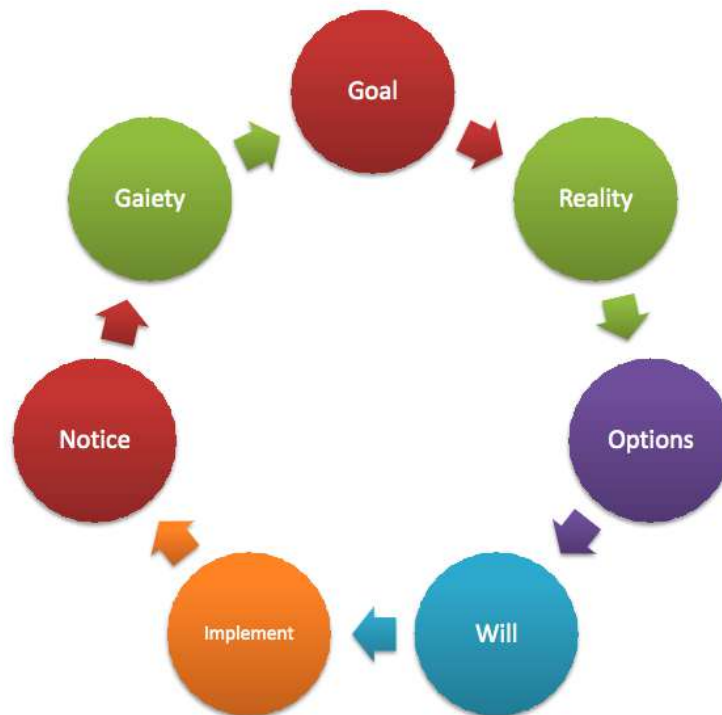


DESIGN FRAMEWORK

The **design framework** I find very fitting for this endeavor is Carla Moss's GROWING Cycle (which I found via a Diploma facebook group in Helen Smith's [collection of Design frameworks](#)). The reason I find it fitting is because there is an element of 'will' in there before implementation, and will (or willpower) is something I often struggle with and would be especially important for this design to follow through. The cyclical nature of this framework is also fitting (though I think since permaculture is about learning from nature, most, if not all frameworks are cyclical to some extent), I have to come back and re-evaluate what I'm doing and tailor it to the changes of life.

Another aspect I love about this framework is it includes 'gaiety' which, to me means that play, joy and celebration has an important role, which in this particular design is very important.

Carla Moss's GROWING Cycle



Helen Smith 2020

GOAL



The **goal** is to relieve this doom and gloom, this constant pressure, this constant dread, whether it's political, pandemic or climate related. This can have a paralysing effect on our creativity: we don't feel like learning anything new, starting anything new, creating anything new. It puts us into an unhelpful spiral, a state of moaning and submission.

Using the “inner garden” metaphor makes even more sense when we think of it in permaculture terms, like inputs (*what do we let into our minds, what do we feed it?*), resources (*family, friends, allies, the internet, books, courses*), patterns (*bad habits, good habits, relationships*), yield (*quality time*) and ethics:

- Earth care - a healthy inner garden=active, more efficient representative of Earth
- People care - better relationships, improved social environment
- Fair share - a cultivator of a healthier “inner garden” has more (presence, time, ideas) to give/share



On a personal level my goal is to redefine the relationship and interaction between me as a system and my surrounding systems, the systems I'm a part of (family, society, political and economical systems) as they have a direct impact on my mood, my health, my wellbeing and in turn my impact on these systems is dependant on the relationships with them.

Instead of letting bad news occupy my mind I'll try to focus on solutions (solutions thinking - 7 ways to think differently, [Looby Macnamara's video](#), [Delvin Solkinson's cards](#)), growth, inspiration, appreciation, rest! Swap the mind/less doing-nothing (watching TV or crappy shows, Facebook scrolling) for *mindful* doing-nothing (the act of allowing myself to do nothing and be present)!

REALITY



Reality and potential pitfalls/challenges on the way:

At first glance it might seem that hiding away from or dampening reality is the purpose of this design, but far from it!

As Joanna Macy says in her book, *Active Hope* (which I started reading as part of the implementation of this design), it's important to face reality, to be aware of what's going on in the world (and inside our world), to acknowledge our concerns, pains and fears.

It's also a good idea to be clear of one's own tendencies and patterns and to map out what and how could go wrong along that line.

These are the biggest pitfalls for me personally:



- falling back to apathy after this loses its novelty
- just giving up, because it's easy (I should design fail-safes for that, or have an accountability partner)
- I can't control all aspects of my environment, have to be able to deal with a certain level of negativity from parents, co-workers etc...
- I have to be mindful of not making this into a head-in-the-sand kind of avoidance of uncomfortable events - the point is not to be this happy-go-lucky type of person, completely ignoring worldly happenings, but to avoid being overwhelmed by all sorts of uncontrollable events and letting others decide what occupies my mind via unhelpful and toxic input - all this within reason of course

OPTIONS



This part will discuss turning the prevailing, mainstream **unconscious pessimism** (unconsciously letting toxic media be the main input of our everyday life, causing us to be pessimistic about the future) into **conscious optimism** (consciously controlling our media consumption, our input of knowledge in order to have a more optimistic view and thus a more participatory future).

This piece of art by permaculture artist [Brenna Quinlan](#) sums it up brilliantly:

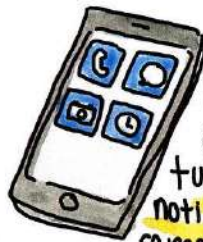


HOW TO STOP DOOMSCROLLING

Declare a screen free bedroom



read books before bed (remember books? They're rad)



Detox your devices - turn off notifications + remove apps



get an alarm clock, a watch, a calendar and a notebook so you use your phone less

Make a plan



Embrace phone-free habits



Decide on screen free hours (like after 8pm)

@brenna-quinlan

I aim not only to leave unwholesome activities but to *replace* them with wholesome ones. I know myself enough to know that simply cutting out bad habits don't work and the same goes for introducing good habits, so I have to be watchful.



A good example is using too much of Facebook/social media (or doomsscrolling as it is aptly called by Brenna). On a surface level I want to replace the “need” for scrolling through (at best) mind numbing content with scrolling through good, wholesome content, good news sites for example. Good news do exist, and there are lots of them!:)

But I believe an even better approach than replacing bad with good is *transforming*.

On a deeper level scrolling through facebook may give a sense of connectedness, belonging and community. None of these wholesome longings are achieved by my mindless scrolling through Facebook BUT it's not the tool it's how we use it! And Facebook is a tool, it can be a resource even. And as such, it can be harnessed for good if I use it mindfully, so here's what I came up with:

- to begin with I limit my time spent on FB/social media, by installing a site blocker extension on my browser (I use [Site blocker](#)) - this way I can only access FB in the allocated times, and if I try to open it (most of the time out of habit) it redirects me to one of the many good news platforms (like [Good News Network](#) for example)
- I've deleted the app from my phone/device
- reducing or altogether turning off notifications is also a good idea, this way I was able to rid my day of those small, seemingly urgent, but in reality not at all urgent interruptions hogging my full attention

- when I am on FB I deliberately look for educational content or I tend my permie group or I roam other permaculture groups or different groups related to my interests
- I follow people and pages that inspire me and/or people I can learn from
- I have unfollowed almost all my FB “friends” a long time ago, because I don’t really know most of them enough to constantly see (or let’s face it, care about) what they are up to every day. Well said by Bilbo Baggins in Lord of the rings: “I don’t know half of you half as well as I should like; and I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve.”
- this helps me to keep my wall full of mostly relevant and interesting things
- it can be a platform to keep in touch with family, to find interesting workshops and seminars, to learn new skills, to have conversations with experts (and other enthusiasts), but I have to reframe it in my mind to become that instead of the timewaster I often consider it

Other options, in the name of filtering or even transforming the mindless content into mindful content, may include but are not limited to:

- reducing and/or blocking harmful media input (e.g.: reducing facebook time by deleting it from devices and limiting its availability on the computer with browser plugins)
- allocating just 0.5-1 hour per day for social media (and even during this time, consciously look for inspiring content: permaculture articles, useful groups, etc.)
- using one’s indoors/internet time to learn something new, there are tons of amazing learning platforms, here are just a few of my favourites:
 - <https://www.coursera.org/> - a wonderful platform for free academic level courses. I highly recommend [Understanding plants part I.](#) and [part II.](#) - they are all about plant biology and how and what plants “feel”.
 - <https://mycologos.world/> - Mycology course I have set my sights on
 - <https://www.centreofexcellence.com/> - lots of affordable and interesting diploma courses in all subjects (e.g.: herbalist courses, holistic therapy courses, there’s a sustainable living, a foraging course and a forest bathing course even)
 - <https://www.lynda.com/> - a brilliant platform for learning “digital” skills (programming, design, photography, marketing, etc...)
 - <https://www.ctrlpaint.com/> - wonderful digital painting school for free
- consciously searching for good news, improvements, green projects, not just globally but locally as well

- consuming uplifting, **hopeful media**:
 - Good news media platforms I found and have been following:
 - <https://www.positive.news/>
 - <https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/>
 - Podcasts are a wonderful way to gain new knowledge, listen to interesting stories and perspectives:
 - [The Permaculture Podcast](#) - and [an episode about hope](#) very much related to this design
 - [Wander and Awe podcast](#)
 - [What the f*** is biodiversity?](#)
 - [Sustainable World Radio](#) - Permaculture and Ecology podcast
 - [Sow Edible Podcast](#)
 - [Mushroom Hour Podcast](#)
 - [Building a better world podcast](#) - a companion to the book 'Building a better world in your backyard instead of being angry at bad guys'
 - [The Simplicity Principle Podcast](#) - interesting tips and interviews on how to live a simpler life
 - [We won't die wondering podcast](#) - wonderfully curious, playful and uplifting series of interviews on life itself
 - Reading books/listening to audiobooks:
 - [From what is to what if](#) by Rob Hopkins, in [Audiobook format](#)
 - [Building a better World in your backyard](#) by Paul Wheaton and Shawn Klassen-Koop, also available as an [Audiobook](#)
 - [Active Hope](#) by Joanna Macy, also available as an [Audiobook](#)
 - Books by Looby Macnamara:
 - [7 ways to think differently](#)
 - [People and Permaculture](#)
 - [Cultural Emergence](#)
 - [Seeds of Hope](#) by Jane Goodall, and the [Audiobook version](#)
 - [Think like a Tree](#) by Sarah Spencer
 - [The Simplicity Principle](#) by Julia Hobsbawn, and the [Audiobook format](#)
 - [The natural health service: How Nature Can Mend Your Mind](#) by Isabel Hardman, and [the Audiobook](#)
 - [The Well Gardened Mind: Rediscovering Nature in the Modern World](#) by Sue Stuart-Smith, and [Audiobook](#)
 - [Humankind: A hopeful history](#) by Rutger Bregman, and the [Audiobook](#)
I really loved this one, it's methodically and completely debunking the mainstream notion that human nature is inherently evil. It brings many-many examples throughout history to prove that it isn't so.
 - [HumanKind: Changing the World One Small Act At a Time](#) by Brad Aronson, and the [Audiobook](#)
 - [A Paradise Built in Hell - The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster](#) by Rebecca Solnit

- [The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible](#) by Charles Eisenstein and its [Audiobook form](#)
 - [The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate](#) by Peter Wohlleben, [Audiobook](#)
 - [The Unselfish Spirit](#) by Mick Collins
 - [Embers of hope: Embracing Life in an age of ecological destruction and climate chaos](#) by Bonita Ford
- Watching films that have optimistic views, good practices, inspiring stories and people:
 - All David Attenborough films (especially recent works of his)
 - Tomorrow
 - 2040
 - The need to grow
 - Kiss the ground
- Youtube channels to follow and videos to watch for useful, uplifting content:
 - [Goldshaw Farm](#)
I love watching this guy's work. It's such a genuine and heartening content that's also quite educational.
 - [Back to Reality](#)
Another young couple, growers, communicating very relatable values with heartfelt honesty.
 - [The Weedy Garden](#)
 - [Green Renaissance](#)
Inspiring little documentaries. One of my favourites is [this one](#), a very relevant one.
 - This is a [short video essay](#) making a point about how human nature isn't all that bad after all.
- practising **GRATITUDE** - this is one of the most if not THE most transforming practice one can do, in my opinion, to handle the dread. Here's a [list of ways one can practice gratitude](#).



I've been keeping a gratitude journal for over 5 years now. Every evening, before bed, I write down 5 things I'm grateful for that day. It is a wonderful way to close and reflect on the day.

I just use pen and paper (or an actual journal/diary) and I write down

'Today I am grateful for:'

Then I follow up with those 5 things that can be *anything* lofty, like *'access to clean water, food and shelter'* or completely superficial, like *'winning a pound on a scratch ticket'*. They can be small things, like *'I got to sleep in'* and big things, like *'my family'*, vague things, like *'life itself'* or specific

things, like *'my tomato seedling survived the storm'*. Really anything that evokes the feeling of gratitude.

This has affected my day-to-day life, making me look for and savoring those moments of gratitude.

- contacting inspiring people, and the “my kind of people”
- cultivating wonder and awe
"Wonder and awe is experientially the antidote to existential dread." - quote from [this promo video](#) for the Wonder and Awe podcast.



For me right now the world of mycology and fungi is what fills me with wonder and awe. Fungi is such a fascinating and integrant part of our world, such an interesting life form.

An amazing documentary on the subject is [Fantastic fungi](#).

Equally fascinating to me is the cosmos itself. A youtube channel called [Cool worlds](#) does a really good job of evoking wonder and awe with an educational spin. One of my favourite videos from there is [this one](#).

- Meditation in any shape or form can help us process and face reality, be mindful, be kind or just be in a better mood in general
- Other ways to practice engaging, or rather re-engaging, with reality can be as small an act as commuting without being buried in one's phone, or listening to music. Washing the dishes without distractions, just being with the (often boring) feeling of washing up, may seem small and insignificant in the scheme of things, but it's a good small step in the direction of engaging with the world (baby steps, see in [Implementation](#))



To me meditation (when I have the [will](#) and/or the discipline to maintain a practice...) is a way to practice, in safety, letting the moment unfold, letting go of wanting to control every or any aspect of what's unfolding, accepting what is. This opens up so much room in the place of worry that gives me enough space from which I can creatively move on. Practicing this helps me to deal with the aforementioned dread in my everyday life.

- spending more time in nature, setting up hiking challenges
In my region we have several long distance hiking trails, but since the pandemic hit, no group hikes/performance hikes have been organised, but there are individual challenges on those trails than anyone can take, any time and if they are within the set timeframe,

they get a cool medal at the end:)



- **PLAY** - playing board games, sports, playing with the kids and/or pets. Any form of play can raise one's spirits I think, it's such an innate replenishing (and learning!) mechanism. Here are a few permaculture/nature related amazing board games:
 - [Food Forest Card Game](#)
 - [Permaculture Action Cards](#)
 - [Permaculture Design Elements Game](#)
 - [Miraposas](#)
 - [Wingspan](#)
 - [Tussie Mussie](#)
- moving - exercising, giving that boost of confidence to mind and body, making them more resilient!



I found [this great and simple training plan](#) that I follow (very) loosely. It had to be short for me to muster enough [will](#) to do it, especially during lockdowns. Beside it and the occasional game of squash I aim to go for walks which is *the* most underestimated form of exercise. Yes, it can be considered exercise! (except at times I don't want to call it that, because it takes away from its appeal:))

- AND gardening, of course!:) - being in contact with plants, with animals, with the earth and the grounding effect of gardening itself can be immensely replenishing.
“No matter how the harvest will turn out, whether or not there will be enough food to eat, in simply sowing seed and caring tenderly for plants under nature’s guidance there is joy.” - Masanobu Fukuoka, The One-Straw Revolution

WILL



Will is something that can be hard to muster even in the best of circumstances, let alone in hard times like these.

When we feel disempowered and helpless, we may have lost our jobs, we may even have lost loved ones recently or we're just simply weary. Weary of how governments are handling the situation, weary of not being able to see our loved ones in person, weary of everything being unpredictable, weary of being stuck, weary of the mainstream media constantly blurting negative content at us, about stuff we can't control, etc.

In a state like this it can be extremely hard to find motivation to change.

What may help is community, friendship, a partner we can take steps with, someone holding us accountable for following through, someone who can support us and whom we can support (reciprocity, feeling useful is an important part of a happier mindset!), be it online or offline.

IMPLEMENTATION



"Little deeds are like little seeds, they grow to flowers or to weeds." - Daniel D. Palmer

The motto of this section should be: **BABY STEPS!** - build it up step-by-step. Try things in small increments and see what sticks and what doesn't.

My experience is if I try to introduce too many "life changing" improvements I run out of motivation by week 2 and get back to the baseline life quality.

A message for future me, a lesson of which I have to be reminded over and over again, and a very important part of this section is **people care**, which starts with the "self" :

"**BE KIND TO YOURSELF!** - don't beat yourself up, don't judge yourself if you don't feel like exercising or you just want to sit back and watch a cheesy movie every once in a while. Treat yourself as you would a good friend if you saw them slip up (you'd be less harsh, less judgemental and more accepting, supporting, right?)."

The goal here is to *reduce* these possibly harmful patterns not to magically get rid of them overnight. Which brings me back to the most important point of this being a successful endeavor: *baby steps a.k.a. gradualness*.

An excellent guide for keeping us on track in a wholesome way, with the right values in front of us is another one of Brenna Quinlan's telling illustrations:



This can be used as a reminder or, as my permaculture mentor/tutor/friend/brother, Delvin suggested, it can even be applied as a small framework in and of itself.

NOTICE



This section is what provides the feedback loop. It's the evaluation part of the design where we check how we got along, what worked and what didn't.

I think it's important to approach this too as non-judgmentally as possible, almost matter-of-factly.

Here, I'll call the wonderful tool of '[Roses, thorns, buds](#)' method to help. This is to evaluate the past 3 months (Nov of 2020- Feb of 2021) of implementing (and tweaking) the design.



ROSE



Success

THORN



Challenge

BUD



Potential

Successes (Roses):

- I've maintained a morning routine of [stretches](#) and a short meditation for over a month. I think routines are invaluable in maintaining some momentum and structure during challenging times. I bookend my days with this morning routine and the evening routine of writing a gratitude journal.
- I managed to cut back on social media
- I have been consuming a lot of hopeful media, I've been seeing lots and lots of good news, reading/listening to books about human nature and how to mindfully handle climate change and

pandemic overwhelm.

I've been listening to loads of permie podcasts and podcasts about mushrooms.

- I've been more mindful about how I spend my free time and as a result I'm more sensitive to when I waste it
- I've been learning about plant cell biology online. Fascinating!
- Overall, I think I've been focussing on solutions more than on problems
- I've noticed my interpersonal communication is a lot less reactive and lot more conscious

Challenges (Thorns):

- Some of the foreseeable challenges are already listed under the [Reality](#) section
- Keeping up the spirits in these gloomy winter months
- Following lots of permaculture related media, I'm faced with the problems too
- The pandemic fatigue is building up not only in me but in everyone. People are just fed up with restrictions, lockdowns, curfews, not being able to see loved ones in person. Frictions are more likely to occur.
- My tendency to give myself a "day-off" all too often, which then wanes out wholesome habits
- During these winter months I haven't spent as much time outdoors as I would've liked.
- Managing my time was difficult at times, with some of the activities I picked up or done more of.
- I definitely am guilty of (so much for non-judgemental...) not devoting enough time to the all important act of celebration or [gaiety](#). The recognition and acknowledgement of small and big successes, of quiet moments, of growth or steadiness.

Next steps/Potential (Buds):

- My hope is that this design will have some boost during the months of spring when the weather gets warmer and nature gets greener and the air cleaner
- Routines, though useful, need to be shaken up every once in a while. I need to mix it up with a different kind of stretching and meditation session, because it's getting boring.
- this has been quite a solitary business so far, so I feel I could reach out to more people
 - maybe start a monthly chat group or guild in the Applied Permaculture Diploma facebook group - something to get our spirits up, share and celebrate our successes, learn

from our own and each other's mistakes, create a welcoming, non-judging atmosphere

- OR to join an existing guild perhaps
- attend Sangha nights and other Buddhist events via zoom
- reconnect with old friends

GAIETY



This part is indispensable for the purpose of this design, to raise spirits, to put oneself in a good mood, to have a more optimistic view in these confusing times.

To me gaiety means play, joy and celebration and not only is this the backbone of this design, it also stands here in the last step of the cycle as a reminder. A reminder to think back on what has changed, what's been achieved and **celebrate it!**

As important this part is, I'm terrible at it and celebration is probably what comes least naturally to me. My tendency is to skim over personal success as if it was supposed to happen, as if it is the norm, and I don't give it enough space and time to actually acknowledge that 'hey, I actually managed to do what I set out to do!'

The fact that I had to google 'ways to celebrate your success' is most telling of that shortcoming, but the results are actually really good:



- Take a breath (*ingeniously simple!*)
- Share the news with friends, family and colleagues
- Give your goals a one-day break
- Reflect on the path you took
- Write down your success and put it where you can see it every day (*loving this one!*)
- Sleep (*and this!*)
- Thank everyone who supported you (*this too! nice nod to the practice of being grateful, more on that under [Options](#)*)
- Accept and enjoy the compliments (*ooh, tough one for me*)
- Watch a favorite TV show or movie
- Support someone else in reaching his or her goal
- Cross it off your master list of goals

- Cheer for yourself
- Do something you enjoy but rarely have time to do
- Take a day off from work
- Whistle
- Go out for dinner (*once restrictions are lifted*)
- Write your success story to share in a newsletter or email to clients and colleagues
- Spend the day with your family
- Start a success journal (*why haven't I thought of that?*)
- Treat yourself to a day of rest and relaxation

I am yet to implement most of these, at least as acts of celebration. This is partly why a cyclical [framework like this](#) can be super-useful: with each iteration I get better at celebration too!

This part gives a boost to re-start the cycle, to set new [goals](#), face a new (hopefully more positive) [reality](#), weigh new [options](#) and think of new [implementations](#), [notice](#) what's happened and be [merry](#) about it.

Final thoughts

The main takeaway of this experience for me is that we **do** have control over how we see the world and what we do in it, both in the outer world and our inner worlds. The fact that we can apply (permaculture) design in such a direct way to our lives is a relief to me and it gives me hope.

Speaking of hope, as final thoughts let me quote Joanna Macy from her book, Active Hope:

“Active Hope is not wishful thinking. Active Hope is not waiting to be rescued by some savior. Active Hope is waking up to the beauty of life on whose behalf we can act.

We belong to this world. The web of life is calling us forth at this time. We've come a long way and are here to play our part. With Active Hope we realize that there are adventures in store, strengths to discover, and comrades to link arms with. Active Hope is a readiness to discover the strengths in ourselves and in others; a readiness to discover the reasons for hope and the occasions for love. A readiness to discover the size and strength of our hearts, our quickness of mind, our steadiness of purpose, our own authority, our love for life, the liveliness of our curiosity, the unsuspected deep well of patience and diligence, the keenness of our senses, and our capacity to lead. None of these can be discovered in an armchair or without risk.”

