

The Future Is Calling Us to Greatness

with Michael Dowd + 56 Experts



Permaculture as Right Relationship to Reality

with Peter Bane

Big ideas from this session:

- Why learning Nature's language, laws, and customs is our only way forward
- Permaculture as a regenerative (not merely sustainable) way thinking, feeling, and living
- Applying fundamental ecological principles to every arena of life

Michael: Well, Peter, thanks so much for being part of this conversation series, The Future is Calling Us to Greatness.

Peter: I'm glad to be here, Michael.

Michael: Well, Peter, we've known each other for what, 25 years or so. You have been an inspiration to me this entire time, ever since we met at Bioregional Congress, if I remember correctly.

Peter: That's right.

Michael: Yes. I've been inviting all of my guests in this series to help us get who you are. I don't want to assume that everybody that's listening to this will know of you and your work. This isn't a time to be bashful. Just share basically what you're best known for, what you're proudest of, what you're passionately committed to, and a little bit of how you got to where you are now.

Peter: Well, that's a tall order. Let me see if I can fill it. I'm a writer, an educator, a tree planter, a builder. For nearly 25 years I've been publishing Permaculture Activist, which is a small but significant magazine journal that comes out quarterly for movement dedicated to Earth repair and ethical design.

Our focus is what's going on in North America, so that gives it a pretty big brief. I also have authored a big book on permaculture. It came out in 2012, called *The Permaculture Handbook: Garden Farming for Town and Country*, which attempts to translate permaculture that grew out of an Australian experience originally into something that people in North America can make sense of and apply in a wide variety of situations.

Basically it's an attempt to restore the [02:13] economy and help create a place-based society, one that we're sadly or sorely in need of now. What else have I done in my life that's of note? I've taught many people how to do environmental design. I helped to cofound Earthaven Ecovillage in the mountains of North Carolina about the same time that you and I met.

Michael: Yes.

Peter: It's still going. You know a little bit about it. It's one of the most significant social experiments in the intentional communities movement. We did a lot of natural building there. Maybe that's a thumbnail of what I'm about.

Michael: That's great. You used a couple of phrases that I want you to go more deeply into. I love the idea of Earth repair, that idea of going beyond sort of living sustainably, which can sometimes be translated as continuing to sustain the damage that we're doing, to really restoration, to repair, to recovery. Say a little bit more about Earth repair and ethical design.

Peter: I think we have no real choice at this point going forward. Every environment has been damaged by humans. Even the remote ones have been polluted through the atmosphere and affected by global climate change. If we're to derive our living from nature, which is how we've always done it, by whatever means, we're going to have to reinvest in nature.

We're going to have to create new forms of natural capital, same old forms, planting trees, building soil, storing water, increasing biodiversity. Wherever we live is the best place we can begin that work, because it's the place we spend most time and where we have the most knowledge and the greatest capacity to manage.

That's a key strategy in permaculture work, which is to focus on the domestic economy, where people live, encourage them and show them how to grow food, catch water, harvest energy from the environment, treat their own waste, cycle materials, and support the growth of a locally based economy in society out of that.

Earth repair needs to take many forms. It can be as simple as returning the waste from your food stream to the place where the food is grown. If that's in your garden, it's very easy to do. Earth repair can mean, and should mean for a lot of us, planting trees. I've been planting trees this week, fruit trees in particular. I've planted about 500 trees this year, I'm happy to say.

Michael: That's great.

Peter: More of us need to do that, because that's probably one of the best ways that we can pull the too much carbon that's now in the atmosphere back out and put it down in the soil where it can actually do us a lot of good instead of harm.

Michael: Yes. Amen.

Peter: Then Earth repair is many things. Diverting water streams so that they nourish rather than damage. Capturing all bio mass and waste and returning it to soils. Changing the way we farm and produce food. Those are just a few of the big topics under that heading.

Michael: Yes. That's great. Well, I just want to go on record here to anybody listening to this that Peter was my permaculture teacher. I took a course in permaculture with Peter and Chuck Marsh and several others down at the farm in Tennessee I think in 1996, I believe it was.

Peter: Yes.

Michael: In many ways, I consider, as I'm sure you do, too, permaculture to be the essence of right relationship to reality. I've been preaching what I call the gospel of right relationship to reality, the good news that's only possible when we live in right relationship to what's inescapably real, and that means nature with a capital N.

Peter: We have been trying to say in as many ways people can get as possible that nature writes the rulebook, and we need to read it, learn from it, and then follow it. When I talk about ethical design or environmental design, I mean setting our relationship to nature back to life again in the sense of following the rules that nature shows us and demonstrates.

It's a very successful model. Nature doesn't damage environments. Or when damage occurs, it's swept up in the larger flow of transformation and evolution and is repaired by the process of sunlight falling on soil, water-nourishing plants. It's all quite well worked out. We just have been pretending because of our cultural story to be outside that rulebook, outside the world of nature, for quite some number of centuries now. There's a bill to pay on that one.

Michael: Yes. I should say. I've been calling it the great reckoning, that humanity has been out of right relationship to reality for a long time, but certainly in a major way ever since we had a mechanistic understanding of nature. We're thinking of nature as a complex mechanism, and God is the creative force outside nature.

Nature became desacrilized and God became trivialized. We've been treating nature as an it to be exploited by us rather than a vow to be honored and respected and related to

in a mutually enhancing way ever since. We're now about to experience the consequences of that, and it's not because some supernatural deity is pissed off at us and is going to punish us.

It's because we've been out of right relationship to nature, out of right relationship to reality, and there's a consequence. There's a cost to that.

Peter: Yes. Well, there doesn't have to be, although at this point things have moved along significantly down that track, so I'm afraid there will be more suffering. But we do know what that right relationship needs to look like. We do know nature's rules fairly well. What permaculture did when it popped the tent up on the world's scene 40 years ago was to take our understanding of nature's rules and translate them into memorable and simple language that anyone could learn and then apply.

We say lots of things, and this is the genius of Bill Mollison, who is one of our teachers, one of our elders and an author of the system of permaculture. Everything is mulch. This is sort of like recognizing the power of gravity and the force of life. Everything that lives dies. It falls to the ground. It decays. It then becomes food for something else.

That encompasses the whole law of return. We can't take things out of nature. We have to put them continuously back, and put them in the right place. Nature flourishes. We flourish. These are really quite simple, but we ignore them.

When I teach permaculture, I'm simply waking people back up to their inherent nature, to the fact that they belong in a living environment and a living world, that they have a place as caretakers, that they can be intelligent and helpful instead of wandering around blithely oblivious to what's going on around them.

It's really like taking the blinders off. People have that response often. "Wow, I see everything differently now." It's just that. You can go anywhere. We change the lenses in your glasses, so to speak. There's a whole world all around you that wants to reach out and engage.

Michael: Yes. Well, of the things—I completely agree. One of the things that I'm most attracted to and most grateful for about permaculture specifically is that it doesn't require any belief system. Somebody can be a Jew or a Muslim or a Buddhist or a Hindu or an atheist or a Christian or whatever and learn from nature's rulebook, nature's guidebook, practice those principles, live sustainably, live in right relationship to the air, water, soil, life of your region, and it doesn't require us to have the same beliefs.

Peter: No, not at all. It can be taught in any human language. It can be applied in any environmental situation. It doesn't require belief. It's essentially, what would you say, reality based, science based, empirical. That is, we can go out and test these rules. We can see that they work. We can prove it to ourselves here or on the other side of the planet.

You don't have to believe anything except your own eyes and your senses, the evidence that's right in front of you. That's all we ask people to believe in, is the things that they're already grounded in.

Michael: Yes. Yes. Amen. Well, one of the things that—I don't know if I shared this with you or not, but the first five or six years that Connie and I lived on the road—we've been on the road for 12 years now, traveling North America speaking in churches and colleges and what have you. The first five or six years we sold Bill Mollison's DVD.

Well, first it was videotape, and then the DVD, *The Global Gardener*. One of the things that a lot of people reported back inspiring about that was that he takes basically a half hour on four very different regions of the world and shows how permaculture can work in the deserts and in the jungles, basically, and in the urban and the temperate zones.

It's not a matter of doing the exact same things as having the same practices. Could you share a little bit about sort of the history of permaculture? For people who aren't familiar with permaculture—I mean, you've already been sharing some, but help us get a sense of where permaculture came from and what has been learned along the way in the last 35-40 years.

Peter: Well, it arose out of the great environmental awakening that began in the late '60s and '70s. It had its roots earlier. We could point to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as one of the first great pieces of literature of the movement. But by 1970, Earth Day was a phenomenon. By 1972, we had the publication of *The Report of the Club of Rome Limits to Growth*, which pointed to future problems of pollution and resource loss.

There was a whole stirring of awareness that the world was all connected. It was a time of great ferment. Bill Mollison was Australian, and David Holmgren, his coauthor. They were of different generations. David was young, a college student. Bill was middle aged and a lecturer in environmental psychology.

They put their heads together. In fact, David moved into Bill's household for a couple of years while they worked on the thesis that became *Permaculture One*. It was a time of social experimentation and exploration of different technologies. The world was a different place 40 years ago. They were seeing the crises that institutions had begotten and perpetuated, governments at the academy, these corporations.

These were not providing the answers that were needed to poverty and hunger and land degradation and pollution. Their idea was to take the science of ecology, the principles of the right relationship of nature, and make them into a series of stories and teaching lessons for ordinary people, who could then understand how to house themselves, grow food, capture

energy, clean water, and so on and so forth, take care of animals, plants, build communities, or nurture communities, and set those ideas loose in the world.

They did that beginning in 1978 with the publication of Permaculture One. Bill then two years later began traveling the world, as he says, one fat foot in front of the other, wherever people would pay him to show up and put him up and listen to him. He began teaching what became the Permaculture Design Course, the course you took with me 20-some years ago.

Michael: Yes.

Peter: Which I have taught now maybe 100 times to a couple of thousand students. The basic curriculum presents all of these major or basic arenas of life. That is, we all eat. We have to raise food. Where should we raise food? How should we do it? It comes out of the soil. It comes from plants and animals. What do we need to know about those? We live in buildings mostly.

How should they be designed to conserve and even generate energy? How do we want them so they're affordable and comfortable and economical? How should we design our settlements, our neighborhoods, our towns? All these things we present in two weeks, roughly. Sometimes this is taught over weekends.

Sometimes it's one day a month for 12 months. In any case, it's about 72 hours of instruction. That has now been done thousands of times all around the world. We have a hundred thousand activists of the sort that you and I may represent working with this knowledge to create for themselves and their communities and families a better way of life based on nature's rules, nature's proper relationships.

It's all over the world. We're in 100 countries. Permaculture has been in the United States since 1980. I'm a member of the board of Permaculture Institute of North America, which is looking to how the profession can gain greater awareness and public awareness and legitimacy and improve its standards of education, recognize excellence. It's sort of a thankless job, but somebody needs to do it at this point.

Michael: Well, that was going to be my next question, which is what do you see as the sort of next steps in terms of permaculture and permaculture design and just awareness about permaculture going to scale? Frankly, I don't know of anybody who has spoken poorly or bad about permaculture. It's more a matter of educating the masses. How do you see that happening? Or what steps do you think need . . .

Peter: Well, we're somewhere in the middle scales, and we haven't shown up as a mass phenomenon yet. Not to say that the word is not there in the New York Times. It has briefly. We are still not seen by millions and tens of millions of people. However, I do have the beginning of

a feeling that we're now beginning to gain some ground or traction, because there's starting to be pushback.

You know how they say about social change and new ideas. First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then they say they invented it themselves. We're somewhere in the fight process. There's getting to be pushback here and there. One of the things I think we need to do is make this part of best practices.

We need to get some authoritative figures on board talking about this as if only stupid people would ignore it. This is kind of what I think needs to happen, so we aren't losing ground at the same time we're ticking away at educating our future land stewards. I don't know what all is involved in that way, but part of my work with Permaculture Institute is adding a professional gloss to what we do so we can put initials after our names and say, "Hey, we have accomplished things that are worth noting."

It helps whenever there is new literature. You can put it in libraries. People can refer to it. It helps when we get some research dollars behind permaculture systems to prove that, yes, in fact chickens do control plum curculio in orchards better than chemicals.

Michael: Yes.

Peter: And you can eat the eggs.

Michael: Exactly.

Peter: Those kinds of things would help. I'm really tired of dealing with low level bureaucrats and people who never heard of this and are in positions of authorities and saying, "Well, no, chickens are illegal," or, "No, you can't farm in the city." Or, "No, front yard gardens don't conform to the law and order ordinance."

That's the sort of friction we're experiencing. We need to get beyond that. People need to get more excited and say, "Hey, this is for everybody."

Michael: Yes.

Peter: That's why I'm working with institutions. One of the things I've found appealing recently is to work with organized faith communities. In my case, I'm working with Catholic Sisters in Michigan and Indiana. I think what you're doing in speaking to churches and other communities already organized is the right way to go.

We don't have to reinvent the wheel. It's not necessary to form intentional communities. We need to go where people are already in communities and give them the good news that they can repair their landscapes and their towns and their economies.

Michael: Yes.

Peter: They've got the power in their own hands, and here's how to do it. That's what [21:05].

Michael: Yes. Well, it's interesting, you're reminding me of something that I had almost forgotten about. Just about four months ago, as Connie and I have been traveling across the country on this great march for climate action, there was—actually, I'm echoing somehow.

Peter: I'm hearing you fine.

Michael: Okay. At any rate, there was a place that were—yes, it's fine now. I forget where it was. It was someplace—oh, gosh, where was it? Iowa? I'm trying to remember. But somebody had a major permaculture—their entire front yard was an edible garden and a full permaculture designed—in fact, their backyard, too.

But the front yard was in violation of the local ordinance. Yet all the neighbors were in total support, and so nobody said or did anything against them, because they realized on some very deep level that they were really modeling what we're all going to have to do soon, which is build soil, compost, plant trees.

Peter: Yes, exactly. Cultivate the lawns.

Michael: Yes, exactly. Exactly.

Peter: Turn it into a garden. Start growing food and putting it up in the pantry. I wish that was the case. I mean, I know that's the case, and I know people are making the right choices in many situations. We are personally experiencing some of the pushback. We've been farming and trying to demonstrate farming outside Bloomington, Indiana.

Our county government, at the behest of a neighbor who didn't like the disorder of vegetables in the front yard, has been basically trying to put a hammer down on us around the way we are building and supporting our food growing operation. Without going into a lot of that, it's the kind of thing that shouldn't be happening, but is, and seemingly in an enlightened university community.

The forces of reaction are real. They exist. There's lots of pettiness, and there's lots of power tripping. It's a sad thing. We have to somehow rise above that.

Michael: Yes. Well, I'm aware of that challenge that you're dealing with, and I'm really sorry for that, because you're right. All that does is drain energy. One of the things, Peter, that you mentioned earlier is you used a phrase a couple of times, "restoring the domestic economy," or, "restoring the household economy."

A lot of people don't know what that means, and yet I think that's so vital for moving into a sustainable or life giving future. Say a little bit more about that.

Peter: Well, the word economy comes from the Greek *oikonomia*, and it means the regulation of the household or the home, the same word as ecology. We've been conditioned to think that economy is what appears in the business papers and has to do with the Dow Jones and all that other nonsense.

But the economy is rooted in nature, and the translators of nature are those skilled people living together in households who are in closest contact with nature. Now, our consumer way of life, our consumer based economy, has divorced many of us from the patterns that our ancestors lived by.

I'm not suggesting that we need to go back to the drudgery of the fourth century BC. However, we do need to take some greater responsibility for where our food, water, energy, and other resources come from, doing some of it ourselves, cooperating with others in our neighborhoods and in our communities to provide other parts of that, in that way reclaiming our control over our own destiny.

This is political autonomy, too, because when you can feed yourself and heat your home without depending on corporations or the government, then you have a greater ability to stand and say, "I want this, and I don't want that." I think a lot of us need to reclaim that moral high ground now. The domestic economy is my formulation—it's not my alone.

It comes out of the permaculture work, to refocus people's attention. If you don't grow any food, do you have any land? Even a tiny plot, you could be growing herbs or salads. You can begin to learn something about how plants work. If you have a little more ground, you can grow some foods that store, and then you can begin to preserve.

After the harvest, even if you don't grow food and can, you can learn to cook and eat out of local cycles of food, produce from the farmers market, from neighbors who have surpluses. You can can, freeze, dry, put food by. Then you create value, which is essentially sunlight and minerals out of the soil, almost free for the labor involved.

That's tradable. That becomes the basis of a local economy. Every time I put up a jar of jam, I'm like, "Oh, there's another \$5," although I'd rather have the can than the Lincoln.

It's like that. I see the honey that came from my beehives on the shelf is better than gold and lasting just about as long.

Michael: Yes, exactly.

Peter: It doesn't deteriorate. It's kind of a miracle. More people need to get in touch with that and in all the other resources and ways we can capture sunlight and turn it into value that we can then exchange, use, store, draw from. We have to recharge the batteries not only for nature, but for the real economy.

That means food in the pantry and firewood in the stack and a well-insulated house and relationships in good order with the neighbors. All those things are humans in the soil. We have to do that work so that we can reclaim our purchase on the future, reclaim our real freedom. People talk about freedom, but the freedom to live well in the world, to have a say about how our lives are ordered and regulated.

This is actually a lot of fun. I'm doing it right now and enjoying it immensely. It's a lot of work. People shouldn't be fooled.

Michael: Yes. Amen. Well, one of the things that Connie has been encouraging a lot of middle class people and some wealthy people that we are in contact with as we travel North America is that if they've got the land but they don't necessarily have the youth or the passion, there are plenty of young permaculturists who have a passion for applying permaculture principles that don't own land.

There's a partnership there. Invite the young people to work on some of your land and have some kind of a barter where you're giving them the space to work with. They do some work, and then you share in the fruit and the results.

Peter: Yes. Yes. I would like to see those kinds of relationships form and then deepen into real partnerships.

Michael: Yes.

Peter: I think the great fruitfulness comes in intergenerational connections. We've lost a lot of that. It used to exist in extended families and through tribal communities. Now we're all sort of in same age cohorts, in either retirement communities or college aged students all together or work groups and so forth.

We need more young and old cooperating. The old have privilege. They have wealth. They have land. They have resources. The young have energy. It's a natural marriage,

but it's not easy. In my writing I've said those who are well off, who have privilege, middle aged, middle class, upper class, need to reach out and help to form those.

It's easier for them to give a hand out or hand up or welcome in to a young person or a young couple and say, "Hey, we'd like to work with you. What can we do together," and see that turn into success. People in the farming business have been onto this. The average age of farmers in the US is something like 62.

Farmers are retiring with no one to follow in their steps, no children who want to farm. Now the big thing is finding young farmers coming up, to pair them with retiring farmers and figure out how the equity transfer happens fairly to everyone. We need a lot more of that, that kind of let's build community together for the long haul. That's where the real joy and satisfaction comes from.

Michael: Yes. Amen. Amen. Well, just beginning to wind down. Anything you'd like to say? Obviously there are a lot of permaculture principles. Any of the most important sort of memes or memorable permaculture principles that you'd like to share?

Peter: Well, we've been talking in some ways about one of my favorites, which is number two. It's called catch and store energy. That takes a lot of forms. I think if we can tune ourselves in to the flows of energy in the natural world all around us, see how sunlight is transformed by plants and animals, captured by the soil, by structures, by rocks, by everything held in by the atmosphere, and begin to use those, harvest those flows, store them in ways.

We can begin to recharge the battery of the living world. There's no lack of sunlight. There's plenty of energy coming into planet Earth, but we've been running down the battery of stored energy by depleting carbon out of the soil, burning it up out of fossil stores, putting it in the atmosphere, eroding landscapes, cutting forests, degrading woodlands, and in many other ways losing biodiversity.

We need to reverse that. That's the job really for everyone right now. We need to plant forests, build soil, store water, and save seed in all other forms of genetic life and information. Those are the four pillars of our future home.

Michael: Say those again.

Peter: Yes. We need to plant forests, build soil, store water, and save seed. By seed, I mean all forms of genetic information in nature, conserving breeds of animals, for example, and biodiversity. Those four things are the keys to Earth repair and to a livable future on the planet. Permaculture has many strategies and approaches for doing all those things, but everyone can do those things where they live with the means they have at present.

Michael: That's great.

Peter: What's lacking usually is a little information.

Michael: Yes. That's great. Well, Peter, there's one question, final question, that Connie has asked me to ask all my guests in this series, and it's sort of off the wall, but it's also fun. It has brought up some really interesting responses, because I purposely don't tell anybody ahead of time.

That is, if you had a chance to invite any three people in history to a dinner party where all four of you are together, or one on one where you have a beer or a glass of wine or you go for a hike or whatever, with any three people in human history, who would those three people be and why would you choose them?

Peter: Good question. Oh, my Lord. Three. Three all at once?

Michael: Yes. All at once or one on one, either one.

Peter: Well, I'd really love to have a late night supper with Walt Whitman.

Michael: Oh, yes.

Peter: The man inspires me so much with his love of life. He was a great soul and a visionary for this democratic world that we hope to live in. We're still hoping to live in it. Yes, well, I had the privilege of meeting Ivan Illich, but I'd really love to spend another bit of quality time with him. He's gone now, but if I could bring him back, he's another one I'd want to have a beer with or a glass of wine or a cup of tea and see what he thinks of things now and where the world is going.

He isn't much of a well-known figure, but I think that the country missed an opportunity when FDR decided to die in '45 instead of '43. We got Truman instead of Henry Wallace. I'd like to go back and talk to Henry Wallace, who was Secretary of Agriculture and then Vice President and one of the few progressive voices to actually get into national government in the last century. There you go. My choices.

Michael: That's great. That's great. Anything you'd like to say about yours and Keith's work? We didn't even mention Keith Johnson, your partner in Patterns For Abundance.

Peter: Yes. People can find out a little bit more about us at PermacultureActivist.net. We do design and consulting work together. Right now we're trying to repair a 10-acre piece of property up in Michigan, and, among other things, help people, clients, all over the Midwest.

Whatever our public life is about is mostly there online. Keith is a longtime gardener, and he's a great inspiration to me. One of the things that keeps me grounded is the work we've been able to do to bring abundance out of the world, out of the soil. I just wish that for everyone else.

Michael: Amen.

Peter: I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you tonight.

Michael: Peter, I'm just so grateful that you were able to make this time. I love you, and I love Keith. I just wish you the best. I look forward to seeing you again hopefully in May.

Peter: That will be wonderful. We look forward to it, too. You have safe travels until then, Michael.

Michael: Okay.

Peter: Give our love to Connie, too.

Michael: Will do.

Peter: We're going to be taking care of some trees for her.

Michael: Yes. Good. That's great. Thanks. Okay. Bye bye.

Peter: Bye bye.

Michael: Bye bye.

