



## 25. CHANGING HABITS FOR SELF-RELIANCE AND RESILIENCE

To take advantage of the patterns described in *Ownership and living arrangements*, we need to think about an issue even closer to home: our personal habits of consumption and work. This requires a strong grasp of the real psychological drivers behind what we do and how we can apply the retrofitting process to our own habits, discarding those that are no longer fit for purpose,

and being proactive about cultivating processes that will build self-reliance and resilience. We need to do this all with a sense of adventure and fun, rather than guilt or desperation as well as recognising that some changes require us to take responsibility for things that we may have previously outsourced to others or ‘the system’.

One of the best resources for helping people through the psychological process of change is Looby Macnamara's *People & Permaculture: caring and designing for ourselves, each other and the planet* (2012). Macnamara encourages us to consciously redesign our lives using permaculture principles and strategies. She provides guidance on embracing change, recognising existing patterns and creating new ones, and identifying and dealing with our own psychological blockages, all essential factors in creating a more resilient life.

Being more self-reliant and resilient is like starting a small business: it involves research, and careful and clear decision making with acknowledged risks and threats to navigate. A lot of this territory is explored in the following chapters especially Chapter 27, *Creating your own livelihood*, and the final chapter, *Decision making, interpersonal relations and conflict resolution*. In this chapter I tackle psychological issues and grapple with a few potentially explosive ones – hopefully without getting into too much deep water and mud.

## HAIR SHIRTS AND FRUGAL HEDONISM

The assumption that people can and will easily change their behaviour once economic and social conditions change is only partly true. I have long argued<sup>1</sup> that most people are addicted to commuting, for example, just as they are addicted to shopping, television, mobile phones or social media. In the same way that drug or alcohol addicts persist with the habit long after the downsides have exceeded the benefits, many people may continue to commute to work, go shopping, watch television, use their mobile phones or follow Facebook long after energy descent scenarios have reduced the benefits and increased the dysfunction and resulting pain.

These or other socially reinforced habits may not appear to be real addictions while everyone willingly or reluctantly gets their 'fix' in a socially acceptable way. However, if natural disaster, financial difficulties or societal crisis cuts off the 'supply' then the resulting stress is as much psychological as it is practical. The two are intertwined, in much the same way as the psychological and physiological

reactions of a drug addict dealing with 'cold turkey' of rapid withdrawal. Road rage of drivers during fuel shortages is an example of surprisingly dysfunctional behaviour that can emerge when normal and everyday habits are interrupted.

People already combining voluntary simplicity with permaculture self-reliance know it is possible to enjoy living a lower impact life while earning less money and remaining free of debt. But many people can find this message threatening, viewing it as green ideology trying to enforce a 'hair shirt'<sup>2</sup> existence on everyone. While my *Future Scenarios* work, and even the concept of energy descent, does at least suggest the possibility of 'hair shirt' futures, Annie Raser-Rowland with Adam Grubb in *The Art of Frugal Hedonism* (2016) distill their experience and observation of how to live better whilst consuming less without any need for ideological baggage full of hair shirts. But even this delightful and light-hearted set of tips would be threatening to some readers if they thought the authors were suggesting people living conventional consumer lives had been conned into a distasteful existence, or even worse, that they are hopeless addicts. Raser-Rowland and Grubb are not preaching, but you need only to be enjoying living differently for some folks to find your way of life a threat.

## HOME-BASED WORK

Our forebears for thousands of years spent most of their days within walking distance of home. Before that, our nomadic ancestors moved deliberately, but slowly, across the landscape following seasonal cycles. In one human lifetime, the extraction of more than half the world's reserves of oil have made commuting the default way of life for more than a billion people.

This travelling back and forth each day over large distances to paid work, and an increasing list of other activities, has no future in a world of energy descent. Although travel and trade will remain important human activities in the future, without cheap, reliable, concentrated and convenient energy, it makes sense to do as much as possible without moving people or stuff.



Michi Pusswald works from home maintaining the large number of bikes used by 'The Hood' while prototyping advanced electric assist cargo bikes, Hibi Farm, Heidelberg West, Melbourne.

Several novel factors increase the opportunities for home-based work:

- information and communications technology
- surplus space in large houses which can be used as home offices and workshops
- miniaturisation of tools and equipment for manufacturing in home workshops
- a reduction in secure full-time work, and increased opportunities for part-time, home, and internet-based work.

Economic contraction will accelerate these processes. Those who are practically prepared to work from home will be much more psychologically resilient in energy descent futures.

One of the most powerful behavioural shifts that permaculture retrofitters make is from a commuting lifestyle to a home-based one. Saving the time and money involved in commuting to another location most days is a huge gain in personal productivity with various benefits including:

- more efficient and lower cost lunch, drinks, clothes and consumables

- more efficient operation of passive solar houses, wood stoves and other facilities
- interaction with other family members, animals and neighbours
- better use of capital assets in the home that almost everywhere are underused
- improved home security.

For many decades, advocating home-based living was associated with social conservatives trying to stop women from choosing a career instead of the care of a household. These days books like *Radical Homemakers* (Hayes 2011) and photo blogs like Kat Lavers<sup>3</sup> document the increasing numbers of younger women and men for whom home-based living and work is empowering.

1. See Holmgren (1994) 'Development aid for the industrialised north; turning an idea on its head' in Holmgren (2018).
2. A garment of rough cloth made from goats' hair and worn in the form of a shirt or as a girdle around the loins, by way of religious mortification and penance in the Middle Ages.
3. Sustainability and permaculture educator Kat Lavers documents her serious self-reliance work at The Plummery at [instagram.com/kat.lavers](https://www.instagram.com/kat.lavers).

As someone who consciously decided to live this way in my youth, I think it was the most important strategic decision I have made, contributing more than any other factor to a rich and rewarding life, while earning less than a taxable income most years.

I made this decision at the age of 18 in a year spent travelling around Australia. During a temporary working interlude with a long-distance commute across Sydney, I was on the train in Central Station looking across several platforms of trains full of commuters, mostly reading the *Sydney Morning Herald*. I declared to myself that I would never be one of them (both in sense of commuting and daily readers of the newspaper). Today the commuters might be on their iPhones, but otherwise the habit remains unchanged despite the existence of technology that could make the daily commute redundant.

## COMMUTING AS HABITUAL BEHAVIOUR

Many people claim they would love to stop commuting, but too many obstacles stand in their way. Some of the most powerful include:

- the need to pay off debt, demanding full-time work
- employer and peer expectations to show up each day.

The number of employees doing some work from home has been stable for a decade and only one-third of these do so with formal approval from their employers.<sup>4</sup>

Although most people see these impediments as largely external to themselves, powerful psychological drivers may also be part of personal identity. Many adults considering these issues today were driven to childcare five days a week, followed by commuting to school for another twelve years. It's not surprising that the idea of spending most days of the week in one place seems strange. The need to feel part of the wider

society, by going somewhere each day, can act as a 'carrot' drawing people into commuting, while the need to escape from children and partners can act as a 'stick', driving workers out of the home.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL TRANSITION TO WORKING FROM HOME

In my discussion of the 'Work/life balance matrix' (page 54), I explored how the four quadrants ('Profit and loss', 'Consumer heaven', 'Permaculture productivity' and 'Voluntary simplicity') are segregated in conventional lifestyles. Working from home naturally breaks the segregation created by commuting.

Avoiding an over-integrated mishmash of work and family life can be an issue for many making the transition to greater self and collective reliance. Sometimes we need established work patterns with time and even physical boundaries. Having a separate office, or even a backyard bungalow or shed, as the place of 'work' can help with that process. At the extreme, putting on specific work clothing can help create the psychologically distinctive experience of being 'at work'.

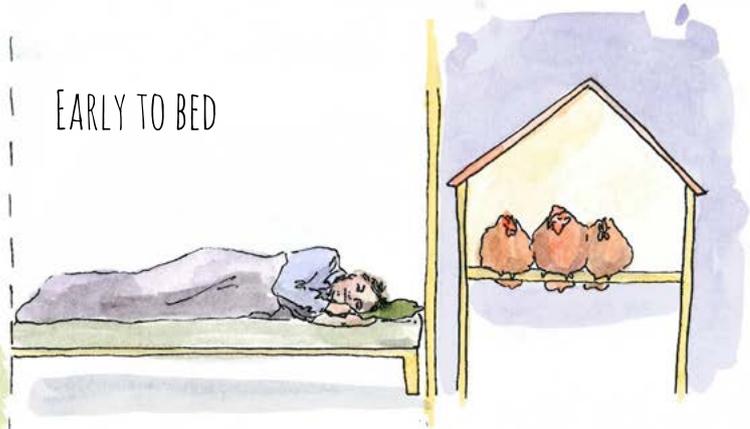
While we all need separation from family and home distractions, taking breaks is just as important, especially if you're self-employed or doing self-directed contract work. Working at home provides lots of opportunities to take a break from the desk, to be productive stoking the fire, opening blinds, letting out the chooks, harvesting salad from the garden and preparing and eating meals.

Going for longer walks, talking to neighbours and other activities that connect to the community can overcome feelings of isolation typically associated with suburbia. Living within bicycling (if not walking) distance from social interaction is an advantage. As more people live this way, the problems of perceived isolation will reduce. Therefore, living in an area where a critical mass of home-based residents already exists makes the transition easier.

EARLY TO RISE...



EARLY TO BED



## DAYTIME LIFESTYLE AND SEASONAL SLEEPING PATTERNS



Shifting to a daytime lifestyle from one of long evenings and late starts is a less dramatic but very beneficial behavioural retrofit. The transition from party-going adolescence and student years to full-time work and family responsibilities tends to force such a change to some degree, but many people continue to regard getting up late and going to bed late as a more desirable way to live, if and when they can.

Getting up with the sun keeps us more in tune with nature and reduces energy consumption for lighting and heating in winter. In summer, it gives you more hours to work outside before it gets too hot.

One of the most significant factors in this shift is avoiding computers and TV at night before going to bed. Evidence suggests<sup>5</sup> that night exposure to the light from screens increases the chances of a poor night's sleep. Sleeping well is a key element of a healthy, productive and long life.

## MANAGING HABITS AND ADDICTIONS



For many adults struggling with addictive behaviours, the arrival of children becomes the motivation for efforts at self-control. This transition from extended and indulgent adolescence to responsible parenthood is a classic pattern that is happening later in life in most affluent countries.

Older first-time parents generally have greater maturity and worldly experience to apply to this difficult transition; however, they often have long-established habits and addictions that they don't want to pass on to their children. For those focused on retrofitting their behaviour for energy descent futures, the list of habits worth dumping can be quite long.<sup>6</sup>

If you want to reduce or eliminate a psychological dependence or habit that is undermining self-reliance and resilience, experience and research suggest it is helpful to:

- be aware that the habit is not serving you well, even if society accepts the behaviour as normal
- recognise the conditions that contributed to the habit without blaming others or society for your problem<sup>7</sup>

4. See Dockery & Bawa (2014) 'Is working from home good work or bad work? Evidence from Australian employees.' Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre Working Paper 14/2, Perth: Curtin University; available from [melbourneinstitute.com](http://melbourneinstitute.com) or [retrosuburbia.com/book/25-4](http://retrosuburbia.com/book/25-4).

5. See this informative post on good sleeping habits, showing how serotonin and melatonin production is affected by artificial light: Ballachey (2014) 'Serotonin, melatonin, and your circadian rhythm' at [sustainablebalance.ca](http://sustainablebalance.ca) or [retrosuburbia.com/book/25-5](http://retrosuburbia.com/book/25-5).

6. While addiction is a serious business, Raser-Rowland & Grubb's (2016) light-hearted tips on how to manage the tendencies we all have to dysfunctional indulgence and how to replace them with functional indulgence is the best thinking and writing on this subject that I have read.

7. It doesn't matter whether the contributing factors were dysfunctional parents or greedy corporations, attributing blame to others disempowers one's own ability to change.



*Cargo bikes: bicycle activism often elicits antagonistic responses from drivers with a sense of entitlement, indicative of an addiction to transit unimpeded by slower road users, Tree Elbow.*

- recognise the underlying need that the habit is meeting and explore more benign ways to meet that need
- consider the viability of managing the addiction or defusing its power back to a 'want' rather than the need for total abstinence<sup>8</sup>
- avoid or reduce time spent in the company of fellow addicts who don't acknowledge the problem
- avoid exposure to advertising that reinforces the habit<sup>9</sup>
- be aware of triggers that break down resistance to the habit<sup>10</sup>
- associate with ex-addicts who have made some progress or have succeeded in kicking the habit
- monitor and measure your behaviour to reinforce achievement milestones and avoid self-deception
- have accountability meetings with partners or others who can provide useful feedback
- avoid the temptation to encourage others to share in the habit.

Addicts usually feel more comfortable when others share their addiction. The grandmother giving sweets behind the backs of disapproving parents or the father sharing 'quality time' with kids watching his favourite program on telly illustrate the same psychological drivers that give the alcoholic or drug addict a warm glow when someone else begins to share their pleasure (and pain).

Media technologies create difficult-to-manage habits that take us away from direct unmediated relationships with people and nature. If you are aiming to retrofit your behaviour through voluntary simplicity, getting control of these habits is as important as dealing with pharmacological addictions to alcohol, caffeine, sugar and other drugs. The guidelines for limiting media technologies listed in Chapter 30, *Rearing self-reliant and resilient children*, are generally relevant to self-control by adults too.

## ESTABLISHING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

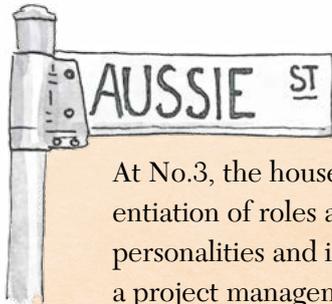


More people living together in a household is more efficient, with more functions reclaimed from the monetary economy through greater household self-reliance. Some specialisation of roles in partnerships, families and housemate relationships facilitates this process further. While not pursuing specialisation to a degree that disempowers and suppresses individual creativity, having clear roles and responsibilities is not unique to workplaces in the monetary economy. Differentiation of household roles offers increased efficiency as well as a greater sense of interdependence that bonds the household together through emotional ups and downs. This reflects the pattern in nature where bonds of interdependence between species underlie and stabilise the functioning of ecosystems. When everyone has the same skills, dispositions and needs, human relationships tend to default into competition and conflict.

With greater self-reliance we come face to face with our greater dependency on other members of our households and immediate community. Very often couples and households with decades of experience of self-reliance will have very clear domains. One person may assist or provide back-up, but never expect to have an equal say on decisions in that particular subject area or function.

Household tasks and areas of responsibility may be determined in many different ways. They may

fall along traditional gender lines, may develop as a result of existing skills and interests, or be determined by age and physical capabilities – more often than not it will be a combination of all of these.



At No.3, the household has a clear differentiation of roles according to individuals' personalities and interests. Andrea, with a project management background, takes the lead in planning and organising retrofits and other changes. Ian is the big picture philosopher; his university lecturer role provides most of the monetary income for the household. Gareth looks after the technical side of things, and is the 'doer', establishing and maintaining projects.

Finding the right degree and range of interdependences that keep the system stable and operating efficiently whilst maintaining the flexibility needed to cope with stress and change is a balancing act.

Arranging the household so that all members share equally in mundane household chores as well as the fun, challenging and empowering activities is

a reasonable goal, which having established roles and responsibilities can facilitate. For example, if one person is primarily responsible for the house and another is primarily responsible for the garden, then both will have a mix of routine chores and more interesting planning, decision-making and new projects.

When learning new skills and exploring new ways of living, we all need space to experiment to find our roles. This is especially so for children, who need both a diversity of role models and opportunities created by vacant niches for them to try their hand at (see Chapter 30). For most adults, creating a more self-reliant household is also a steep learning curve, so it's not always possible to immediately decide who takes what role. Everyone needs to experiment with trying new things to discover natural preferences and capabilities, as well as recognise where we are not so inclined or capable!

8. The solution here will vary depending on a person's general tendency to addictive behaviours and the severity of the particular addiction.
9. Research shows that advertising in the background without conscious attention is most effective at embedding the message; see for instance Heath (2016) 'How advertisers seduce our subconscious' at [theconversation.com](http://theconversation.com) or [retrosuburbia.com/book/25-9](http://retrosuburbia.com/book/25-9).
10. Most people become more vulnerable to addictive habits later in the day when they are tired and relaxing (a reward for being disciplined during the day).

## PLANT, ANIMAL, TECHNOLOGY AND PEOPLE PEOPLE

One of the frameworks I use in permaculture design consultancy is to think about how a client's personal skills and disposition place them in one or more of four pigeonholes:

- those with enthusiasm for and knowledge of plants
- those with empathy and ability with animals
- those with comfort and confidence in navigating and maintaining the built environment and physical technologies
- those with particular ability and enjoyment in connecting and relating to people.

It is possible to shape a permaculture design to avoid dependence on a particular skill or disposition, but households that can collectively cover these four bases are probably more likely to develop flourishing permaculture systems than those with greater depth of skill confined to one or two.

This simple framework can be applied beyond design to help in identifying household strengths, weaknesses and passions whilst evolving or swapping roles and responsibilities.



Woody, 4 year old boy, in a dress using a smoothing plane.

## THE GENDER QUESTION

One obvious ‘elephant in the room’ question is the extent to which household roles could be gendered. As an older white male of some privilege and reputation, my perspective is unavoidably subjective. However, I feel there is still value in sharing my decades of observation on the intersection between the ideals of gender equity and those of household self-reliance. My hope is that these observations will help people navigate this tricky territory in cooperative ways that celebrate a diversity of solutions. Even though I understand there might be reasons to do so, to ignore gender as one of the patterns shaping retrosuburbia would be intellectually dishonest.

My views have been shaped by being raised by a feminist of the Second World War generation and full participation in the counter-culture revolution of the 1970s, as well as by the ecological understandings that underpin permaculture. Most importantly, my views have been informed and shaped by my life partner Su Dennett who I partially acknowledged with these words in *Permaculture: principles and pathways beyond sustainability* (2002):

*In the early days of our relationship it was frustrating to us that because Su was not prominent in the ‘important’ activities of permaculture teaching, writing and public speaking, she was seen as a follower implementing my ideas. Ironically this view often came from women who were both permaculturists and feminists. Su’s commitment and energy in pursuing a low-impact simple lifestyle have been a constant source of renewal of my own commitment to voluntary frugality as an empowering pathway adapted to ecological realities.*

In the years since that was written Su has exercised great influence by mentoring and inspiring many young women and men in the power of domesticity.

The industrialised world<sup>11</sup> broke the bonds of the gendered world, elevated traditional male roles and devalued traditional female roles to a far greater degree than any traditional patriarchal society.<sup>12</sup> Technological society and its ways of working are the unbalanced overgrowth of the traditional masculine mind and gender. Men and women alike are both embedded in this system that may look increasingly gender-neutral but continues to accelerate most of the problems created by this domination of the ‘masculine’ over the ‘feminine’ part of ourselves.

*Venie Holmgren unloading mulch at her bush property, Wynham, NSW, 1991.*



The mass movement of women into the workforce has allowed access to status and economic autonomy, but a new generation of feminists<sup>13</sup> are questioning the balance of gains and losses. Women's participation in the 'workplace' accelerated economic growth but also contributed to the collapse of the household economy.

Beginning in the 1970s, the recognition of the potential for a gender-fluid world and self-sufficiency has resulted in home husbands, openly gay and lesbian couples, communes and every other living arrangement imaginable – and provides some insights into what might be workable in energy descent futures with revitalised household economies.

In larger communal households, the diversity of people and their interests and skills can blur any tendency for roles to be gendered 'hers and his'. On the other hand, it is my observation that many self-reliant couples gradually divide their roles and responsibilities along what are traditionally regarded as 'gendered' lines, even if there are many examples of reversed and mixed roles. How much of this falling back into these roles is nurture (socially reinforced) and how much is nature (hard-wired by genetics) is far from clear.<sup>15</sup>

In some cases, the root of the delineation is obvious: nothing makes the average bloke feel like a second-class parent as much as trying to provide a nipple to a crying infant missing mum's breast. In other cases it is less so: -

- Does the fact that adults have more trust in leaving a baby with a teenage girl than a teenage boy reflect a real, innate female tendency for diffuse awareness and multi-tasking that can be useful in childcare, or does it just reflect self-reinforcing gender stereotypes?
- Are women less likely to have the upper body strength for splitting wood, making it potentially more effective for a man to do it, or does a man often find these tasks more approachable simply because of a culturally influenced self-image? Or is it that many women have never been expected to do such

physically demanding tasks and therefore may have never developed the required strength?

- Is the saying about having a 'bloke's look' (in reference to finding missing things around the house) a recognition of excessively-focussed male minds less open to diffuse awareness, or just a way of ensuring (perhaps unconsciously) that women continue to keep track of things?
- Is the rare combination of a diagnostic mind, acceptance of grease and awkward working positions, the occasional need for brute force and a fascination with power that makes a good car mechanic inherently more masculine or does it reflect generations of social reinforcement?

At the personal level, energy descent will force an exploration of novel roles and responsibilities and a consolidation around what we already do best. Whether that turns out to be more gendered or less so, it is key that we recognise that different roles are equally important.

Both the classic masculine and feminine roles will be needed in retrosuburban self-reliance, but I believe that retrofitting the Built, Biological and Behavioural fields will require a stronger emphasis on traditionally female maintenance tasks and less on traditionally male project-orientated tasks. Even the very concept of retrofitting suggests incremental change and adaptation rather than bold new projects. Once the retrofit of the physical environment and its subsystems is established, most of the time, the rhythmic and regular engagement in the biological and behavioural fields will be crucial to a productive and harmonious household.

11. Which evolved almost exclusively from fields that were originally men's business in pre-industrial societies.
12. See Illich (1982) 'Vernacular Gender' Alternatives 8:381–448 for a history of this transition from a gendered to a genderless world.
13. For example, Hayes (2011).
14. Documented in Holmgren (1992) and Venie Holmgren (1995).
15. Although note that the field of epigenetics has so blurred the boundary between nature and nurture that it makes much of the debate meaningless: genetics is more plastic than we think, and social conditioning can be so deep that simply deciding to ignore or overturn it does not necessarily work.

Su and I have quite specific roles at Melliodora, which have developed over many years. As an 'animal person' (see text box), Su is in charge of the goats, poultry and bees. As a plant and technology person, I have greater roles in the garden and on building and infrastructure projects. Although our role divisions are partially due to individual tendencies and interests, some are due to physical characteristics – for instance Su does the milking both because she is an animal person and because she has smaller fingers, making milking a goat with small teats physically easier.

Many of our roles fall along traditional gender lines: whilst I tend to build, Su manages the house – in particular the kitchen and food supplies. As we have developed our specific roles I have found myself giving up some of my previous interests such as sewing (to the point where I ask Su to sew on a button for me!) and baking. Likewise, although Su enjoys the physical aspects of building, her skills in the kitchen mean that providing meals is often more important to building projects than the labour she can offer. There have been some notable exceptions however – whilst physically building our house, I was also parenting a toddler on the building site (see *Evaluating risk* on page 460)

In the early years of project development, my skills and expertise were more prominent in designing, building and establishing the physical systems, whilst Su's skills and expertise at keeping the household running and everyone fed were critical but less obvious. As established daily and seasonal patterns have evolved over the years, there has been a wider canvas for Su's expertise in household management. Su's activities are mostly focused on the rhythmic patterns of daily life, but include managing a community food processing, bulk purchase and distribution system that has evolved organically from her domestic routines. My input continues to include a degree of project work, such as devising and implementing new built or biological systems, but maintenance and rhythmic cycles have gradually come to dominate my work as well.

A proportion of the more physical tasks at Melliodora are now the domain of younger volunteers and interns. More and more I find myself at the desk writing rather than undertaking physical activities outside.



*Author with partner Su reflecting the synergies of their respective passions and areas of responsibility at Melliodora, as well as celebrating the announcement of their partnership with Nick and Kirsten of Milkwood Permaculture.*

The experiences, skills and disposition of modern people pursuing self-reliance are so varied that it isn't possible (or desirable) to predict who might do what work. The following points highlight issues to be aware of as roles and responsibilities evolve:

- After generations of affluent consumerism in Australia, women may no longer have a traditional domestic skill-set any more than men are capable of fixing a leaking tap or splitting wood.
- As traditional self-reliance skills have become scarce, their perceived value by prospective partners interested in self-reliance rises.
- Although there are now more women with traditional male self-reliance skills and vice versa, the total scarcity of these skills overall means those who have highly developed self-reliant skills traditionally associated with the opposite sex will often find a complementary skill set in someone of their own sex.
- Larger extended family and shared households provide more diverse skill set combinations and opportunities to explore different roles without needing to fall back into gendered division. Consequently children are exposed to more diverse role models than in nuclear family households.

The early stages of energy descent are likely to take away most of the prestige of paid work while the domain of the household will be elevated in importance. This transition might be difficult for most people, but it could prove harder for men, given that they've had more generations to become strongly wedded to identities shaped around paid work. Women, on the other hand, might emerge as the natural leaders in the rediscovery of the importance of the household domain.

In all imaginable energy descent futures, a return to more specialised household roles seems likely. We should use the insights and achievements of feminism and the diversity of gender identification to avoid a return to a patriarchal gendered world, while not being dogmatically resistant to the possibility that some of that specialisation may fall along traditional gendered lines – as long as there is a balance of value and power.

## MULTI-TASKING

One of the gender generalisations that many people recognise is the tendency for women to be better at multi-tasking than men. In any traditional society, it was an essential survival skill for a mother with a baby. Working on productive tasks while maintaining awareness of the infant's moves and moods and being prepared to change track at any moment were non-negotiable realities. Men focused on the development and completion of 'projects' tended to clock on and off long before factory processes regulated the workflow. Hunting was a high-energy task requiring one hundred percent focus to be effective. In between times, men in many traditional societies may have appeared indolent, or were engaged in political or spiritual ponderings.

School and work, let alone lifetime careers have, over several generations, increasingly moulded women to the traditionally masculine emphasis on focused work rather than multi-tasking. For modern women and men seeking to restart the household economy to reduce their dependence on work in the monetary economy, learning to be

*Multi-tasking with diffuse awareness; Kunie Yoshimoto in the kitchen with Sen and Kai in front of the Gourmet Cooker, Abdallah House, Seymour, central Vic.*



comfortable with multi-tasking can be one of the more difficult challenges. There are many aspects to what could be called multi-tasking.

## INTERRUPTIONS

Firstly, you need to be comfortable with stopping one job midstream because something more urgent has gained your attention, such as needing to stop thinning the carrots to change and rinse a pooey nappy, or jumping up from the desk to chase parrots out of the ripe apricots, which you then decide need to be picked immediately. Sometimes the tasks can cascade; by the time you have dealt with this minor crisis, you can't remember where you left the hand fork you were using to thin the carrots, or what you were working on at the desk.

## DELAYS

Secondly, you may need to start another task because the one you are on needs time, such as allowing the bread to rise before kneading. Many tasks in the kitchen require this on-off workflow.

## UNDER CAPACITY

Thirdly, many routine and repetitive household tasks can be done with less than full physical or mental focus. If we just stand holding the hose watering the garden when we could be harvesting or weeding simultaneously, then we find we don't have enough hours in the day to get everything done. This is also true in much paid work, so it is not surprising that multi-tasking is promoted by business efficiency experts.

## WORK AND PLAY

Last, but perhaps most fundamentally, multi-tasking (in the household economy at least) blurs the line between work and play. Is playing with the baby while cooking or gardening 'childcare', or having a fun break from the task? The blurring of the boundaries between what might be conventionally classified as 'work' and 'play' are a defining aspect of self-reliant living, reflecting the principle of *Integrate rather than segregate*.

Many people find this blurring challenging, partly because it creates confusion between market and social norms. If 'work' outside the market place (in the household and community non-monetary economies) is a larger part of one's time and focus, the lack of the conventional rewards of money or societal recognition of value can create a sense of disconnect. Similarly, when play (including developing new skills) moves from purchased recreational and educational experiences to homemade fun, experiential learning, and exchange mediated by social norms, it can lead to doubts about having a good or valuable time if no money is spent.

In the 'Work/life balance matrix', the balance between work and play is combined with the balance between market and social norms. This highlights the potential to shift towards a more productive, fulfilling and resilient life with less dependence on monetary gain and consumer compensations.

'Have a fine ol' peasant time' is one of the 51 light-hearted tips in Raser-Rowland & Grubb (2016, p139) that encapsulates one of the best strategies for socialising while getting time-consuming tasks done:

*It was a bit of a revelation actually, the point at which your authors realised that sitting around doing things with our hands while talking to people felt about twice as nice as just sitting around talking to people. Even better, this handy discovery came at a bit of a low point in our journey into more concerted self-reliance.*

*We had begun to notice that all the food-bearing vegetation we had so excitedly surrounded our house with, and had coddled into superb health with endless loads of autumn leaves and worm castings, was making much more food than we could eat. We gave some away, swapped some, and then started trying to preserve the rest. And it took hours. Entire days in some cases – to strip a fruit tree, cut out any bird-peck holes, stew and bottle the whole lot. The first few sessions in a steamy kitchen, simmering tomatillos into chutney, bottling quinces, stripping branches of basil to make into pesto for freezing, and slitting olives for brining,*



Annie Raser-Rowland and Meg Ulman having a laugh during a business meeting in the Melliodora Publishing office.

*were pleasant enough. Put on an audio book and potter away. But by the time Annie had gotten through War and Peace on CD, she was beginning to pine for, you know, some kind of life. With people in it.*

*She got really quite cynical about the joys of home food production, until a day came where she took her bushel of broad beans that needed podding with her when she popped over to have tea with her neighbour... After an hour's casual chatting, they had not only caught up on life events and worked out the details of the mulch delivery they were going to share, but all the broad beans had been podded, and no one had even noticed it happening.*

## INCREASING PRODUCTIVITY

Permaculture has inspired hundreds of thousands if not millions of people in Australia and around the world to become more self- and collectively-reliant outside of the monetary economy. One of the motivations has been the belief, or at least hope, that permaculture was an easier path, including more creativity and fun, and less drudgery and sweat. To some extent the smart design and working with, rather than against, nature does achieve this. However I always discouraged the image of lolling in the Garden of Eden that was used to 'sell' the concept.

Keeping the household economy humming involves planning, efficiency and at times hard work, and being efficient reduces the time, and sometimes the effort, required to deal with the myriad of jobs needed.

Measuring and valuing performance is standard practice at school, in paid work and on the sport field, and the relentless drive for greater efficiency in the workplace has been taken to extremes. On the home front the reverse has been true: a loss of skills over several generations, the discretionary nature of most tasks, and a lack of feedback on what might be reasonable makes for a poor household report card.

On the other hand, the prevalent lack of skills, inefficiency, dithering and sloth provide great opportunities for radical improvements in work productivity. Like the surplus capacity of our large houses and cars, this lack of personal work productivity in the household economy gives huge scope for improvement.

We have worked with volunteers for over two decades at Melliodora, revealing vast discrepancies in productivity in everything from cutting fruit for preserving to turning a compost heap.<sup>16</sup> Some of this difference is attributable to lack of skill that

16. At the extreme, there could be as much as four-fold difference between the work output of the least and the most capable volunteers.



*Splitting and stacking wood at Melliodora.*

can be easily overcome with practice. In other cases, parental role models of domestic inefficiency, ‘make work’, and even dysfunction have created deep emotional attachments to highly inefficient work patterns.

The need to look after ourselves at home will be a ‘boot in the bum’ for many, especially in Australia where uninterrupted multi-generational affluence (at least since the 1930s Great Depression) has contributed to such a dramatic loss of self-reliance behaviours and skills.

Young people starting to take responsibility for their own lives in hard times will face a steeper learning curve than previous generations. More mature adults who have already made that transition as they become workers and parents will face a second transition from comfortable middle age habits to dealing with a novel set of challenges. Older people with declining capacities may have to draw on long-forgotten exposure to parents and grandparents for whom productive and efficient self-reliance were essential survival skills. For many Anglo-Australian families, stories of resilience in the 1930s Great Depression and wartime rationing are a fading link as that generation passes. For many migrant families from non-English speaking countries, more recent and dramatic stories highlight how easy life is in Australia.

What is certain is that those who choose the hard work of self-reliant living will make a much better job of it and have much more fun in the process than those who are forced into it by changed economic circumstances.

## VISION

This chapter includes sobering (if not depressing) discussions of the realities, rather than the romance, of self-reliance and resilience as an alternative to dependence on the cosy comforts of the system. For some of us, the fresh air of vibrant partnership and collectively reliant households have always been more attractive than the suffocating comforts of security in the system. Being your own boss through self-employment and small business has been the traditional outlet for those with energy and ideas. Voluntarily frugal and self-reliant household economies are similar to, and in many ways complementary to, self-employment and small business in the conventional economy. However, they offer a much greater degree of freedom than the conventional economy constrained by markets and the law. The market system tends to destroy most small businesses, while elevating a few to so much success that they then become the takeover targets of corporations, driving us all to produce and consume more.

The concept of the family castle where we can create our own reality and write the rules was exquisitely parodied in the working class comedy *The Castle*,<sup>17</sup> where the family are out of their depth in the legal system when attempting to defend their home from compulsory acquisition by the neighbouring airport. Part of the film’s power is its recognition of the genuine sense of wellbeing that home and household can provide. Retrofitting the ‘family castle’ to be ‘fit for purpose’ in energy descent futures requires us to be prepared to work hard, but not in the 9-to-5 grind way! The rewards in freedom and joy from being more frugal and resilient have always been worth the discipline required. As the cosy comforts of life in the mainstream increasingly constrict freedom, more and more people are breaking out of the straightjacket before the drip feed system runs dry.

17. Working Dog Productions, dir. R Sitch (1997).