

OP 4: Strategic Planning for Food Security



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Output Specification

What is this output?

This is the fifth output of the capstone year of my Bachelor's degree in Ecosocial Design with Gaia University. In my last output, I outlined my capstone thread of creating home, and identified four main areas that I am focusing on; livelihood, inner work, family and community, and food. In this output, I report on a project that I designed in order to dive deeper into the food area of my pathway, and to begin to create the kind of nourishing home environment that I imagine for myself and my future family. This output is intended as a record of a process that I am using to gain clarity and help me make strategic decisions about food, in the hope that others might benefit from a similar process in their own lives.

How was it designed?

In designing this output, I started by looking at the basic requirements of an output, including the required content (output specification, pathway reflections, etc...) as well as the review criteria (evidence of action learning, benefit to the field, etc...). I then distilled those requirements into this set of questions that an output needs to answer:

- What was the project?
- How does it fit into my pathway?
- How was the project designed?
- What were the outcomes of the project?
 - What were its effects on others?
 - What were its effects on me?
 - What did I learn or unlearn?
 - How is my life different as a result of this project?

At the time, I was considering several different topics for the output, so I quickly answered each of these questions for my top two topics.¹ Of those two choices, one felt very deeply meaningful, and yet extremely complex and difficult to convey, while the other felt easy to write about yet less close to my heart. I chose to write about the second topic, that of food and diet, because it allowed me to minimize the energy I was putting into output writing and maximize the energy I was putting into other areas of my life that are a higher priority for me. After that, I created an outline with all the required content sections and filled it in, being careful to answer the questions above.

My goal in the design of this output was to create a quick and efficient piece of work that clearly conveyed the project in a way that would be useful to others and provide clarity for myself. In the Output Process Reflections at the end of the output, I share my reflections on that goal.

How should it be read?

This output contains the description and framework of a process that I have been through that has been helpful to me. The output itself contains the description of the project and its design process, its relevance to my pathway, and a report on its outcomes so far and projected possible outcomes. The appendices contain the actual outcomes of the project in terms of my thinking and information gathered, as well as learning journal excerpts, in depth design processes, a resource review, and more.

¹ You can read the full text of this brainstorm on page 3 of the Appendices under “Output Design Brainstorm”

If you are interested in examining your relationship to your food, I would recommend reading the output front to back, and going through the process I describe as you are reading, using the detailed sets of questions and answers in the appendices for examples and inspiration. If you just want to do the process yourself and skip all of the story, you can find a quick guide to the process on the last page of the appendices.

Project Specification

What is the project?

The project described in this output is the design of a strategic plan for creating the kind of integrated, consciously chosen, deeply nourishing food system that I desire. In essence, the project is to figure out what I want to be eating and how I want to be acquiring that food, and to create a strategy for getting to that place. Although these are simple questions, I have found them to be quite complex. In order to help me sort through all of my tangled thoughts on this topic, I hired my friend Jonathan Swiftcreek as an advisor. Jonathan has spent much of his life thinking about just these kinds of issues, and has gone to great lengths to organize his life around the food that he eats. He is also quite skilled in concrete, practical, strategic thinking, a skillflex that has been challenging for me and that I am interested in building.

The purpose of this project is twofold. Firstly, its purpose is to bring clarity and direction to my life, and to avoid wasting my energy and time as a result of making decisions rashly and without proper consideration. At the same time, I intend to learn through this project some tools and skills for logical and strategic thinking that I will be able to use throughout my life.

How was it designed?

My first step in designing this project was to ask myself some questions about what I was wanting and needing in my life that gave rise to the idea for this project, and then write about each of those questions. This process of conversation with myself in writing helped me to clarify why I wanted to do this project at all, and what I was hoping to get out of it. After gaining that clarity, I used a fairly standard design template with the following steps²:

- Purpose and Goals
- Assessment and Analysis
- Design
- Implementation
- Evaluation

I wrote out responses to this template through the design phase, and then brought the idea to Jonathan and began the implementation phase. As we were getting started, we engaged in a collaborative design process, involving him asking questions to clarify my goals and the purpose of the project, and then both of us making decisions about how we wanted to proceed.

² You can view my design template and conversation with myself on page 2 of the appendices, under “Project Design Process”

Pathway Reflections

How does this project fit into my pathway?

I am at a major turning point in my life's path, a place of great opportunity and promise and also a place of big choices that often feel frightening and overwhelming. It is clear to me that my life is about creating home, and that I want to do that in the context of an intentional community. I have been living here at Earthaven Ecovillage for almost eight months now, and I have started to put down roots here in a way that I have never experienced before. I am deeply grateful for all the love and support and opportunities for deep learning that I have in this place, and I can see myself making a life here. At the same time, I feel the pull of California, the place where I was born and raised, the landscape that is so familiar to me, the place where most of my genetic family lives. This summer I will be returning to California to work at the summer camp that I have returned to every year for the last fifteen years, and then coming back to Earthaven in the fall for my graduation from Gaia University. At that time, I will be deciding whether to stay at Earthaven and pursue membership, or whether to move back to California and search for community there.

As I am turning this question over in my mind, of where to put down my roots and create my home, the question of what food I want to eat and how do I want to get it takes on a new significance. I know that in order to eat the quality of food that I want to eat I am going to have to eat as locally as I can, so where I choose to make my home has a big effect on the food that will be available to me. In addition, the place where I choose to live will affect the resources that are available to me in terms of mentorship and gaining experience and skill in different aspects of food production. Engaging in this project provides me with valuable data that I can use to help make what may be the biggest decision I have ever made. At the same time, I know that in the end food is only a piece of the puzzle, and that no matter how much data I have this decision will still be a difficult one.

In my LIPD, I identified a long term goal of having a family and raising children in a soul centered environment. Food is a crucial piece of that vision for me. I want to provide my family with healthy, nourishing food, and for my children to grow up with the opportunity to be intimately connected with the food that they eat, and through that food to the rest of the natural world. Ultimately, my designing my long term food strategy is not for me, but for my children and their children and all those who will come after.

Main Report

Introduction

When I first read Michael Pollan's "The Omnivore's Dilemma" about four years ago, I was deeply affected by it. The question that he poses, "What should I eat and how much?", is such a central question to our lives, and there is so much information on all sides of the issue that it can be very confusing to sort it all out. Through the years since then, I have thought often about food, about what food is best to eat, about the damage done by industrial agriculture, about my desire to feel more of a direct connection to my food. Until now, however, I have never taken the time to really sit down and look at the details of what I want to eat, how I want to get it, and how I am going to learn what I need to learn and create what I need to create in order to do that. This project is my first stab at what I am sure will be a lifelong process of deepening my relationship to the food that I eat.

Project description: What have I done?

The structure of the project is very simple. Jonathan and I go on a walk once a week for one hour, and during that time he guides me through a thought process with the goal of creating a one, five, and ten year plan for food security. I have asked him to take a strong lead during our sessions, in order to model the kind of strategic thinking and organization that I am hoping to learn. Mostly, he suggests questions that I can think about on my own between sessions. This project is in progress as this output is being written, so I am displaying here what we have completed so far, and I will come back later and add the finished products to the appendices.

So far, he has asked and I have answered the following questions³:

- What foods would be in your optimal diet? What is the complete list of foods that, if you had at least some access to all of these foods, you would be fulfilled and happy with your diet?
- What other details can you add to the list of foods, how can you be more specific? For example, not just coffee, but fair trade organic coffee, or coffee grown in an integrated, permaculture food forest, etc...
- For the list of foods above, how do you want to get each of these things? How directly do you want to be involved in their production? Some options would be:
 - buy them from the grocery store
 - buy them from someone you know
 - buy them from a neighbor
 - grow them yourself
 - grow them cooperatively
 - buy them from someone you don't know, but have done some research about, or know somebody who knows them
- Once you've made those kinds of decisions, what is your experience in each of those things? For example, if you decide that you want to drink milk and that you want to be directly involved in caring for and milking the cow yourself, what skills and experience do you have in doing that?
- What skills and experience will you need that you don't have already?

³ For the full text of my answers, see page 7 of the appendices under "Food System Design Journal"

- How can you acquire the experience that you will need? Who do you know that has that experience? What kinds of classes, programs, internships, experiences, etc could help you to gain that experience?
- What are you doing already that builds the experience you will need?
- What information do you need in order to make these kinds of decisions? What questions do you have?

Project outcomes

Tangible outcomes

So far, the tangible outcome of this project has been my answers to the questions stated above. As an example, here is my list of foods, and my thought process in relation to a few of those foods:

List of foods⁴

- raw, pastured milk and dairy products made from it (cream, butter, cheese, yogurt, etc...)
- pastured and hunted meat, both red meat and poultry (including organ meats, esp. liver and stocks and broths)
- pastured eggs w/o gmo feed (chicken, duck, other?)
- fish (I don't know what kind or how much, probably freshwater fish that can be raised in ponds and small scale aquaculture)
- wild edibles (greens, mushrooms, tubers, etc...)
- garden vegetables (for sure onions, garlic, sweet potatoes, brassicas, tomatoes, carrots, asparagus, squash, cucumbers, peppers, maybe others, other than those not sure which ones exactly are important to me)
- grains, particularly more wild ones like amaranth and millet, some bread
- nuts (esp. pecans, almonds, walnuts, some nut butter)
- fruit (esp. berries, but also apples, watermelon, citrus, some amount of tropical fruits)
- olive oil, olives
- chocolate (fair trade, organic, preferably with some connection to and knowledge of the place where it was grown)
- tea
- raw honey
- sea salt, pepper

Thought processes for milk and meat

- raw, pastured milk and dairy products made from it (cream, butter, cheese, yogurt, etc...)
 - How do I want to get this? How directly do I want to be involved in its production?
 - I want to co-own a cow (or goats) and be directly involved in its care and milking
 - What skills and experience do I have already?
 - Not much, getting a little bit at Imani⁵ of cow related farm stuff.
 - What are the skills and experience I will need?
 - Milking

⁴ In her review of my OP, Nicole Vosper suggested that I examine the ecological footprints of different food choices in order to get some solid quantitative data to use in making my food choices. Although I do not have time to report further on this question, I do intend to examine it in my work with Jonathan and in my life.

⁵ Imani farm is a cooperative farm here at Earthaven that keeps a milk cow, raises cows for meat, keeps chickens for eggs, and keeps an orchard for fruit and berry production. I have been working on the farm four hours a week in exchange for food credit. Jonathan is a part owner of Imani.

- cow/goat care
 - animal infrastructure construction and maintenance
 - milk handling, storage, distribution
- How can I acquire the experience that I will need? Who do I know that has that experience? What kinds of classes, programs, internships, experiences, etc could help me to gain that experience?
 - Working at Imani, becoming a milker
 - living on any homestead that has a cow and being on the cow care team
- What am I doing already that builds the experience I will need?
 - Farm work days at Imani
- What information do I need in order to make these kinds of decisions? What questions do I have?
 - What are all the factors to consider in cow or goat ownership?
 - What investments will be required? How expensive will this be?
- pastured and hunted meat, both red meat and poultry (including organ meats, esp. liver, and stocks and broths)
 - How do I want to get this? How directly do I want to be involved in its production?
 - Pastured meat
 - I would like to be directly involved in the care of the animals, in cooperation with other people. I would like to at least know how to butcher and process the animals, but I imagine that most of the time I would pay professionals to do those parts.
 - Hunted meat
 - I would like to learn how to hunt and trap, at least on the small game level, such as rabbits and squirrels, and how to process the meat, and would like to do that as a supplement to my diet and as recreation/nature connection time.
 - I would like to purchase hunted meat from a local butcher, knowing where the meat comes from as much as possible.
 - What skills and experience do I have already?
 - Pastured meat
 - animal care
 - a little experience in animal related farm tasks at Imani
 - Butchering/processing
 - none
 - Hunted meat
 - hunting
 - very limited experience using hunting tools such as bow and arrows and slingshots
 - processing
 - killed, skinned, and eaten two rabbits and skinned and eaten one roadkill squirrel
 - What skills or experience will I need?
 - Animal infrastructure construction and maintenance
 - animal care (health, social needs, food, water, shelter, etc...)
 - land management skills (rotational grazing, grass care, etc...)
 - use of hunting tools, marksmanship
 - tracking
 - trapping

- butchering
- skinning
- hide tanning
- charcutery
- How can I acquire the experience that I will need? Who do I know that has that experience? What kinds of classes, programs, internships, experiences, etc could help me to gain that experience?
 - Working at Imani
 - firefly, other primitive skills gatherings for hunting, trapping, hide tanning, etc...
 - classes with Natalie at Earthaven
 - woofing
 - organic growers school classes
 - shooting with bob
 - practicing marksmanship and tracking on my own
 - practicing processing roadkill
- What am I doing already that builds the experience I will need?
 - Farm work at Imani
- What information do I need in order to make these kinds of decisions? What questions do I have?
 - ecological impacts of raising animals
 - health benefits/risks of meat
 - costs and other factors to consider in co-ownership of animals
 -

In addition to these outcomes, I intend to create a plan of action for one, five, and ten years from now and identify my next steps towards implementing those plans.

Effects on others

My hope is that by sharing this project I have offered a tool that others can use to clarify their own thought processes around the food that they want to eat and how to get it. I also imagine that my going through this process will be of benefit to others because I will be more consciously and powerfully creating an environment of abundance and nourishment, and that will have a ripple effect that nourishes others as well. From an ecological standpoint, my designing and implementing an integrated food system for myself will be of benefit to the ecosystems that produce my food, and to the ones that would have been harmed by my eating food that was grown using industrial agricultural practices. In addition, if this project does help me to make a decision about where I want to live, that will have a significant effect on all of my loved ones, both here at Earthaven and back in California. I imagine that the effect of that will be sadness and grief for some of those people, joy and gratitude for others, and hopefully clarity for everyone in knowing where I stand and how to relate to me.

Effects on me

So far, this project has brought me a lot of clarity and good food for thought, so to speak. I have asked and begun to answer some difficult questions, and stirred up the pot of my emotions and values around food. As the project continues, I hope to gain even more clarity, and to begin to make some broader life decisions, to begin implementing the plan that I create, and to start walking the path towards abundance, nourishment, and home. I imagine that as a result of this project, I will feel more confident and purposeful, and experience more ease and joy in many areas of my life.

Conclusion

This project is only the beginning of a very long process, one that I hope will extend beyond my lifetime and touch the lives of my descendants whom I will never see. The creation of home, an environment that meets human needs, surrounded by the cultural wasteland of consumerism and industrialism that Martin Prechtel calls “the clear cut of modernity” is a task bigger than I can accomplish in this lifetime, and this is only a small step towards that vision. But its like the story of the man who went down to a beach, covered in millions upon millions of starfish, and saw a woman stooped down in the sand, patiently tossing one starfish at a time back into the crashing waves. “What are you doing?” he asked, “why bother tossing those starfish back, when there are millions more that will die? What difference does it make?” Without looking up, without stopping, the woman picked up another starfish, tossed it into the sea, and said “Made a difference to that starfish”⁶.

6 Thanks to Sheila Saunders, Family Constellations practitioner, teacher, and mentor, for this wonderful story.

Output Process Reflections

This output was a breeze compared to many other outputs I have written. I chose a clear, well defined project, created a clear template for the output, and did not allow myself to get hung up on formatting and aesthetics, while still doing what was necessary to make it presentable and pleasant. I wrote concisely and clearly, sticking to the necessary information and not going off on tangents. I am very pleased with this output, and I hope that it will be useful to others who are doing similar work in their lives.

My goal was to create a quick and efficient piece of work that clearly describes the project in a way that is useful to others. I feel that this output achieved all parts of that goal. It was quick and efficient to create, allowing me to focus my energy on other areas of my life, and I feel that the product is clear, easy to read, and potentially quite useful to someone who wants to engage in a similar strategic process. If I were to do anything differently, it would be to include more visuals, perhaps mind maps or just pictures, to help those for whom long blocks of text are challenging and/or restimulating.