

I'm glad to have you again, Ethan. Your interview with me the last time is one of the ones that I keep receiving continual feedback on as one of the most inspirational pieces that they've encountered and a lot of the language that you shared with me. And the way that you approach your community is something that I've been using in moving some of the ideas of permaculture and sustainability forward, away from just the physical systems to people and community building.

But, last time we spoke a lot about those philosophical underpinnings and the way that you practice a gift economy within your home site when you touched on, you know, having inherited some wealth and then giving it all away and then as you were looking to build The Possibility Alliance, asking for assistance from your community in order to make that a reality. And, because of that, some of the questions I've received are about the more on the ground, practical aspect of what you're doing in building a society without...[laughs] in building a community—I would like a society without electricity and petrol or at least a more functional form of that—but at this time, you're building a community that brings that about.

And, just, people are wondering how you're doing that. Like when you built your home, did you build that using any of these other tools to get it off the ground or were you electricity and petrol free from the beginning?

EH: We were from the very beginning. It was an Amish homestead, so when we arrived, there was no power coming into the 80 acres, which has now grown into 110 acres. And, we just committed to using our creativity and imagination. There were times when we were building our outdoor kitchen and we needed urbanite, which is recycled concrete, and we had a bunch on the land. The previous owners, the Amish, had big masses of concrete everywhere. It didn't break with sledgehammers, so the three teachers for the month wanted to get a jackhammer right away. And those are times when we just moved slow, I said, "Give me 24 hours." "Cause there are students and they're waiting to build this kitchen and they couldn't break the concrete on the land with the sledgehammer. And I just made two phone calls, and our Amish neighbors had a pile about fifty feet high of old concrete from a bridge site that was demoed. And it was perfect. And it was close enough to go over by horse, pile it up, and bring it for the outdoor kitchen.

So, yes, and, we move a lot slower. And my wife and I and my two kids live in a 284 square foot straw-bale. And it took a long time to build; the horses bring in the materials, we get second-hand windows and doors, we got off-cut red oak tongue and groove off-cuts. The only new material on that building was a metal roof, so that we could do rain catchment and be off of any kind of rural water.

So there are places where we haven't figured it out yet. But, that's okay. And we're looking at shingle oak roofs next, which my wife and I saw in the Pyrenees, they're using oak shingles, which the tannic acid made it useful enough that you could still

catch rain off of it. So, even where we make a compromise we make a commitment that the next building be even more closer to the local materials.

This is just a technical question for me, because I'm looking at re-roofing my house, and I recently interviewed the architect Bob Theis. And he recommends at this point largely metal roofs, because they can later be recycled, or slate roofs. (5:00) And I was just wondering, did you use a corrugated metal roof or a standing seam?

EH: It was corrugated. And it goes slower, too, because we're using hand tools. So it's all brace and bit and, which also, is wonderful, 'cause on our worksite you can hear the birds singing. That's another piece of the way we're building is that, you're out in the forest with crosscut saws and felling a tree. It's very reasonable for our, for our psyche as we build.

As you were felling trees, were you then also cutting them to timber with handsaws and axes?

EH: Yeah. So, well we used some round wood for the roof of that small straw-bale so the white oak, we used the entire tree to hold up the roof. And in other settings, we'll get salvaged barn wood, so dimensional wood inside of that straw-bale is all second-hand material from demoed buildings. What we're moving towards, our head builder who's a BP oil engineer who's now a straw-bale builder, he has been taking timber framing classes so our third—we've built two straw-bales now—our third is going to be 100 percent timber framed, removing all needs for screws and bolts and single-story straw-bale. So, each time we build, we're learning how to remove more and more material.

Our straw-bale, our second one was built—the first one was earthbags—but to remove any extra material, even the plastic in the earthbag, we built the second one on Osage orange. It's a post-and-beam. And Osage is in our forest and it's one of the hardest woods in North America. It can last 80 to 100 years in the ground. So we built it on Osage beams of different widths, so in eighty years when they start to rot, the thinnest ones can be dug out and replaced without the need of bulldozers or anything else. So we're actually building long-term. Also for people in 80 years they can keep the building going with natural materials.

So they can kind of do a 'find and replace' repair of the building that the larger dimensional structural pieces that are still there can be kept, and to do an incremental improvement.

EH: And that's where the creativity and imagination comes in is we have to think in those long-term periods of time. In most cultures, natural building you re-plaster every year. You're used to a building being a living thing that you're adding to. In the western mind, you build it once and that's it. That wasn't the case with the English cobs, or other structures. But now the western mind is you just put it up and it's done. And so, we have to re-think without embedded concrete and other things how to keep a living building functioning.

Another thing that's interesting, the way we build, is that idea, the third ethic that kind of got buried by later on in permaculture is, "limitations create abundance." That, because we only have hand tools, we can only go out in the forest and cut so many trees in a day. We can only build so fast that we're building, you know, my wife and two children live in 280 square feet. That limitation is a wonderful thing 'cause it checks us with how much we can impact the natural world around us. I've worked in sustainable forests with a chainsaw, and you can fell hundreds of trees in a day. With a handsaw, you're limited and it slows you down again to the creative thinking process.

So it's really important to realize that by having no petrol and electricity, we slow down which gives us the time to creatively think. And we don't have any building goals, like, "This is going to be done at this time." We just go out and give full effort; when it's done it's done. And I find we create time scarcity—every permaculture site I've ever been to deals with this incredible time scarcity because they're bidding the wrong timeline. And we create time scarcity by creating deadlines. And so here, by not creating any deadlines we're never behind schedule. And there's always this kind of ease.

So I think combined with just the practical nuts and bolts people are curious about, there's also an ethos that allows us to build that way without ever feeling that time scarcity that we create in modern culture.

I'm just thinking about the way that that changes the way that you live and interact with the world. That it's not a matter of, "Well, we have to be here at this moment at this time to get this done, then 15 minutes later we have to leave so that we can get here to do this." And, just that mad rush that having access to all this energy and high-speed travel and all these other things in the way that it changes the way that we live relative to that hunter-gatherer (10:00) idea of, "The sun comes up, I'm awake. The sun goes down, I go to bed." And how living a life closer to those cycles, the pressure that it removes. The stress that it removes.

The several times I've spoken with you, both on the air and in setting up interviews and things, you and everyone who I've spoken to in the community, you just sound relaxed.

EH: [Laughs] Yeah. It's a different flow. It's that we work a lot in the summer time, we're working like all other mammals in North America. We're busy. Not busy in the sense of crazy, like, today we're canning all the apples we picked and string beans and we're just like the squirrels putting up nuts. But there's a rhythm, like you said, the sun rises and the sun sets. In the wintertime, the sun goes down at four, we're also like mammals. We're just...inside. We don't have electric lights so we're limited, that we can't go crazy all year long.

And so these cycles are built so that a mammal rests in the winter and we rest really well for many months in the winter and recharge. So, the more we get connected

with the rhythm, the more we feel a kind of in our bones feeling of peace and connectedness in our bioregion.

One challenge—and it's important to put up these challenges, too—is that we're interfacing with the modern world that's working on a time period. So when we're asked to speak at a university—this year we had a gift economy straw-bale class with two amazing builders leading it for ten days. So we had a few things we had to have prepared for that class. So, in those times, we have an equation: Whatever you think the most conservative estimate at how long it will do to finish something, so someone gives, "Okay, we'll *definitely* be done by this day." We double it, and then split it in half and add that half. And so, we're always done early. So whenever there is a timeline, 'cause people are coming, we always double—that's our equation, times it by two, half that number and add that other half—and so normally, we're like, "Wow, we're done eight days ahead of time!" And again, you create time abundance by just, it's all arbitrary, you just set up a schedule that's really reasonable. So, when we interface with the modern world, we create equations that again create that abundance.

We're not recreating a society we want to move away from, which is, we're, we have no time so then we choose time-saving devices and those time-saving devices are creating, what is it right now, between 100 and 300 species are extinct a day? That's definitely too many for me.

I think about all the distractions that are built in to the modern lifestyle between, you know, I'm sitting here and I'm looking at a cell phone that just buzzed a few minutes ago while I'm talking to you and it's, "Well, what's that message?" And all these other things that I interact with on a, in a day, that are just regular to me. But how much time that eats up, and how my sixteen hours of wakefulness, I lose an hour here because of these distractions and things that I respond to that aren't necessary. And the impact that that has on making me feel like I don't have enough time to do something, and then the push to always do something more because, "Oh man, I've gotta get a paper written for Friday!" And then, "Oh, wait, well we've got an appointment on Thursday, so because of that, that means that there's going to be two or three hours lost." Then there's, "Ohh, man."

EH: Yeah. I think that what happens, too, when we slow down—we're traveling by bicycle, there's no community car on-site. If we had a car, I know when I lived—I've been car-free for twelve years—but when I was in a car, if something looked halfway interesting, "Oh, there's, we're twelve miles from a university town." If it looked halfway interesting, I'd go to it. And I'd be like, often disappointed. When you're biking 24 miles round-trip, we really select what's most important to us. And so it's another way that we've put these cultural boundaries, as most indigenous cultures have, that actually protect our time for what's most important. Because it's really hard to do when you just have the ability to access...it's the Age of Information, and there's so much of it. And I had mentioned it before, we're so much more interested in the Age of Transformation. With this idea that, act on one

principle of permaculture or one ethic fully, that's better than reading ten thousand books on permaculture or [unintelligible] gardening.

So, yeah, those limitations—both entertainment, social, everything. We have an amazing social media here, the face-to-Facebook where we're just, we demand face-to-face human contact. Eyes-face connection. So then our life becomes more and more rich 'cause we're **(15:00)** not participating in things that are, can create communication, but at a lesser, it's of lesser worth talking to someone on a screen rather than face-to-face.

And we *need* those systems, because we're attempting constantly to start moving fast and be able to listen and hear and go to everything. And then we're participating with the violence of society; it's just trying to do everything.

I think about that, and all these distractions and temptations and things that are, are pieces that we bring on ourselves. This idea to do more, to learn more, to know more. And it, that push is just...now you have me contemplative and meditative for a moment as I think about this [laughs].

EH: I, I mean I can share another interesting thing like, when we do our permaculture class, I've sat in classes where you just, it's information-full. It says it, 'information-full' and 'imagination-dense'. We're trying to remove the information. We send students out to just observe leaf structures and, you know, it's two hours of them just being in nature observing. And some students are like, "Hey, I want *content*. Tell me what to mix in the compost!" And we all should do that. But this—observe and interact is our first principle, and we're so busy getting information, we miss that. Bill Mollison created it by observing and interacting at a slow pace. We actually walked and watched the land for a year before building anything. Most permaculture operations I know do not move to land and wait a year. *Because* it feels like, "We gotta get it in, we gotta get it going!"

Yeah, again, it's slowing down, because nature is our teacher. We really need to slow down to listen to it, its rhythms and everything else. And the onslaught of information, to me, is totally counter to the wisdom, the deep wisdom, that I get from just being in the cycles of the sun, being in, knowing when I go to the bathroom, my waste is being composted. So, I really think the permaculture movement is so exciting, all this new information and workshops and new ways to do prairie and it's wonderful. And also I would use the word psychotic. It takes us away from these rhythms which the essence of permaculture is about.

That sense of place, both physically and temporally, as we move through the seasons if we live in a temperate climate or if we're, how did a friend of mine describe Texas, as having two summers? And so quickly, our conversation moves from those practical, on-the-ground pieces, those techniques back to the principles and strategies that we use for building the space around us.

EH: Yeah. I'm excited too, if you want to, I know some listeners had specific nuts-and-bolts questions, to just go through some of those and I can just give concrete answers and then maybe see where it moves from there.

One of the pieces that you said earlier was about how, with like a straw-bale house, that you're plastering every year and adding to it. What kinds of plasters did you use in building your straw-bales there?

EH: Interior plaster of our small straw-bale is a mix of sand, clay, and cattail fluff. The finished plaster with cattail fluff, it's the seed head, adds strength but you can get a really smooth, solid finish. We're finding the more natural plasters here with the clay that we dig up from the land. At first we did experimental plasters in the outdoor kitchen with lime and a few other industrial inputs that usually make it harder, but it tends our plasters work a lot better without that, with just the clay from the land. Sand and, it would be the first layer would be fine straw and then the final would be with the cattail fluff.

And some of our plasters, like the outdoor kitchen, will last years and years without having being re-plastered. Just know there are some, there will be in other buildings studying global alternative natural building where people will re-plaster yearly if there's places with, like, monsoon rains and things. But here, we can go for years without having to re-plaster with a natural mix with no added lime, just local sand, clay, and chopped-fine straw and then cattail fluff.

And you're just finding that it holds up fairly well?

EH: Yeah. Better. We really do a lot of experimenting, so each wall is a different mix. We put in horse manure in one, and there are small walls in the outdoor kitchen with adobe brick that we made here. So, we just tested them, and some of them, after two years, sloughed off and we had great information. So, if you're using vernacular mixes, better to test on an outdoor kitchen on a wall that's eight feet by four feet and get the results before you go building a house and plastering the entire house with the mix.

Now what we're just learning now, **(20:00)** one of our builders who worked a lot in Tasmania, is this fermented plaster mix. It ferments for not just overnight but for ten days and then the microorganisms actually create an incredibly strong plaster. So we're just getting into these fermented plaster mixes which have been developed in France and Tasmania. So that's really exciting.

But one exciting thing is, because we're going for it imperfectly, we attract a lot of people who are curious, who are quote 'experts in their field'. And so, they come in and add all this wonderful wisdom to our experimentation.

And then you get to mix all that information with the experiments that you're learning and add to that in a body knowledgeable way because you're there doing the work, not just reading and thinking about it but actually on the ground participating.

EH: And I have to say, people come for their apprenticeship—it's an embodiment. Given all the practical things of how we go about things, also generate a new way of being. So, one of our apprentices already left by bicycle after the apprenticeship was done. Many go and say, "I just realized, I don't need electricity. Before I came, canned music," this huge list, and at the end of seven months are like, "Wow, life is so much richer without it." You can't just write that down and believe it.

And that's one place where I have a lot of empathy for folks who don't have access to a full-embodied experience of returning to a natural cycle. It takes months for people to go through this kind of detox and then find a new way that's actually *tested* experientially more meaningful. It's not an idea, they leave and they just know, like, "Well I'm going to be biking and not using electricity." And it's just an embodied thing, there's no moral statement about it. It's just, we enjoy it more. But then you have an incredible revolution.

And then there's nuts and bolts around it, where we have to find compromises with—we have 1,500 visitors—if we go too far in certain directions, visitors won't even be able to land here and be comfortable. So I know you had mentioned earlier about what do you use in your composting toilet. We have options: We have a basket full of mullein leaves and Lambs' Quarters—not Lambs' Quarters, sorry, Lamb's Ear—that people can use as natural toilet paper. And that's in a basket. And we also have an option of bulk-purchased 100% post-consumer toilet paper that we buy bulk so it's non-plastic wrapping. We get a big box. So we have both!

And a lot of our systems here also embrace that we have college groups and fifth graders and...So, that way, people have a choice. Those who want to get a little more experimental can reach for the mullein, and we have a little write-up about it, and other people can go for the 100% post-consumer waste toilet paper. That would make a huge impact, if everyone in the United States used 100% post-consumer waste toilet paper without plastic wrapping, that would be a wonderful leap. And then the next leap would be, have a big area of comfrey and mullein. And then, you've really dropped it to very local. And, it probably helps with the composting.

In buying the 100% post-consumer bulk toilet paper, how do you—I feel so strange asking this question because I remember a time when there was no internet to look these things up—

EH: Yeah.

—Like, you know, I used a phone and a telephone book to find information. I would call around and now, I almost feel mystified by the idea of being able to find a product in bulk that you would need without access to these information sources. So how do you access where to get some of these supplies?

EH: We're near a university town, which was part of our design, to be near a university town, it's a liberal arts college university and then a founding school of osteopathic medicine. By having that, we're rural, but being next to that, there's a

buying club where families buy bulk and function as a co-op. So where we do need to bring some of those things in, we go through the buying club which is both economically cheaper than the natural food store, and also you can get numbers high enough where you can avoid packaging. So, that's wonderful, that's, for us, transition. As we just harvest our own wheat, all by horse and by scythe, and we're making all our bread from the land. It's the first time, this year, we now have our dairy cow, so the butter and the milk—each system we bring in, we then cut off one of these systems which are, is still moving in the right direction, bulk organic, as bioregional as possible.

So, that's the pace that we have here, too, is, "Okay, we're not going to bring in a new animal. We have, we have bees, **(25:00)** chickens, ducks, goats, cows, draft horses." And, we started with just one: We started with chickens, and once we had that system well—black walnuts falling from the trees that would feed them in the wintertime, free-ranging so they get insects—once we have a good, basic permaculture system starting up, then we get the next animal. Then we got the goats, and we had the goats functioning. We found out, oh, they love cattails, and feeding them hundreds and hundreds of cattails and leave the cattail hearts. When we strip them, that goes to the goats, and then...Finding all these systems localized to feed them, honey locust pods fall, and we can collect 20 bushels in the morning, and the goats love them over winter. So we bring an animal in slowly. People come here and they're like, "Where are the pigs? Where are the..." all these other things, and we're like, "You know what? We're now getting our cattle system worked out."

And that's the same with our food production. We have four organic gardens, no-till, that are on-contour raised beds. And we're just planning to put in a fifth. We've added about a garden every other year, and then we now have a large field where we're producing grain field crops. Two areas like that. And that it's a, it's a slow movement. We don't come in and say, "We have to be 100% self-sufficient right now," 'cause then we're back into psychotic behavior. We can't transition out of the industrial world overnight. So, each of these systems we build and get to know it, and once it feels like, embodied and we've got it, then we bring in the next system.

So, for some people coming here, on our seventh year they feel like it's too slow. And then I say, "Well, a redwood takes 2,000 years to grow. Is that too slow?"

You're building an incremental design that functions within your time horizon. Which happens to be longer than what others might necessarily consider.

EH: Yeah. And even when we do a building, sourcing throwaway windows or secondhand doors as locally as possible, takes a lot longer. And it's also very rewarding. I think one thing that's interesting about the internet is it removes all relationships. You just go and get your information where, we don't have it here. I call a neighbor and say, "Hey, do you know where there's some local alfalfa for our goats within ten miles?" Or I call Don Jack who's 87 and has barns full of salvaged windows, and I say, "Hey, yeah, we're looking for this type of window." And, the very

act of looking bioregionally, I'm building relationships, human relationships, with all of our neighbors. And relationship works life with both nature and humans is incredible. And because we're going by the phone, or biking down the road to our Amish neighbors, when we're sourcing things, we're building relationships. And I think that's one thing people haven't seen that the internet has taken away. You're not interacting with anyone directly, often. You're doing, well, a search.

So, on peoples' deathbeds, their regrets is no relationships, not following their dreams, not living out their heart. So, it's interesting that we're going against our very human nature to be in relationship and to be in community, favoring something that maybe is quicker. And, I know in my marriage, I would rather have the death of 12 years and a slow walk in the woods. You can't replace that with anything. Speed is overrated.

The more and more that I walk down my path, the more and more that I agree with that sentiment.

EH: But I think when our rights are overwhelmed, you know, Sarah and I, it's been a twenty year process of me removing and simplifying, you know, nuts and bolts. It's like, "You know what? I downhill ski. I just studied that it messes up black bear migration in Vermont. I'm going to walk up the mountains from now on." That was 20 years ago, and it led to each time I could embody and then make it part of my human culture and then take on something new. But when we're in time scarcity, when I go back to visit my friends in Boston, they're so overwhelmed that they can't even imagine removing any of these things 'cause their life, you know, one quote from a friend was, "I'll be torn apart. Like, I won't even be able to function on my basic responsibilities."

And then we get into the whole culture of debt: You buy a house, you owe the bank, there's an interest. Everything's built to speed you up, and then you have to be a consumer. And it starts this very predictable feedback loop, which I don't see people and judge them, I see them and I'm like, "Wow, this is really sad." I give all my money away and I have more capital **(30:00)** than all my friends on the East Coast. Who, they're like, "Wow, how do you, how do you manage a family?" You have, you know, at any one time The Possibility Alliance has \$1,000 is a lot in our account. Which would equal two months of paying for fifteen adults, two children, and hundreds of visitors. But, most of my friends are actually in, if I do the math, they're in negative \$200,000.

So, an incredible paradox by living in the gift economy, giving everything away, I have more physical assets and abundance than people who are working and making 100,000 a year. It's mind-blowing. And my brother pointed out, 'cause he doesn't have any debt and lives in an apartment, he's 45 and has a roommate and his friends are like, "Why don't you get a house and invest?" And they often harass my brother, saying, "Your brother is irresponsible!" And he'll turn around and say, "My brother has no debt. How about you?" And, so, it's really, I mean it's capitalism, you have—

once you go down this rabbit hole, it's fine to think about moving slower and using a hand saw instead of a chainsaw.

But then we also have to go to the macro and start questioning everything, and that's where it gets exciting and scary. It's the very permaculture ethics and values and principles—they're brilliant. They force us to question everything. Zero waste, very favored biological resources, true earth and people care. And so the hard thing is if we really become bioregionalist and permaculturist, our lives would be drastically different. And I think that's the jump we need to give resources for, people. We need to give them the resources to make that jump.

One important thing, though, that I think you pointed out in weaving together that narrative, though, is that it's not about doing it all at once. It's not, "Tomorrow I'm going to decide that I'm going to call the power company and have them turn off the electricity and start using my wood stove and..." You spent 20 years getting there. Your interns come and they spend seven months embodying this lifestyle in order to kind of realize the possibility of liking and living without electricity. And then when they leave, they're in a place where they can make that decision.

EH: And I think, you know, Sarah and I didn't have a system like this set up. So it took a little longer. I was a lone wolf for a while, swimming upstream and mainly getting a lot of attack energy. Even though I was just doing it for myself. So, it's great to have these pockets of support; I think embodiments happen faster when we get the support and resources we need.

And I also realize, sometimes you come up against a wall. And I believe there are tens of thousands of people at this wall right now in North America, based on our only 7,000 visitors who have come through in six years, but enough conversations to realize I think there are people ready to leave. So there's a balance between taking a risk, having it be scary, and pushing forward, and not going into overwhelm so all your systems shut down. But I do feel like there could be a little more risk-taking. I say that with a lot of love and compassion. But there's a way in which we can keep waiting 'til the next year. I love what Gandhi said, is, "Every day, take one—even a tiny act—to move towards the world you want to see." And that might be, I'm not going to use a pen anymore, I'll only use a pencil. Some reduction and impact. And I think that, as long as we're moving forward in whatever small act, I really applaud it. And I also see a lot of people thinking their way out of that risk.

Could you elaborate on that? That idea of thinking their way out of that risk?

EH: Yeah. It's only from my own direct experience and also watching people around me. When I was planning to give away my money and get out of cars and really simplify, my story was that my life was going to fall apart. Yes, it was important for the earth, but literally my relationships would fall apart, I would be a dependent, I would feel often fearful. I had all these stories of what would happen. And all of them were *completely* wrong. I started to bike all the time, I got in better shape; I'm

42 now and I'm in incredible shape. I don't need a gym membership because I'm always moving by bicycle. I slow down—and I don't know if I mentioned this last interview but when I visit people, I have to bike up the hill in Berkeley and I spend the night with my friends. And when I had a car, I would just drive by for lunch for two hours.

So my relationships are all enhanced. My physical health is all enhanced. Having, giving away everything multiple times, I have no fear now. How great, to have no, like, covetousness **(35:00)** on an object. Someone's like, "Can I take your bike?" And I'm like, "Great." I had a bike stolen 'cause I wasn't using a lock; the next day, three bikes arrived. And I gave two away. Actually, the result was so different than my mental story. And it's not that it wasn't heartbreaking at times, or difficult, but life is, has challenges no matter what you're doing. People get sick. We die. Things break down. That happens no matter what. But there's a deeper peace and meaning when my bike breaks down. Or, whatever else might happen.

What I find is, everyone who takes that leap, the story, the mental story they told was often totally wrong. And I found that, I find that in myself. I just committed to look at no more screens. Now, I only spend about four hours on a screen a year, simply 'cause I visit friends and they're like, "Oh, check out this Youtube!" or, "Look at this thing I made!" or...I made a commitment when I stopped watching movies—my brother studied movies—to watch one movie a year. But I realized, even four hours, I'd want to be interacting with real life. People and nature. That's it. And so these commitments, it, a part they're scary, it's like, "What is my brother going to think?" But then I realize that my brothers' love for each other does not depend on a movie. We can be creative and find something to do. One thing we came up with is, I mountain bike, and I tie a rope on a post and I tow him on his rollerblades, which he enjoys much more than going to a movie with me.

But we're forced to be really creative and really imaginative when we have to replace these things. When we get creative, we become alive. For my anniversary the other day, nuts and bolts thing, we don't go to restaurants, my wife and I. We chose to push that money in different places. But for my anniversary I had my friend dress up as a waiter, I had a friend play accordion, and we set up the dinner table on the dock out over our pond covered in cattails and ducks and they set it up like a restaurant. And Sarah didn't know and walked down the path and I said, "Let's just go for a walk before dinner." We show up and there's my friend, and we made a menu. It was a dockside café and there's Sarah and I stepping out, and two people take our kids. We're sitting out on this dock with tables, cloth, and flowers from the garden and someone's playing accordion and then they served our dinner. And Sarah was like, "This is a hundred times better than *any* restaurant on the planet." And, she was surprised we got the same delight as if you'd take your partner out to a restaurant. It took more creativity, depended on more human relationships, but the end result was *way* greater than what industrial society could offer.

And *that's* when I think we're doing true cultural and natural design: Permaculture. We did it on our terms and made the experience even better than a restaurant.

And everyone you included in that process added more to those human relationships because of the people you included who were close to your life. Rather than some anonymous musician or anonymous waiter, that these were your friends who were part of this with you.

EH: Yeah. And that uplifts my wife as this surprise, it's like, "These people *care* about me."

What you're doing, Ethan, is simply amazing to me. I mean, for me, from the, there's an idea that Mark Lakeman shared with me when I was speaking with him, and it was this thought of 'who's story do you inhabit?' Am I, am I really living my own life within the story that I want to create or am I living within someone else's?

EH: Mmhmm.

Hearing those successes that you've had and the places that you've been able to go, though I might sit here sometimes when we were talking through this, I, I was told once that human beings are really good at piling on. And some of that, those negative thoughts about, "Oh, well I could be doing more," and then I think about what you said before, the first time we spoke, about meeting someone where they're at and realizing, "Well, this is where I'm at." And taking a few minutes to realize that, "Wait, let's think about where I myself was a year ago. Or two years ago, or even three years ago, and all the changes that I've made in that time to get closer to living the life that I want to.

I might not be where I want to be, yet, but I'm still on that journey. I'm taking steps forward.

EH: Yeah, you're exactly right. The comparison will kill us. People come here; it's very imperfect in the extent that people can still point out, "Oh, you're using a bike lighter." And we know that, and we're comfortable with that. But at least they say, "I can see where I'm heading now." Or, "I can see the map." I hope there's a million experiments and they all look different than The Possibility Alliance. Nature is diversity, that's another teaching. So, we help to support projects that are gonna be distinctly different.

And, I do think we need celebration. That, wherever you're at, you make that movement to—a simple movement, a professor from [unintelligible] came down **(40:00)** with his students for a weekend. And he got very overwhelmed being here. Then he went home, and they have a movie on Sunday night. They left Sunday morning. And he just decided, he was like, "Hey, can I tell you a story about where I was just at?" And his son cuddled up next to him and he told a story for an hour about his experience here. And it was *so* connecting. And then he called me and said, "It was so amazing," on Monday, he was like, "I told a *story*, 'cause I'm so afraid that video games and movies will beat me! So I don't even want to take them on! That my son will be like, 'Shut up, dad, I wanna watch the movie or play the video game.'"

And the son stood there, totally engaged, and he called and said, "I did it last night!" And I was like, "Yes!"

That is what it's about. Just like a simple step in the moment. And to celebrate that, fully, then if we're both doing that for each other, then it's community. Celebrating the act, not like an ego kind of, "You're awesome," but to celebrating like—you move closer to the world you want to see. That requires celebrating. What you said about stories, it was so true. The Hopi said, "Those who tell the story rule the world." It's all stories, and everywhere we turn we see a story that, "For revolution you need the internet. You need to consume to be happy." That's the story being told, even in alternative: "You need fair trade chocolate or you'll be miserable." We need new stories to define the human culture and the earth, and so, storytelling is so important.

Celebration and storytelling in the current time I think are essential. I want to thank you too, I have the experience that you're Dominic Barter just came here to do a workshop on restorative circles, which we're now studying an alternative to the punitive justice system. We've committed to not bringing in the police, and we had someone show up this year that was escorted out of the county by the police of another county and showed up in our woods, and we put it to the test! He was here for a week, we got him back on his feet, and now he's doing activism with the Keystone Pipeline.

What Dominic Barter said is, "To be changed, you have to feel the other person." And I think that's such a beautiful thing, is to let us feel—if we *feel* the earth and what's happening and we feel other people, the change will be effortless. Just reading about Martin Luther King standing up against the war and really changing from civil rights to global justice—'cause he read an article about children dying in Vietnam from Rampart Magazine—he was in his office and he saw pictures of the dead children in Vietnam, and he let himself feel it. He stood up in the moment and he said, "I'm done. I'm taking on the war machine." And, it's 'cause he *felt* the world.

And I think also we're conditioned to *not* feel. The news goes so fast and, I think slowing down to feel, and then once we feel, our action becomes effortless. It's like non-action. I guess I'm getting to the point that I really feel like when we're in conversation, you feel and are impacted by our experiment. I think if we all did that more, the actions would arrive by themselves.

I find it funny that you say that because as I was sitting here kind of speechless taking all of this in, before you started down this next thread, was that you and I have spoken, between this conversation and the last interview and some of the others. We've spent maybe three to four hours in conversation. I feel like I know you and what you're doing, and who you are as a person, better than some people who I've known for a decade or more.

EH: Mmhmm.

Straddling this edge between the life that I've lived in the modern world and always being pushed to go to college, get a job, buy a house, have a family, like all these normal milestones that were presented as the way to live a normal life. And this other side of going down the path to live the life that I've always wanted to live, and feeling kind of conflicted between the two as I make that transition just because of the fear of the success of living my own life in a certain way. Thinking about all the people who I've known for so long who I've never *really* been able to connect with because of the stories that they've inhabited and the way they've lived someone else's life rather than their own.

EH: Mmhmm.

I feel happy for the people who live the lives that they want to, but I feel sad, then, for the people who are almost trapped by those stories.

EH: I find when I'm with my family and old friends, I really have to function by just listening. Just me showing up starts triggering people. I come to the family picnic and there's paper plates and someone comes over and says, "Oh, we're sorry, but they were left over in the basement," and then **(45:00)** one of the aunts is like, "I don't want you to come see my re-do of my house, I'll be embarrassed." And, it starts going. Paper plates go in the trash, "Oh, I'm so sorry about this." Everyone's apologizing to me. And I'm just enjoying being with family. And of course I'm choosing to bring my own plate and cup and I don't say anything, but, really. All's I can do is just listen to their pain and their confusion. And then I stay connected with them.

And, I think that's such a gift we can all give as we're pushing forward towards ecological and social justice or taking risks. It's hard sometimes to not have a shared reality but what I find, most of my time, I just need to listen to what comes up in people. And really honor it. And trust that, for some people, they're never going to be able to hear my full message. But the first thing, to stay connected, is to allow my grandmother to have a mouth pad, 'cause I'm not driving that she's never going to see me again and that I'm ruining the family, and to really just hear and say, "I hear this, and did you hear I'm committing to being with you *more* this year than last year?"

And, I think that's important work too, is to—those who are stuck need a lot of love and compassion. I don't think information is useful, or challenging is useful—people, on a deep level, I think get it in their heart. They just can't imagine getting out of \$300,000 in debt or whatever they've gone down and...yeah.

So, it's interesting. I think we need to be very ferocious and risk-taking in our own lives, and balance so we don't go into overwhelm. And we need to be incredibly compassionate and kind and gentle with other peoples' lives. And, you know, modern activism is like, "Oh we'll ram this down your throat, and then we'll have the world we want!" And there's a small category where people really want to be challenged. And so when people come here, I give the tour, I show them what's

happening, and if they ask me, like, "What do you see in my life? How should I change?" I stop and say, "Well, what do *you* want to change?" And, if someone really wants to be challenged, I'm like, "Do you really want to be challenged on this idea?" If they say yes, I check again, if they say yes, then I'll share my limited perspective.

But I think, um, I'd love to see a greater gentleness. And I think people actually make more radical changes in a pillow of kindness than they do in a pillow of fire or judgment.

I only have a glimpse of some of the places that you've gone to in order to get where you are. But I'm very thankful that you've arrived at this moment, and have shared it with me. And just, thank you for that.

EH: I think one thing that's important and I want to share just a few shadows to balance this interview, if that's okay right now.

Sure.

EH: One is, I've gone through incredible heartbreak. And I do believe that the door of devastation is the door of love, is so many pieces of myself. I've had to die. And the path to becoming who you want to become, birth is...birth is a messy thing! There's a lot of pushing and blood, and the heartbreak is part of our breaking open our heart for the world but there's a lot of grief and sorrow as much as joy...and beauty that informs this experiment.

So that's the first thing that, it's not that you're going to choose to do something and then Muppets come out of the trees and start singing. You take that radical leap and then your life changes and relationships change and it's very, can be really heartbreaking. The woman who biked out of here, she's 23, she said, "I'm biking home and I'm doing electricity free." Her mom drove across the country from Virginia to intercept her on the way to Chicago. And her mom had her sister say, you know, "Don't let your sister into the house if she bikes there."

These are the kinds of heartbreaks, like, "Oh my gosh, I'm finally doing what my heart wants. And now my family says I'm ruining the family." And these are the kinds of struggles where we need a lot of resources and compassion. That led to an incredible breakthrough between the mom and the daughter. And when we live our truths, it usually ends up in a breakthrough, after the blood and the pain. Like a birth. On the other side is this baby, and you're like, "Oh, I'd go through this a thousand times!" But when you don't see the baby, it seems like your family's falling apart; it's really hard to stay the course and keep coming back.

And also one of the shadows here is there are times when we, when we *don't* figure out a bioregional solution. We have a hundred-year-old farmhouse, it was concrete cinder block, the clay was pushing it in. We have some of the greatest horizontal clay heave next to New York State. So the house is falling in. So we're like, "Okay, how do we do this?" And everyone said, "You need a **(50:00)** bulldozer, you need all this stuff." But we finally settled with getting recycled I beams and we needed an

acetylene torch, which we borrowed from a friend to cut the recycled I beams to prop up the basement. And we had to get some recycled rebar and some new concrete. It was a lot better than a bulldozer and huge anchors, and it works. And we worked with a friend who had done basements, but. There are times when we don't find a local solution, like, either the house falls down or we use recycled I-beams and get an acetylene torch.

I believe there are 15 times when we've had to bring in some really clear industrial input on the land 'cause we couldn't find another solution. And that's okay! We're like, "Okay, we're not going to build a house in clay with a concrete floor, so we can build differently next time." But there's a way in which I think that we've really, collectively as a community, we don't beat ourselves up. And I think if we give it time to find a third solution if we don't, we keep telling people when they come, we're like, "Look, here are all the places we haven't figured it out. Help us." I think that's another important piece, with the fact that, you know, we have a phone line. A landline. Most people say it's very primitive. It's our only technology, like, any kind of energy coming in on the land. And people are like, "What about the phone?!" We're like, "Yeah, power lines, we don't know how to figure it out, but we want fifth grade groups and colleges to come. We haven't figured this one out." They think it's really hard to even talk on land line, some groups won't work with us 'cause we don't have email, but, you know, we don't have a solution! And to just sit with that and be like, "Well, we're going to keep looking at it."

And what I think is that each one of our lives needs literally hundreds of people to help us problem solve. Like, what you're doing right now, your journey and bringing this information to the world and looking for changes in your family, you need hundreds of relationships to help you problem solve each little thing. 'Cause if you try to figure it out yourself, which I did in the past...I become really overwhelmed, isolated, then the judgment starts coming up. So I think it's the time of building relationships and circles and just to realize that we make a lot of compromises here. And, we just don't jump to the industrial right away. You know, we had a, we didn't have a wheelbarrow when we showed up! We borrowed our neighbor's wheelbarrow for nine months and we looked for a secondhand wheelbarrow *all over the county*. We went to auctions and couldn't find anyone. So after nine months, we were like, "We can't borrow our neighbor's wheelbarrow, we're a permaculture site! We don't have a wheelbarrow!" And we didn't have the infrastructure to build a wooden wheelbarrow yet, or the time. So we went and purchased a new wheelbarrow. And we found one that was built at least in Mexico, and not in China. That still required what I would call inappropriate labor in some form of sweatshop on the Mexican border. But, we tried. Nine months was a good go. And we got a wheelbarrow and returned our neighbor's wheelbarrow oiled up and repainted and...

So there are lots of times where we have to make those decisions and we try to make it the best decision we can.

As has seemed to be the case the last several times that I've spoken with recent guests who have mature perspectives on the world that they want to see and the life that they want to live, I don't have anything else to add at the moment [laughs]. Can I ask a few quick questions and we'll bring this to a close?

EH: Yeah.

You touched on your gardens being no-till, and you're adding them every several year. You're adding one like every other year. About how many square feet of garden space do you add each time, and how much do you have at the moment?

EH: Probably in our vegetable gardens, all combined, maybe $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre. And then maybe with the field crops and everything else, maybe that would be an additional half-acre. And then a lot of perennial food sources. We've added over 1,200 perennial food sources, fruits, nuts, bushes. So we're really heavy on perennials. So we're growing everything from medlars to Manchurian apricots to cold hardy figs—I mean cold hardy kiwis. In addition to the garden and crop space we have edibles planted everywhere. I mean, we've added just 50 mulberry trees, and we have 11 mature mulberry trees. We've added 25 serviceberry plants. A lot of them local wild food that we enhance. We find blackberries growing in one area, then we move tons of the same species of wild blackberry there.

On top of that we eat hundreds of pounds of wild edibles, so, we just got a chicken of the woods mushroom. Twenty pounds of mushrooms. We eat hundreds and hundreds of cattail hearts and feed the rest to our goats. We get, maybe on a good year, **(55:00)** 30 to 40 gallons of awesome olives that are wild. Non-native wild. So, it's important to realize we're just not functioning on a garden, we have dairies from the goats, and we have cows, we have aquaculture. We have a hundred fish from our pond and we just restocked three new ponds as we added 30 acres.

So there, it's a very diverse food system. 90 pounds of honey on a good year coming from the bees. Cicada, the year of the cicada, we fried up and ate many cicadas. We'll find a fresh road kill, coyote or deer, and eat it. We get deer, we canned seven deer one year from trophy deers when they take the antlers and don't want to eat it 'cause it's a buck.

So we have multiple systems happening. We glean fruit trees within ten square miles that are mature. So, I hope that gives an insight to the diversity of food.

It does. One thing you mentioned about road kill, at least here in Pennsylvania if you pick up road kill you're supposed to report it, especially if it's a game animal. Do you have any requirements like that where you live?

EH: You do with deer; we didn't call in on the coyote 'cause there's like an open season on coyote all year round.

Okay.

EH: So, there's certain conditions. And, also, just for listeners, we're very clear we process a lot of meat. We know that it's a fresh kill. You know, really, after 24 hours, you don't want to be eating an animal. So you have to really know how to see the signs that it's very fresh animal. Yes. We try to use a lot of wisdom when we're eating wild edibles and road kill and such.

That also makes me think of the other legal issues. You mentioned living without police intervention and trying to have an alternative justice system. Do you have certain legal things in place for The Possibility Alliance and the land that you work on things like liability and insurance? If fifth graders or a college class are coming in do you have any waivers that they sign or anything like that?

EH: We don't. And that's a stance that we're taking. I went and lived in New Zealand, I was there for four months and they didn't have a legal system. I was on a sailboat and I climbed up and looked down at the skipper, I was going to bird sanctuaries and I was volunteering crew on it. And I was gonna jump off the mast and I looked down and said, "Oh," and he said, "You're not in the United States anymore, if you fall on your head you can't sue me." Only the government can choose a case that's so extreme that there'd be compensation. And the freedom people have—this is in New Zealand in '96, and I imagine it's changed quite a bit—but we want to create a culture where again you're building on relationships again.

And, we do not want to move in the legalistic area where it's fearful, fear-based. And we've also had situations where a friend fell from a staircase in the barn, which is only eight feet tall. She happened to fall in the right place where she cracked her head, broke her back, and was in intensive care for three and a half weeks and almost died. A helicopter came and life-flighted her off the land. And, so, we, you know, from some interactions, the parents said this amount would have been covered by homeowner's, and so we rallied as a community and said, "Here's this amount." And we said, "We will also raise whatever other amount you might need."

Like, instead of this relationship where I'm gonna sue you if you don't help me, that, in any condition, let's create a world where if someone—not even on my property, down the road—gets into an accident, I'm gonna support them. And we have handed checks of \$1,000 for a Mennonite who didn't have health insurance so she could get Lovenox 'cause she had a blood clot and she had a baby in utero, and...I want a world like *that!* Little La Plata, 1,200, like, the Midwest is ahead of the east and West Coasts. We had a family here who, the dad had a stroke in the forties. They had two kids in high school and the insurance didn't cover it and we had a fundraiser at night, and in one night raised \$44,000 dollars with, you know, low-middle class people in a town, to pay their bills.

That's the world I want to see. We're all coming together and people were crying and celebrating and just saying, "We are part of your family." And instead of giving

\$400 to some profit-driven insurance company, what if everyone in a town of 1,200 gave \$400 a month to a fund for whoever needed it in that town? How much more empowering and how much more money there'd be for that person? So we're, you know, taking a risk 'cause we're going upstream, but we're looking at a *total* re-working of how we **(1:00:00)** deal in human relationships. And sometimes it's scary! But we're willing to lose this 110 acres, willing to lose everything to try and create something that aligns with our heart.

That's real freedom. I just think about that, that for so many of us who are seeking the ability to live our lives and be free, that it's, that lack of fear really provides an opportunity to, to do that.

EH: Yeah, I mean, Gandhi said you had to develop fearlessness to practice upliftment of all life, and, we have to deal with it every day and move through it.

I don't have a nice, smooth segue to my next piece from that. But I only have one more question and that's about children.

EH: Yeah.

Do you home school your children on-site?

EH: We're dealing with that design creatively right now, we've been blessed that a lot of friends from the east and West Coasts have come out here and seen beautiful land that's \$1,500 an acre with oak and hickory forests and ponds and they're like, "Well, I could buy in Oregon for \$300,000 or get ten acres for \$15,000, so we've got a lot of families move around us, and we've started a co-operative, on Fridays we have things like 'adventure days' where the kids all come together and we, I dress up as Dr. Phibbean and we go looking at frogs in the pond and other things like that.

And we, just this fall, are starting a co-operative school and it'll probably start with jut around ten kids, but it's a beginning. And we want to move into a kind of outdoor, pulling from the Norwegian outdoor schools, some Waldorf, some non-violence and basically we're starting up a school in the area. We're putting out applications for teachers.

With that said, we're looking at twenty hours a week, because most of the kids, like my daughter Etta who's six and my daughter Isla who's 15 months, this morning at the morning meeting they were at the grapevines picking grapes together for a half-hour. Etta yesterday went out—two days ago—went out on the horses. She woke up and was like, "What are we gonna do today?" Phoenix was taking the horses out with the wagon, and any six-year-old girl, it's a dream come true. She's on a wagon, working the horses.

So, we find that the school's so rich here that home schooling isn't like just a nuclear family model; we have 15 adults on-site and over 1,500 visitors from all over the world so she's exposed to so much. She's fluent in French at age six already, and we just let her, kind of, naturally choose when she's ready to take something on.

Combined with the wonderful socialization that happens at a school, so we're building this co-op aiming at 20 hours a week in a kind of school setting and the rest of the time these families are on homesteads where it's very rich. And the kids also, there's a Wednesday playgroup where they go to the lake and can just have free play together, and that's 10 to 20 kids. So we have a creative way of raising our kids both collectively, most of the families are within walking distance and my daughter can go play with my friend's daughter Ella, they're the same age. And they have Etta for the day, and then the next day I'll have Ella and Etta.

And so it creates incredible abundance, too, as parents. We have a lot of open time. And Sarah's mom moved down the road, and dad. So we have grandparents; my mom's moving here part-time. One of our other member's parents are moving here from Chicago. So we're really building a multi-generational movement where everyone can enter. Sarah's parents, they're in La Plata, they have wood heat, but they have electricity. They have an organic garden and 12 orchard trees, and they have rain catchment. But they also have internet and hot shower. So they're moving at their pace which is wonderful. And everyone's kind of moving towards this goal at all different locations, we can all hang out and enjoy the entry points.

And so for our kids, we have, one big thing is family of all generations and friends, where we're sharing the care of our kids. And school settings where we're doing explicit learning like, I was Burrow Bob and we would run out all day in the forest and identify trees and very hands-on learning. So, that's kind of where we're at right now, and I think in a few years we'll move to actually offering an amazing alternative school for everyone in the area.

Another wonderful, inspiring conversation, Mr. Hughes. Thank you so much for this time, and answering the questions but also bringing in all the different elements of what makes the work you're doing functional. I really appreciate that in understanding the mindset and the perspective that goes with it. Is there anything else that you'd like to add to this conversation for the listeners?

EH: Yeah, just, one, I feel really honored that people had a lot of questions and were interested in our last interview. **(1:05:00)** I would like to say that what's moving in your heart is real. That sometimes, people we connect with are very isolated in a city or somewhere else and feel really misunderstood. But this yearning to actually have social and ecological justice, this yearning to have a world with no war, it's an authentic urging. As Martin Luther King said, the universe bends towards justice. Whatever your worldview—love, god, spirit the wonderful aspects of creation—this is to say, it's a real yearning. It's authentic, it's not crazy. And if I can quote a superhero that said, "You're not going crazy, you're going sane in an insane world."

And so, yeah I'm just honored to be here and want to offer too that people can come here and visit and get a taste of it and start getting, as I call them, possibility cheerleaders. Find people, the few people in your life who are cheering you on to live an authentic life and, yeah, it'd be wonderful to, through this medium, to make

real human connections down the road. Which I'm sure will happen. So, yeah, I'm just excited and hope maybe one of the listeners I'll meet face-to-face at some point. That'd be a great gift.

I would kind of like to do a permaculture road trip and make stopping to visit you one of those points.

EH: Yeah, great. And just thanks again for, it's always wonderful. I do have the experience, too, of sitting down with an old friend under a tree when I talk with you, so. Thanks for the heart that you bring into this process.

And thank you for this time. There's an idea within storytelling from the Greek traditions of Kronos as the passage of time, but Kairos are those moments of meaning, that, those memories that you have, those meanings that stick with you—the birth of a child—or, times like this. That first conversation that we had and the things that I remember from it and carry with me. And now to have another one with you. So, thank you for this Kairos in my own life.

EH: You're welcome. Have a wonderful day, it's been a really wonderful start to my morning.