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A Path to Food Self-Provisioning and Experiences from Learning New Skills: An Autoethnographic Depiction

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Abstract

In this autoethnographic depiction, I tell a story of change and renewal. In the narrative, I present a story of personal choices and epiphanies that have changed the course of my life. At the turning point, I portray the process of learning new skills regarding food self-provisioning. I come from a privileged, but de-skilled, middle-class suburban background, and the past four years has been a diverse journey of insecurity, alienation, and fatigue, but also of learning, empowerment, and self-realization. From a person with limited skills, to an at least somewhat skilled food neo-self-provisioner, I have partaken in a process of becoming, which is rich in experience but psychologically and physically demanding. The challenges of living a sustainable and ethical life, amidst contemporary societies, are plenty, but in this research the main hurdles are located in the shortage of time, and rootlessness, in the form of eroded communal bonds, lack of peer support, and broken intergenerational relations.

Keywords

autoethnography, food self-provisioning, skills, eco-phenomenology, evocative

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A Path to Food Self-Provisioning and Experiences from Learning New Skills: An Autoethnographic Depiction

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In this autoethnographic depiction, I tell a story of change and renewal. In the narrative, I present a story of personal choices and epiphanies that have changed the course of my life. At the turning point, I portray the process of learning new skills regarding food self-provisioning. I come from a privileged, but de-skilled, middle-class suburban background, and the past four years has been a diverse journey of insecurity, alienation, and fatigue, but also of learning, empowerment, and self-realization. From a person with limited skills, to an at least somewhat skilled food neo-self-provisioner, I have partaken in a process of becoming, which is rich in experience but psychologically and physically demanding. The challenges of living a sustainable and ethical life, amidst contemporary societies, are plenty, but in this research the main hurdles are located in the shortage of time, and rootlessness, in the form of eroded communal bonds, lack of peer support, and broken intergenerational relations.

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My story begins from ignorance, and of being lost. Then I go through a political and ecological “awakening,” which leads to hatred, guilt, and shame, but also, a re-finding of purpose and meaning. The story ends at a new beginning, to a new home, to place where the skills of food self-provisioning are learned and practiced.

A bit over ten years ago I started to divert from a middle-class career-oriented track. This might be difficult to tell, because I have been able, so far, to find employment in academia. Nonetheless, I have tried do it on my own terms.

For most people, what lies at the end of my “diversion” is not convincing. When I offer a vision, for instance in class, of small scale, local, and communal economies, tied together by the acts, practices, and skills of subsistence (Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999; Shiva, 2008; Smaje, 2020), most students reject it. I understand, I rejected it too, at first.

I present an autoethnographic depiction, a journey and narrative of myself, as a person who is keen to learn the skills of food self-provisioning to live a contented, and hopefully at some point, an ethical and sustainable life. This story is about self-discovery, of finding a way out of the stresses, anxieties, and burnouts of contemporary society, but also of insecurity, empowerment, and trial and error.

By food self-provisioning, I mean the process, skills, and practices that are connected to the acts of providing food for oneself, a household, or a community (see Suomalainen et al., 2023, p. 2). As a concept and aim, food self-provisioning is closely connected to subsistence communities and cultures (Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999) and to reproductive labor (Salleh, 2009, 2010). However, in the light of the existing food self-provisioning literature, a conscious approach to attain a sustainable and ethical life by means of food self-provisioning, can be considered marginal, at least currently, in the industrialized North (see e.g., Danek & Jehlicka, 2020; Pungas, 2019; Suomalainen et al., 2023).

To be sure, my personal motivations are not in the spotlight of the research, but rather the memories, recollections, and experiences that I have gone through in the process of learning new skills. Thus, the research question is: *what sort of experiences, emotions, and sensations does a person go through in the process of learning the skills of food self-provisioning?* The method applied in this study is evocative autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) and the approach to experience and enskillment is (eco-) phenomenological (Brown & Toadvine, 2003; Ingold, 2000).

Next, I elaborate on the method, and then tell a personal story where I go through some of the key moments – epiphanies – that have changed the course of my life towards food self-provisioning. After this, I introduce the research process and context to the reader, and then depict my experiences regarding learning new skills as a neo-food-self-provisioner.

On the Autoethnographic and Phenomenological Method

Especially during the past ten years, I have, at times, contemplated the things that have changed the course of my life. I was on a steady track of reproducing and becoming a middle-class businessperson stereotype of sorts, much like my father and brother, but then I diverted from this track. I have a certain narrative in my mind, certain events, books, people I met, things I heard and said, which left a mark and altered something. Each of these moments in some way build into the time when I have been writing this text. I have struggled with the writing. I think this has been because so far, I have mostly written based on other peoples' sayings and ideas, in contrast to this research process, where I have tried to formulate a narrative based on personal experiences, especially from the past four years (2019-2023). In other words, it has been a whole new experience to write about myself with a personal voice, while at the same time keeping in mind that this is an academic study.

When thinking of a suitable form and a method of communicating this research and its findings to the reader, I for some reason, and from early on, considered it as a personal narrative – a story. This seemed appropriate because the process had a setting, temporal ordering of events, a protagonist that was going through different phases and experiences, who struggled along the way, but also learned many things. Still, it took time for me to learn that what I was doing, method-wise, could be called (evocative) autoethnography (see Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Denzin, 2014).

Autoethnography is an approach to research that combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011; see also Denzin, 2014), to describe and analyze personal and bodily experiences (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005; Tuinamuna & Yoo, 2020). As a method it acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity and emotionality, while it is explicitly conscious of the researcher's influence on the research (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274; see also Custer, 2014). When writing an autobiography, a writer retroactively selects past experiences, and analyses them in contrast to specific events. These events and experiences are most often shared with others, and assembled using hindsight and reflection (Bruner, 1993; Freeman, 2004; Adams & Holman Jones, 2011).

As Bochner and Ellis (2016) note, evocative autoethnography deliberately blurs the boundaries between science and art. The researcher's own bodily sensations, emotions, and reflections are present in the text, which is often written as a story (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Custer, 2014; Grant & Zeeman, 2012). The aim is to look back, remember, and try to make sense of what has happened, and how it made one feel: "We frame and cast our vision over experiences through which we've lived, and we invite others into conversation about the meanings of these events" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 46).

As Bochner and Ellis (2016, p. 50) aptly note, researchers live in the world too: "Many of us were drawn to a life of research by our lived experiences of emotional epiphanies that

changed or deeply affected us. We also believe that these experiences strongly influence our perceptions and interpretations of other people's lives."

Following this line of thought, the researcher is required to acknowledge their self-interests, values, political ideals, and emotions that they carry to the research project, simply because these factors influence the research (Averett & Soper, 2011; Bochner & Ellis, 2016). In other words, evocative autoethnography, as a method, seeks to include the author's experience in a holistic way, and not to reduce scientific inquiry to distanced and supposedly neutral descriptions, or simply to puzzles of logic and reason.

The approach to scientific inquiry, in this study, is also (eco-)phenomenological (e.g. Abram, 2017 [1996]; Brown & Toadvine, 2003; Ingold, 2000; Toadvine, 2009), as I utilize Ingold's (2000) conception of skills (see section on Skills and Experiences). In food self-provisioning, the body and perception are constantly put to work and as Abram (2017, p. 45) writes based on Merleau-Ponty, "the body itself is the true subject of experience." Life is, according to Merleau-Ponty (Toadvine, 2009, p. 87) "interrogative being," in which "nature is discovered, not invented" (Marietta, 2003, 121).

In this sense, learning by doing is exploratory, a process in which the ties to one's surroundings gradually deepen through participation and active bodily engagement (Ingold, 2000). Similarly, as Marietta (2003) writes, I too feel that, for a food self-provisioner, when working in the garden, a sharp division between the self and the environment is not present, but it is a process of collaboration, assistance, and participation (see also Abram, 2017; Ingold, 2000). Moreover, and although phenomenological research is subjective, this does not mean that the researcher is not allowed to push for more general conclusions based on experiences.

In this study, I pushed for "concrete reflection" in contrast to the often abstract and intellectualized reflection that we witness throughout academia (Marietta, 2003, p. 123). I was particularly interested in depicting what psycho/physical experiences, emotions, and sensations I go through in the process of becoming skilled in food self-provisioning, which is something that the previous literature on food self-provisioning has not done so far. Now, before presenting and discussing these experiences, and outlining the research process, I first share personal epiphanies, to introduce the writer to the reader, but also to recap the key events that changed the course of my life towards food self-provisioning.

Epiphanies

As I recollected my life and its key moments and the memories related to them, they seemed to lead me to a place, a position, and construct an identity that "made" the person I felt I was when writing this text (Hoppes, 2014). However, the reader should take note that this research is written as a story, which is based on memories, experiences, writings, and bodily sensations. All are somewhat unreliable testimonies – as any personal testimony is – and porous sources of information produced by a fallible being (Gannon, 2006).

I am privileged. A white male, with a middle-class background, living in an affluent country (Finland). I have mostly taken these things for granted, which to me, is common among the privileged. I have always lived in relatively affluent neighborhoods, however my parents were not educated – I was the first one to go to university from my parent's families. Anyhow, because of my background and gender, it is highly probable I have gained things quite effortlessly compared to many, if not most. But certainly, being privileged does not mean that I do not suffer or feel (self-) hatred for the unjust colonial and imperialist histories, or pain for the dying world, or blame myself for these things. Obviously I do, but I gather it is a different kind of pain. It is pain mixed with shame and restlessness for not knowing what to do to change things for the better, or even how to take responsibility for personal actions.

I was a happy child, gifted in sports, and a bit better than average student. Mostly, I did not do homework, and remained indifferent to the things I was been taught. In my adolescence, I was interested in kicking a ball, shooting a puck, kissing girls, going to movies, and listening to records. Unaware and unappreciative, I was perhaps something of a stereotypical ignorant boy growing up amidst material comforts in the suburban “city” of Espoo, in the greater Helsinki region in Finland.

Because I lacked any other horizons for the next step, after graduating from high school, I decided to apply to a business school. My parents, relatives and their friends all worked in the private sector. Business was all I knew, and I strongly felt that my parents expected me to educate myself further.

In the second year of my studies, I realized that something was wrong. I had quit a semi-professional ice hockey career, my first love had left me, and I had little motivation to study. Who was I meant to become? Study-wise I explained to myself that I was in a business school to learn how the world of commerce worked and affected everything else in society, but I was not able to find meaning in the studies, or connect with the people accompanying me there. I grew my hair long, and wore unconventional clothes, as a silent but visible protest. I wanted to show that I did not fit in there.

I took a year off, but nothing had really changed when I returned to study, in 2007. I drifted along. Whether in or outside studies, I felt resignation and purposelessness. I was lost.

I met a psychologist, and after a couple of sessions, she suggested that I had an identity crisis. Strangely that helped. It was good to have a name for the internal confusion.

Then came the crash. In 2008, a financial meltdown occurred on Wall Street, which quickly turned into a global financial crisis. At first the event had little effect on me, but eventually, and as the public outrage grew, and bankers and politicians were accused of being greedy and irresponsible, I also became interested in the reasons behind the crisis.

I felt frustrated because I could neither explain nor understand what the crisis was about. This was particularly disturbing to me because I was studying a master’s degree in a business school. To be fair, I later understood that business schools are not places to search for answers for the systemic failure concerning the very system that the business school integrally reproduces (see Ruuska, 2017).

Around the time, and before (personal) flight guilt, it was a trendy and hip thing to embark on a trip of self-discovery and explore the world with a backpack on a shoestring budget. I figured that perhaps I could find my life’s direction on the road. To finance the trip, I worked a bullshit job (Graeber, 2018) for six months and saved enough money for a 9-month trip around the world.

During my time travelling, and while listening to the stories and struggles of the local people, and after reading novels such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, *1984* by George Orwell, *The Cave* by José Saramago, and non-fiction such as *Mountains beyond Mountains* by Tracy Kidder, *Invictus* by John Carlin, and *Gandhi* by Louis Fischer, I noticed that something was changing. In Finland I had lived a shielded life with material comforts, which lacked purpose and meaning. In contrast to this, the trip introduced me to a multitude of problems: inequality, injustice, corruption, poverty, and environmental hazard and conflict. Back home these things were “hidden” or so assimilated and normalized in the cultural fabric that people remained indifferent, for instance, towards the destruction of industrial forestry and clear-cuts. On the journey, however, in many places, socio-ecological problems were staring me right in the face.

What is more, I could see, if only distantly at first, how these problems were linked to global power imbalances, but also to my own privileged background and the material comforts I enjoyed back home. This “colonizer’s awakening” caused feelings of shame, but also empathy and solidarity for the undermined masses. I felt powerlessness for not knowing what to do to

help, but also hatred towards the career-centered and consumption-based middle-class life that was awaiting me back home. Roughly halfway through the journey, in February 2011, on a small Indonesian island, I wrote in my travel notebook: “A life serving economic growth feels utterly demoralizing and pointless!”

Now I must say that I realize that this is such a cliché, and that the same growth story is told repeatedly. It is a story of an ignorant and well-off subject that goes through life-changing experiences that alter the course of the protagonist’s life. Why tell it once more? Because I feel that my story is about something else, and that the events just described were simply sparks to ignite a flame, and that the real story is not about how to cope with injustices and the ecological crisis, but of letting go, or turning one’s back on an entire way of life. Thus, my story is not necessarily about changing one’s career; it is about finding a way out of a culture of careers (e.g., Boyle, 2019). It is about taking responsibility, and about conscious detachment, a pull away, hopefully, from the destructive industrialism and (neo)colonialist relations of oppression, to the outskirts of contemporary society.

When we got back to Finland, in June 2011, I had spent all my money. I applied for another bunch of meaningless jobs, got one, but the real plan was to go back to school. “This time it would be different!”, I declared, because now I was motivated to learn. I wanted to understand how the economic organization (read capitalism), which makes some rich at the expense of others functioned. I worked days in an energy corporation for a climate change denier boss, and educated myself in the evenings, while planning a doctoral program application, and a PhD research plan.

When travelling, I had heard echoes of a movement that was questioning the benefits and purpose of perpetual economic growth. In the autumn of 2010, the first noteworthy *degrowth* seminar, *Kasvu murroksessa* (Growth in change), was held in Helsinki, including keynotes from Serge Latouche, Tim Jackson, and Peter Victor. The event also made some waves in the Finnish political landscape and was, to some extent, covered by the mainstream media. I picked up one or two of those stories, and later, when we returned home, started reading about the subject.

I read, for instance, Serge Latouche’s *Farewell to Growth* (2009), Tim Jackson’s *Prosperity without Growth* (2009), Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* (2008), and Susan George’s *Whose Crisis, Whose Future?* (2010). This was also the time when the Indignados movement in Spain and the Occupy Movement in the US were making headlines and spreading to other countries. I visited the Occupy camp in Helsinki city center, attended my first environmental demonstrations, and started attending activist meetings and gatherings of the emerging Finnish Degrowth Movement. I was then, in spring 2012, accepted to the doctoral program at Aalto University School of Economics. I remember the feeling when I opened the envelope – I had been admitted! I felt dizzy and cried as I thought my life was going to change. I was right, but I did not realize just how much.

I chose Aalto University because it was the only place I really knew (regardless of its name, it was still my old school – it had changed its name in a merger in 2010), and the only place where I had connections in (Finnish) academia, but also by chance: my master’s thesis supervisor had, in passing, suggested that I should consider pursuing a PhD. At the time, it felt ridiculous, because the thought had never crossed my mind, perhaps because of my class background, and lack of social and cultural capital.

I immediately found like-minded PhD students in the Department of Management, which had a research group dealing with issues of sustainability and responsibility in business. From this point onwards things moved fast, so fast in fact that I had difficulty maintaining the prior personal relationships I had when entering the PhD program. I made new friends in researcher and activist groups, with people that did not shy away from any topic, debate, or critical self-reflection. I started reading Marx, Gramsci, and Žižek. Then in my second year of

doctoral studies, I found John Bellamy Foster's work on ecological Marxism (e.g., *Marx's ecology*, 2000), and Louis Althusser's work on education and reproduction (*On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 2014 [1995]), which would form the core of my PhD research.

In the subsequent months and years, I read environmental philosophy, deep ecology, ecofeminism, eco-anarchism and anarcho-primitivism, post-development and post-colonial studies, and books on deep green radicalism and militancy. The more I read, the more I was inspired and baffled. People had always resisted their oppressors; not all human cultures were prone to colonize others, or to destroy their habitats—quite the contrary! I had found a new direction, a purpose even, as I discovered that my task in the PhD would be to study the roots causes of the ecological crisis, and the main culprits. Purposeful and intriguing as it was, it also added to my hatred towards contemporary society, and myself as a particle of it. I tried to channel the hatred towards activism and to the PhD, which eventually developed into one of the few anti-capitalist doctoral theses defended in business schools in Finland (see Ruuska, 2017).

As a result of the critical readings, radical company, and anti-capitalist activism, my mind was turning radical, but the world around me had not changed. Not surprisingly, I was facing another contradiction, the next identity crisis. It was borne out, on the one hand, from the conviction that the modern consumerist and productivist way of life is utterly unsustainable, irresponsible, and ethically unjustifiable, and on the other hand, from me living an urban “hipster lifestyle.” This contradiction, I should note, has not been fully resolved at the time of writing this article.

Originally it was a close colleague, collaborator, and friend, Pasi Heikkurinen, who first questioned and confronted our urban way of life and made a plea for joint rural relocation based on the practices of self-provisioning. At first, I objected. I argued that I wanted to stay in the city to spread the knowledge, to teach, to be an activist. He noted that those things were all fine but argued then that it would be impossible to live a sustainable and responsible life in the city, and that the only way to take responsibility for personal actions was to head “back to the land.” After visiting a couple of small farms, and eco-villages, where our newly met friends were pushing for self-sufficiency, I became convinced; but it took several years to convince my partner, and for us to reach a sufficient compromise.

During the following years, the insight of rural relocation led a small bunch of friends to search for places beyond the urban, which ultimately lasted from 3 to 7 years depending on the household. For me, my spouse, and our child, relocation took 6 years. After many failed attempts and disappointments, we finally found a place beyond the urban – but not together with others, which was the original plan. The fact that we could not form a community, even with joint aims and values, still perplexes me today. We all went our separate ways for many reasons, which mostly were linked to lack of trust and low self-esteem that we could actually do well beyond the urban, but also to money and the loans we would have to share, in addition to the fear of being isolated and alone in rural Finland.

Nonetheless, the planned rural relocation was not only about pursuing a more sustainable life and getting “back” or “closer to nature” but was somewhat academic experiment as well. Quite soon, and once we had started studying and teaching topics of sustainability and unsustainability in universities, myself, Pasi and others concluded that sustainability was difficult, if not impossible, to understand or to teach from the “outside” in a detached way. In other words, we perceived that sustainability could not be learnt from books, but “sustainable life” had to be lived and experienced. What is more, we argued to ourselves that through the acts of self-provisioning we could cut ties, at least partly, to the unsustainable, unjust, and unethical global growth-economy, and the processes of extractivism, and habitat destruction. It was time, I declared, to put an end to living at others' expense, and the time to self-provide.

To be sure, this has not yet happened but partially, and I must confess that our life is not standing on a sustainable basis here in Nuuksio, as I am still very much dependent on the work of others. For instance, we still buy most of our food from the supermarket, we rely on the coal- and nuclear-powered electricity network when it gets really cold in the winter, and we are dependent on the private car infrastructure for our work commuting, especially in the wintertime. Nonetheless, the difference between this life and my prior urban life is that I now have an opportunity to pursue various paths of self-provisioning, especially regarding the cultivation of food, foraging, and fishing, but also to take care of the heating and the maintenance of our house. In other words, we possess the *potential* for self-provisioning, but also for sustainability, and possibly for emancipation too.

To connect academia even more deeply to the personal metamorphosis, I have been fortunate to receive a postdoctoral research grant for an autoethnographic study on skills and food self-provisioning (2019-2021), and then be involved in a Finnish Academy funded research project entitled *Skills of self-provisioning in rural communities* (2021-2024). Thus, and since 2019, I have been able to combine research, and university work, to learn the skills of self-provisioning, and although I have criticized the proto-capitalist academia heavily in my previous work (Ruuska, 2017, 2018, 2023), it is also true that academia has enabled my personal, and perhaps also unexpected journey. Unexpected, because I never pictured myself writing a PhD, being an academic, becoming an activist, becoming a scholar or alternative agrarian political economy, or a food self-provisioner. The teenage ice hockey player to become corporate manager me would have had a hard time believing all of this.

However, while the journey has already taken many turns, I feel that I am only at the very beginning. In any case, through academic research, activism, and new friends, I discovered that the seeds for meaningful and potentially sustainable life lie in self-provisional activities, and probably beyond the urban realm, although it true that we never escaped too far from the city.

Life, the Place, and the Research Process in Nuuksio (so far)

Although 75% of Finland's land area is covered by trees, there are hardly any intact woodlands – only 2.9% are in natural shape (Sabatini et al., 2018). Most of these primeval forests are in the Northern parts of the country. Uusimaa region, in the south, is the economic hub of the country, where approximately 30% of the country's 5.5 million human inhabitants live. In the heart of the Uusimaa region sits Nuuksio National Park (53 km² in size). The name *Nuuskio* is of Sámi origin. The region was once a passing through place for the Sámi peoples, and the name was given by them, which in the current Northern Sámi language is *njukča*, meaning whooper swan (*Cygnus cygnus*).

Our home is right at the edge of the natural park's southern border, which is sometimes hard to believe, because we are surrounded, in all directions, by clear-cuts that often end only at the border of the natural park. Scattered landscapes of small wood patches and clear-cuts are typical sights across Finland, in a country which has become affluent by logging its wilderness to develop its pulp and paper industry, and the renowned welfare state. Regardless of our proximity to Helsinki, our place is relatively remote. Our closest streetlight is a bit over three kilometers away, as is our closest bus stop. The area where we live is a sparsely populated lake district with mostly summer residents inhabiting lake shores, at the end of dirt roads.

Our lot is 4000m² in size. We bought it in late 2019 from an elderly couple who had owned the place for almost 50 years. They were fond of gardening, which was one of the main reasons we became interested in it. The place is a mixture of modern comforts and premodern set ups – an earth cellar, hand pump well, dry toilet, two heat-storing fireplaces, two green houses, and a simple irrigation system that gets its water from the lake close by. It is a set up

that leaves us plenty of room to experiment with lower and higher technology, and with manual and machine labor. The garden takes up little less than half of the whole lot with fifteen apple trees, almost thirty berry bushes (with 8 different varieties), and a sizeable vegetable garden (see the collage below). The lake gives us an opportunity to fish, and the surrounding forest provides all the mushrooms, wild herbs and berries we need.

Although the setting is favorable for food self-provisioning, one must possess the skills, time, and energy to take up the initiative. My observation is that a career-oriented houseowner in Finland, with a fulltime job and a large mortgage, does not typically have any of those. One could claim that this is one of the sustainability problems in a modern society. It seems to me that almost no one in contemporary industrial societies does the things that are linked to the fulfilment of their basic needs or conducts what Salleh (2009, 2010) calls *reproductive labor*—that is, for instance, grow their own food, educate the children, or take care of their parents—but instead works in a system that is geared towards economic growth, conspicuous consumption, pollution, and waste. While it is certainly true that many Finns do venture into food self-provisioning, it seems to be merely a hobby for most, rather than a livelihood.



Collage: Picture on the left: part of our vegetable garden in Nuuskio, our other greenhouse behind it, a yellow woodshed, our house (the white building behind the greenhouse), and the yellow cottage for summer use (the original building of the lot from 1955); Centre picture: the other greenhouse, which used to be a summer pavilion, in late May 2022; Bottom right picture: road leading to our house; Top right picture: part of our vegetable garden in July 2021, and our neighbor's white greenhouse.

My situation is quite similar: At the time of writing, I work at the University of Helsinki – at least until August 2024. As those who know academia would perhaps agree, however, there is still a certain type of freedom and autonomy involved. If one fulfils his duties (research, teaching, administration, supervision, etc.) and publishes articles (!), one has the space and time, at least to a certain degree, to act according to one's own schedule, and especially if one is able combine research and self-provisioning, it certainly provides legitimacy to spend time in the garden, and away from the university office.

Regardless of all the personal situational abnormalities, however, I still do not have enough time to self-provide, and we only get approximately 25% of our foodstuffs from the household garden, lake, and forest. On top of this, we are self-sufficient in firewood, but when it gets really cold, we also heat the house with an air heat pump that takes its power from the electrical grid. It is true that we are by no means self-sufficient nor is our lifestyle sustainable, but regardless of this I think that self-provisioning should be considered as a process, where self-provisioners define their own aims, rhythms, and ambitions regarding their targeted level of self-sufficiency, and based on their socio-ecological circumstances and abilities. Or alternatively, self-provisioning, and subsistence could be considered as a continuum, where one is more or less self-reliant, and possibly also more or less sustainable depending on the activities and socio-cultural circumstance.

While I had some prior, but nevertheless very limited, experiences of food self-provisioning (e.g., working in the field of a food co-operative, and helping friends who grow most of their own food), the actual work, enskillment, and research process really started in late 2019, when we moved to Nuuksio, and once I had planted the first tomato, bell pepper and cucumber seeds in the Spring 2020. The first planting season was modest, due to our settling into the place, but the next year, 2021, all the space available for annual plants in our garden was used. It was also the first year that I chopped the firewood necessary for the following winter myself with an axe – for the first year, we had relied on the reserves the previous owners had left us. In the 2022 season I expanded our vegetable garden and made significant efforts to better the quality of the soil, which, together with the warm summer, yielded a 20% better crop than the year before. However, we lost an equal amount of the harvest to deer, which urged us to build taller fences to deer-proof our garden in the spring 2023.

The winter is long, cold, and dark in Finland, as is the summer short and full of light. In principle this means that if one wishes to grow the plants that require a longer growth time, one must nurture the seedlings inside next to a window in the spring. In the growth season 2023, I again sprouted four different varieties of tomato, in addition to sage, bell pepper and celeriac. Other seeds were planted to our windowsills in the following months, and were eventually moved outside in May and early June. The harvest began again in July, but most of the harvest took place in August and September, while the growth season continued until early November.

The acts of food self-provisioning naturally structure the annual work calendar. The seasons that steer the process of food self-provisioning, and the weather dictates, and often interrupts, the day's schedule. In fact, one may be surprised how much self-provisioners observe and pay attention to the weather. Depending on the place and climate, the year's work has a certain rhythm, and its pace depends on the time of the year, and the weather. The time of darkness, that is November, December, January, and to some extent also early February, is the time for rest and planning. Certainly, so far, I have not been able to follow this rhythm, because of my university duties. Anyhow, late February and March is the time for log work, to pile and dry up next winter's firewood. April and May are the time when the garden and the soil are prepared for the growth season, but one must tread carefully, when planting seeds and bringing the seedlings outside, because even in the south of Finland, there is sometimes night frost in early June. Again, compared to industrial labor, reproductive labor (Salleh, 2010), in the form of food self-provisioning, is strikingly different, because unlike industrial paid work, self-provisional labor must follow the rhythms of nature, and its seasonal and day-to-day fluctuations.

Data Collection and Analysis

As Cooper and Lilyea (2022) write, a key question that researchers ask when conducting an autoethnography is what constitutes their data. To answer this, I have produced three sources of physical and visual material that I consider to be the data. The first is a black-covered A4-sized notebook that includes all the necessary cultivation information. What seeds I have had at my disposal, when I have planted them (date), how many seeds, what variety, where exactly in our garden (considering the four-year rotation that we use), how was the weather then, plus some additional notes concerning the received crops, the taste of the fruits and vegetables, and experiences from growing different varieties of tomatoes, potatoes, beans, pumpkins, etc.

The second “data set” is another black covered notebook that includes field notes, which are mostly reflections regarding the work, or bodily sensations, and emotional testimonies. It is important to note that these are all retrospective notes, written after the day’s work. My original idea was to keep the notebook with me in the garden, but I immediately realized that I was so invested in the actual physical work that this would simply not be possible. Some of the notes are more general, for instance, “the skills one must possess in self-provisioning do not require deep expertise, but one must be able to perform many different tasks well enough” (July 28th, 2021), but most entries are just statements regarding my spirit, feelings, or weather, for instance, “My back is already sore from shoveling, but still almost half of the work remains to be done!” (May 15th, 2022). I have kept these notes from the beginning of 2021, and these amount to just over 60 entries, in November 2023.

The third source of data is photos. I have taken them mostly with my university work smartphone, from our garden to follow nature’s cycles and the growth of our plants. The photo data is not systematic, but I have nevertheless taken the photos so frequently that they provide supplementary data to the written reflections, the literal field notes, and cultivation diary. The photo collage above is a selection of the photos I have taken since spring 2021.

As an autoethnography is a form of narrative research (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022), in the analysis of the data, I have followed the lines of narrative inquiry (e.g., Gibbs, 2008; Riessman, 2008). I have tried to bring my voice and personal history into the text to interpret my experiences, and to provide context for the reader. I have kept the story in a chronological format, as I have gone through significant life events and turning points in my life. It is not necessarily a success story, but a story of personal metamorphosis, a story of a person who is trying to find a way out of contemporary society, which means that there are also tensions in the story – it is difficult to change the course of one’s life! I leave it to the reader to judge how much the choices I have made make sense in the end, but based on the data, it was clear to me that this research was going to be about my personal experiences of food self-provisioning (from late 2019 to late 2023), as it is about the past choices I had made before we moved to Nuuksio.

Skills and Experiences

In the following I portray my experiences from the process of becoming more skilled in food self-provisioning – but first the concept of *skill* needs to be addressed. The anthropologist, Tim Ingold, has studied many traditional communities, also in Finland, that are still heavily involved in practices and activities of self-provisioning, and also beyond food cultivation, gathering, hunting, and fishing. In his now classic *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (2000, chapter 19) he separates five dimensions of skills that are also integrally linked to self-provisioning.

Ingold argues, first, that a skill is embedded in a process where something (e.g. the body or a tool) is put to use, through their incorporation into accustomed patterns of competent activity. Second, skills are not simply techniques of the body, but involve an active engagement with its and one's surroundings. Third, skill is the property of the total field of relations (tool-body/mind-community-culture-environment) constituted in a richly structured environment. Thus, a skilled practice is not only the application of mechanical force to exterior objects, but entails qualities of care, judgement and ability. Moreover, Ingold (2000, 353) notes that practitioners always watch, feel, and perceive as they work.

The fourth dimension in conceptualizing skills deals with how they are learned. Ingold (*ibid*, see also Ingold, 1996; Ingold & Kurttila, 2000) states that skilled practice does not reduce to a formula, and hence skills cannot be passed on as a formula, from generation to generation. Certainly, the learning of skills involves both observation and imitation, and as Ingold and Kurttila (2000, p. 193) write, skills are learned through “a mixture of imitation and improvisation in the setting of practice.” In other words, people gradually develop their own ways of doing things, but in contexts structured by the presence and activities of their predecessors (*ibid*). Ingold (2000, pp. 353-354; see also Gatewood, 1985; Gibson 1979, p. 254), continues the discussion elsewhere, and writes that a person gradually gets the “feel” of things, through repetition and observations, that is:

he learns to fine-tune his own movements so as to achieve the rhythmic fluency of the accomplished practitioner [...]. And in this process, each generation contributes to the next not by handing on a corpus of representations, or information in the strict sense, but rather by introducing novices into contexts which afford selected opportunities for perception and action, and by providing the scaffolding that enables them to make use of these affordances (Ingold, 2000, pp. 353-354).

Ingold's fifth dimension of skills deals with making things. Following the line of thought on the four other dimensions on skill, Ingold (*ibid*, p. 354) writes that making is embedded or arises within the process of use, “rather than use disclosing what is, ideally if not materially, ready-made.” In plain words, we can conclude that skills are an essential part of various social practices. Skills are something that people imitate, do, know, apply, learn, teach and cultivate. Contexts (richly structured environments) define and shape the performance of skills, where, for instance, self-provisioners use their judgement, care, and make use of their abilities in various skilled practices. Moreover, skills can be learned in various ways, but repetition, improvisation, and imitation are essential parts of the learning process. Skills also have a history and materiality, which are shaped and applied by the practitioners. In the following, I apply this typology to my personal experiences of learning and practicing the skills of self-provisioning.

As already mentioned, my skills in self-provisioning were thin prior to our move to Nuuksio, in late 2019, and just before the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in Finland. I knew how to chop wood with an axe, and to make small repairs and renovations, but other than that, I considered myself a modern city-dweller – a person who had been in school for all his life, and possessed some skills, almost none of them related to food self-provisioning. I was a beginner, but I took this baseline as a challenge, and I wanted to put myself to the test. I thought that if I, an incompetent person in food self-provisioning, could learn some of the skills, then many others could too, if they so desired. It is also important to add that I consider food self-provisioning to be more than just skills and bodily acts directed towards attaining a daily meal. Above everything else, I consider it as a potential enabler of a good and ethical life, and an emancipatory step away from stress, depression, and anxiety, which are sensations and emotions that I strongly link to modern society and working life (see Heikkurinen et al., 2021).

Based on my personal experiences from the past four years, perhaps the greatest challenge in learning the skills of self-provisioning is their sheer number. As we live in a society full of experts, it is easy to think that to be skillful in something is to know something really well. However, there is no point in knowing things from top to bottom in food self-provisioning, or doing something really well, because one simply does not have the time for it, because there are so many things to do. The aim is instead to become *good enough* in every part of the process. Food self-provisioning is thus not about mastering a single craft, like working the soil, or about mastering a single instrument, like a professional violinist in a symphony orchestra, but knowing how to play all the other instruments, to know every process and practice *well enough*.

Regarding the process of food self-provisioning, the greatest personal concern and source of insecurity has been to understand the number and range of different skills, and in my situation without anything else but random situational guidance from more experienced friends, and frequent phone calls and text/photo messaging. A great hurdle for my enskilment is evidently the lack of peers and more experienced elders, to whom I could imitate and learn from (see also the Afterword section). This realization has caused me to visit friends, and places such as the Self-sufficiency Institute in Northern Karelia, to learn from examples, and not only based on personal trial and error.

Moreover, and as Ingold (2000, chapter 19) writes, skills are much more than knowing how to use one's body to do something, and many skills are abstract, and almost always contextual. In my experience, food self-provisioning involves, for instance, the ability to manage complex and overlapping processes at the same time (prioritizing), the ability to connect different work phases to each other (scheduling), the ability to negotiate and deliberate with the surroundings (negotiating), other people and with oneself, the ability to make ad hoc decisions, and also receptivity and alertness (e.g., to changes in the weather).

While still being in the very beginning of the learning process, I'm constantly thinking what I should do next. Should I plant the beetroot seeds, or the carrots? Do I have time to repair the greenhouse, or should I prioritize the soil preparation? Should I keep on wheelbarrowing, although I feel fatigue, but I want to prepare a new place for the corn now that it is sunny and warm? Should I weed the onions, etc.? The problem is of course that none of these things have a straightforward answer. Instead, it is a process of trial and error, which becomes easier with experience and enskilment. In any case, self-provisioning seems to be about seeing the big picture (the management of the process, and the ability to place oneself in it spatially and temporally, to understand what one should do next, or tomorrow, or next week/month). Now, as I have cried about my inability to do this, my more experienced friends in food self-provisioning have reassured me that the kind of psycho-physical understanding of the big picture takes time to develop, and is linked to the place of provisioning, but nonetheless, 4-5 seasonal cycles should already provide some understanding of how to manage the whole. In a sense, one is constantly learning through failure, and in the meanwhile picks up valuable embodied lessons of how to master the process.

Indeed, as Ingold (2000, chapter 19) writes, bodily skills take time and repetition to nurture. The requirement to learn so many new things, and to rely on oneself, in addition to the demand of putting one's body to work, surely makes the whole neo-self-provisioning experience psycho/physically challenging. During the first years in Nuuksio, in addition to learning how to manage the whole, I have tried to learn how to cope with the restrictions of my body. I have not succeeded as well as I would have liked to and have repeatedly overworked myself. I feel that this might be due to the lack of steady and frequent manual labor, and because, thus far I have not succeeded in dividing the work into sufficient passages. Yet sometimes, I have caught a break. For instance, in spring 2022, I was glad that it was so cold, and that the snow melted late, because my body was still sore from chopping the following

winter's firewood. That "lateness" offered me the chance to rest my body, and gather strength to expand our vegetable garden, which involved heavy shoveling and wheelbarrowing of soil back and forth in our yard.

Many self-provisioner friends I have talked to about work fatigue confess that it is very common to overwork oneself, especially at the beginning of the lifestyle change. The more experienced friends have all offered the same advice: to take it slowly. Inpatient as I am, I have had periods (usually in the spring, and in the time of harvest), when I have pushed too hard. I have also blamed myself heavily for not being able to jump out from the career rat race all at once, and only recently started thinking of self-provisioning and self-sufficiency as a relatively long process of renewal and transformation. In the process, it is important to be aware of one's limits with regard to physical labor, while it is also true that one's body becomes accustomed to manual labor, and it is surely a beautiful sensation to go to bed with the feel of a day's work in the limbs.

It is important to have a feel for one's personal limits, because physical reproductive labor is seemingly at the core of food self-provisioning. Surely, cognitive and abstract skills are too, but food self-provisioning skills are nevertheless almost always linked to material practices, such as managing the soil, taking care of plants and seedlings, shoveling, weeding, irrigation, hunting, fishing, gathering, harvest, preservation, cooking, making firewood, construction and repair. As Ingold (2000, chapter 19) writes, these practical skills become more refined with repetition, or as Abram (2017, p. 49) notes, "the sensing body is not a programmed machine but an active and open form, continually improvising its relation to things and to the world." One certainly can learn some elements and frames to a skill from a book, or by watching a person in action, but without practice and repetition, it is difficult to imagine how these skills would develop to the "well enough" level.

Nonetheless, and over time, my experience has been that the skills of food self-provisioning do become more intuitive – the more often and longer one spends working in a vegetable garden visiting the plants and their surroundings, one gets to know them a little better, and to understand their life and needs. For instance, now I know that on a typical Finnish summer, I do not need to stress about potatoes, they will take care of themselves, but if I want to have delicious tomatoes in August, I must pay a (short) visit to the greenhouse every day to check on the temperature, no matter the weather. This is well in line with Abram (2017, p. 49) who writes that "the body's actions and engagements are never wholly determinate since they must ceaselessly adjust themselves to a world and a terrain that is itself continually shifting."

As already expressed, for the unexperienced like me, food self-provisioning can be psychologically demanding. I was mentally and emotionally very insecure during the first planting and harvesting seasons here in Nuuksio. Overall, and perhaps unexpectedly, the spectrum of different emotions, sensations, and feelings has been truly wide-ranging during the past few years. In the urban, I felt anxious, powerless, and alienated for many reasons (see Ruuska, 2021), but primarily, because I felt that my freedom of self-expression was restricted. In Nuuksio, I am free to self-realize, but other insecurities have kicked in, because I have never lived in this kind of environment or self-provided, and I lack a community, and the support of more experienced elders (see also the Afterword section). The lack of tradition, skills and community, point to my low self-esteem and self-confidence.

Peculiarly, the best remedy for this has been to do, to learn, and to fail. I thought, perhaps naively, that soon after we relocated to Nuuksio my modern-day alienation (see Ellul, 1976; Jaeggi, 2016) would be subsumed, at least partially, by feelings of empowerment and self-realization, but after three years, I would instead claim that the process of food self-provisioning is by no means linear. Rather it is a dialectical process of failure and success, alienation and self-realization, insecurity and empowerment, but also fatigue, rest, and recovery. In the year 2022 and early 2023, when I wrote the majority of this text, while working

the soil, planting seeds and seedlings, weeding, nurturing, watering and then harvesting, for the first time I felt that I was *starting* to get the hang of the seasonal way of living, and felt that my confidence was on the rise. Yet, there is still so much I do not know, and I still remain insecure.

After four years, it is clear to me that the learning process, to become a *good enough* food self-provisioner, takes time, but perhaps not too long, and it surely involves both ups and downs. Moreover, I still consider that self-provisioning has the potential to enable a good and responsible life, which offers a lot of room to maneuver and to self-realize. This is because I see food self-provisioning, and other types of reproductive labor, as having the potential for emancipation, that is, self-provisioning may offer pathways to autonomy and freedom, but perhaps in a different way to what people usually think. While life itself ties oneself to a place, the acts of self-provisioning can possibly cut down some of the ties to the destructive and stressful contemporary society. In this way, the step towards self-sufficiency can be emancipatory.

It is true that autonomy and freedom are perhaps not the things that people first connect to self-provisioning (usually they are heavy labor and asceticism), but most often these are the views of the people who have never experimented with it. Personally, it is difficult for me to fathom other, and more meaningful, pathways to sustainable society than local economies and communities whose livelihoods are based on self-provisioning in the past, present, and future (see e.g., Bradford, 2019; Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999; Shiva, 2008; Smaje, 2020).

Afterword: A Cultural Rift?

Today, food self-provisioning as a primary livelihood, is a marginal phenomenon in the North. This is largely so because local economies and communal cultures of self-provisioning have been eroded and dismantled, during the era of industrialization and urbanization. Based on this autoethnographic research, the main hurdle for my personal self-provisioning is the shortage of time for self-provisioning, but also modern-day rootlessness, not knowing where one is from, where one belongs to, or not knowing oneself, but also in the sense of non-existing communal bonds, peer support, and broken intergenerational relations.

While industrial agriculture, and the underlying processes of commodification and capital accumulation, have created metabolic rifts and shifts (e.g., Foster, 2000; Saito, 2023), entailing the degradation of the soil and the worker, there seemingly also exists “a cultural rift.” This cultural rift is the result of the eroding and dismantling of local and communal self-provisional economies due to the processes of division of labor, competition, technologization and urbanization throughout the 20th and 21st centuries (Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999). The urbanization of the planet is truly a cultural turn and shift, where human dwelling has been transformed, from predominantly small village and town economies, with direct ties to the surrounding environment, history, and local culture, to the hectic and fragmentary life of the metropole, which appropriates people, resources, and non-human beings to reproduce the cities, and the underlying processes of industrialism.

The cultural rift also signifies a transformation from communal dwelling to individualism, and a turn from place-based identities and inter-generational relationships to career-based meritocratic employment, long work commuting, and urban identities. In some places, mostly in the Global South, local and communal economies may still thrive, but are constantly at risk of being wiped out by agrobusiness, “development,” and processes of extractivism (Shiva, 2008).

The contrast with industrial labor, and life in the city, is extreme for the remaining land-based communities, which secure their basic needs largely by themselves with relatively low and slow technology, assisted by intergenerational knowledge and skills (see e.g., Ingold, 2000; Shiva, 2008). To repair the rift, there is a need to preserve and rebuild local and communal

economies based on self-provisioning, to re-establish a metabolic fit (Salleh, 2009) between human dwellings and local environments. As Salleh (2009, p. 414) argues “localized metabolic provisioning is eco-sufficient because it does not externalize costs through debt or entropy, or by passing them off to future generations.”

It is evident that the local and communal self-provisional economies require the cultivation of specific and contextual skills (see Ingold & Kurttila, 2000). In order for these skills to become refined, imitation, repetition, trial and error, and improvisation in richly-structured environments (ibid.) are needed. It takes time, patience, and guidance to become a *good enough* food self-provisioner, and the process is by no means linear, but might be a varied and psycho/physically demanding journey of alienation, insecurity, empowerment, and self-realization. One person can learn the skills of self-provisioning, in a relatively short time, but a whole other question is how long does it take for a culture of self-provisioning to re-develop, and to become nurtured in the local eco-social circumstance? Most likely this will take generations.

This is also the paradoxical situation that I find myself in. I now possess some skills, but lack a community, and the foundations for intergenerational continuity. At the same time, my occupational future is unclear, as I try to balance local self-provisioning with the growing demands of academia. I find meaning in them both, but only the other seems to possess the potential for sustainability and emancipation.

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