

The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Adapting In Place: Whether, Why and Wherefore Ought Thou

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Below the fold is a guest post from Sharon Astyk (TOD reader jewishfarmer). This piece is first in a series on adapting to a different type of 'city' and lifestyle than we are currently used to.

If you have insights or expertise to share with theoil drumcom readers please email the campfire editors.



Note: This is the first in what will hopefully be a series of essays about the issues involved in adapting to the Long Emergency without picking up and moving to the New Urbanist dream city or a Farm in the Country.

Adapting In Place: Whether, Why and Wherefore Ought Thou

The first question to ask is whether we should take in-place Adaptation seriously at all. Shouldn't we, ideally, try and choose the best possible place to deal with the coming crisis? Some analysts suggest we will have to have vast population migrations out of suburbia, say, to more densely packed and walkable cities, while others propose re-ruralization. My suspicion is that both of these will probably occur to some degree – but that the progression will be intermittent, not very well organized. And plenty of people will stay in place, either in their homes and apartments, or will settle in property known to them, owned or rented by family or close friends.



Why will they stay? Well, for millions of people who own a home, but aren't in immediate danger of foreclosure, the option of selling, even if they are not "underwater" is problematic – with home sales at historic lows, most of us will be staying put, if we don't lose or abandon our properties. They can't afford to change jobs, because they will lose seniority and potentially get the axe. They can't afford the additional costs of moving, buying a new property or paying first, last and security.

And if they do move? Some of us will migrate, but a lot of us have compelling reasons to live where we do – community, culture, and family. What most of us will probably do in dire circumstances is simply consolidate resources with people we can trust – we'll take in boarders or move in with family or friends. In tough times, we are likely to need family and community more – thus staying close to elderly parents or grandparents who can help with childcare while parents look for work becomes more urgent.

Some of us may also decide where we are is the right place – it isn't just a matter of not being able to move, but of believing that we are best in places we know. The time for the radical changes required by picking up and moving and starting over may have been a few years ago. More familiar projects may be wiser and better for many of us.

Another force pushing us to stay put, as I wrote in my book *Depletion and Abundance: Life on the New Home Front*, one of the most powerful strategies for mitigation is likely to be a move into the informal economy. Teodor Shanin, founder of Peasant Economics has observed that the formal economy (the one most but not all Americans operate in) makes use of only 1/4 of all the world's workers. Most economic activity takes place in the informal economy, and the informal economy generally expands in response to contraction by the formal economy. In an essay in "New Scientist" Shanin writes,

“The concept emerged in Africa 25 years ago. Researchers began to notice that there was no economic explanation for how the majority of the population survived. They didn’t own land. They didn’t seem to have any assets. According to conventional economics, they should have died of hunger long ago, but they survived. To understand this, researchers looked at how these people actually lived, rather than at economic models . They found that their way of life was completely the opposite of how a human being in industrial society survives. They didn’t have a job, pension, steady place to work or regular flow of income. Families held a range of occupations from farming and selling in the market to doing odd jobs or handicrafts. Their aim was survival rather than maximization of profit. Rather than earn wages, labor was used within family.” (archive.newscientist.com/secure/article/article.jsp?rp=1&id=mg1 (article is behind a paywall))

Similar informal economies have emerged in undergoing collapse or economic crisis in Russia, Argentina, and elsewhere, and there is really no reason to believe that the informal economy – which includes domestic labor, cottage industry, illegal activity, under the table businesses, and family economics will not expand here . These economic activities generally make use of family, local, household resources and needs – the soil your home sits on, the wood on your woodlot, providing services to neighbors, making use of household space to operate a business. Where homes have been a major economic drain, they have the potential, for those not over-leveraged, to become a source of income.

It seems likely then that some people whose homes have been or can be made valuable to them – by improving soil, the starting of cottage industries, strong social, familial and community ties, and local economic initiatives will have strong incentives to stay in place. We may see the common pattern of Global South employment in which some family members are sent where formal jobs are available to work, while most of the family remains together. With more people per household, mortgage and property costs may become manageable, while the benefits of family and community are increased by our lack of fossil fuels.

Triaging Your Situation

This does not mean that everyone can or should stay in place. Those who bought homes with ARMs, or at the peak of the market, those already in financial trouble, or without community and family ties may wish or need to relocate. But I still anticipate that at least in the short term, a large number of people all over the world will respond to the present crisis by remaining in their present homes or in a place they have existing ties.

So it is worth asking - what are the first steps if you’ve decided to remain your home, with all its imperfections and disadvantages (and its perfections and advantages – remember, there is no perfect place)? Your goal is to be able to handle what is thrown at you, crises economic, energetic, ecological or political – or all of the above. And the first step, as always, is triage – setting priorities.

First Steps

We all need to get ready to deal with the kind of short term crisis that affects almost everyone sooner or later. Given the fragility of our systems, more and more of these disruptions are likely. Thus, our first project is a medium range systems problem - something that can be caused by ice storms, blizzards, hurricanes, tornadoes, flooding, geopolitical crisis, blackout... you name it. We

need to be ready to get along for a few weeks to a month in a very messed up short term situation. This is useful even if what we face is a very messed up long term situation.

That means moving first to get basic needs met. Thus, we concentrate on first tier solutions. The qualities that these first tier solutions must have are these

1. They keep you alive and healthy.
2. They are simple, accessible and not too expensive – since everyone needs these

You need a reserve of food, and a way to cook it without power, lots of warm clothing and blankets if cold is a potential problem, and sufficient water and ways to keep cool if heat is the issue. You need stored water and a backup source of water. You will want some basic lighting and a way to manage toileting and hygiene issues, clean bodies and clothes. You need away to keep aware of events and communicate with family and community.

Other than the food, medications and water, the emergency measures could be quite cheap, because they don't have to be comfortable and pleasant - for a few weeks, you can winter camp in your house, for a few weeks you can pee in a bucket, for a few weeks you can do laundry infrequently in another plastic bucket, light your evening with your headlamp and rechargeable batteries, communicate with your neighbors by trekking out to knocked together neighborhood bulletin board. That is, you can be uncomfortable and/or inconvenienced for the short term, in most cases. That doesn't mean all the short term solutions are unpleasant – in fact, sometimes you'll be surprised by how minor the inconvenience is, but the most important thing is that you have a way of meeting those needs, not that it be the perfect method.

For those who can't tolerate much discomfort or inconvenience, because of health problems, age, disability or simple intolerance, then you will need to move up a little in the list to the next steps, the long term solutions to these problems. That is, you may need solar panels, expensive equipment or a generator, which come with attendant costs. But for most of us, the first-tier inconvenient but survivable solutions get us part of the way there, and many of them could be used longer if we had no choice.

But we all know that short term isn't everything. What happens if we can't afford electricity or gas anymore? What happens if we're suddenly in the Long Emergency, not the short one? The preparations you've made for a short term crisis will get old really fast - but most of them will still serve you. That is, you will not like lighting your house with only a headlamp and two flashlights, and you will not like going to bed when it gets dark in December in the north, but you can do it if you have no choice. Some of us may already have second tier solutions in place – we might have a wringer washer already and not need the plastic buckets. Still, I recommend that you have the equipment or ability to use these minimal backup solutions, if only so you can teach others in your community.

The Second Tier

The next level of preparations are partly about survival, but more about creating a life you can live with in the long term. If you have money, these are easy changes to make. If you don't have money, it will take time, and saving and scavenging to manage these systems - and you may be stuck with the original, inexpensive backups at times. Only you can decide what you can afford, have time to do, and what portion of your resources you can devote to improving your comfort

The Oil Drum: Campfire | Adapting In Place: Whether, Why and Wherefore Ought <http://www.theoil drum.com/node/5059> and giving you more time – but my own observation is that these accommodations increase rapidly in value in tough situations.

This is where you begin going step by step through the systems you depend on, figuring out what you can do to allow you to live decently and comfortably. Step by step, you start replacing, adding or converting to sustainable systems that will serve you in the absence of existing infrastructure. My own belief is that while renewable energy systems are an excellent supplemental second tier system, your primary systems should operate a technological level you are like to be able to support even in the worst-case scenarios you think likely.

That is, even someone with a solar system large enough to run their washing machine should have a bucket at a minimum, and might want a small pressure washer. Even someone with a generator for their well pump might want a manual pump on their well or rain catchment. Someone with a chainsaw still needs an axe and bucksaw. The reason for this is that things break, supply lines can be disrupted, replacement parts may not be available. Redundancy is healthy – and can be essential. And if you must choose between the solar panels and manual well pump, my own feeling is that you should prioritize a system you can manage, repair and fully understand, whichever that is.

For those without much money, it is much easier to convert permanently to the alternatives in many cases, than it is to maintain both “normal” and “backup” systems. That is, it is hard, if you are poor, to afford solar lanterns - unless, of course, you use them as a lighting source and save money on your electric bill. Sometimes if things seem to costly, the problem may be that you are imagining them as a backup, not a conversion to a new way of life. You may prefer the old way, but if you are serious enough about your concern for the future, converting early isn't the end of the world – our family has made this choice a number of times, in fact.

Some of the choices are easy and cheap - turning your lawn into a landscape of edibles can be quite inexpensive, if you can get slips and starts and divisions from people and buy plants and seeds from your cooperative extension. Converting to a composting toilet is inexpensive and can save you a lot of money on your water bill. Switching to eating out of your food storage can save a lot on your food budget. Sometimes you can do things on the cheap if you have time – but if you have neither time nor money, things get difficult, so you need to prioritize.



The Order and Ethics of Things

There are two good ways to prioritize, and honestly it makes sense to do both simultaneously. Prioritize by urgency, and by availability. Generally, you should concentrate on the things that will matter to your happiness and comfort the most - for a family with two kids in diapers, this might be not having to do laundry in a bucket, for someone who is always cold, a good heat source. But don't also forget (and this is a great chore to delegate to elderly relatives, friends who want to barter or teenagers) to keep an eye on craigslist, freecycle, garage sales and to talk about what you are trying to do with others, so you can take advantage of opportunities. Try and have a list of all the stuff you'd like to do, so that when that old handwasher or treadle sewing machine shows up, you can cross that off your priority list.

While you are finding comfortable ways to keep cool, refrigerate food, keep safe, go to the bathroom and the rest, we can also begin thinking about the long term sustainability and community implications of these projects. That is, if you are going to burn wood, you need to be planting trees and harvesting carefully. You are just as vulnerable to diseases caused by human waste disposal problems as your neighbors - even if you don't contribute to them, you may get sick when your water supply is contaminated. So after you deal with your own water system, share your knowledge. Renewable and lasting systems are central. If your private solutions are likely to contribute to the long term problems, pick different solutions.

In peasant economics, we find that most wealth accumulated by families is passed down through generations. Thus, as Shanin observes, a bicycle for a family may be expected to last until the family's father is too old to ride it and the daughter can take over. Land and property are passed

down, and mostly stewarded – they are not they not disposed of lightly, because they imply an obligation to future generations who are not expected to have enough wealth to replace what we are careless with now. It would behoove most of us, as we make our adaptation plans, to ensure that our strategies serve not just our present, but our future – if our adaptations destroy future capacities to warm, feed, slake thirst, protect other people, perhaps we need to find new adaptation strategies.

Finally, you should practice. That doesn't just mean trying the solar battery charger once, or making sure you know how to cook on your woodstove - try living with these systems routinely, and turning off the ones you've depended on up until now. Consider a test run, when you turn everything off in the winter for a week, or where you live only on your stored and garden food for a month - these tests will tell you really basic things you need to know, and show you the holes in your system while you still have a chance to plug them.



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