

The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

When you should not adapt in place (abridged)

Posted by [Gail the Actuary](#) on June 9, 2010 - 5:48pm in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

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This is a guest post by Sharon Astyk, who posts here as [jewishfarmer](#). This is an abridged version of a post which was previously published on [Causabon's Book](#) on scienceblogs.

Note: *Deciding whether to move is probably a US issue. In much of the rest of the world, folks don't just pick up and leave, because someplace else looks better. -Gail*

Most of the people who take the class I am teaching, *Adapting-In-Place*, reasonably enough, are doing so because they intend to stay where they are or fairly nearby in the coming decades. They know that they may not be in the perfect place, but for a host of reasons - inability to sell a house, job or family commitments, love of place...you name it, they are going to stay. Or maybe it is the best possible place for them.

But I do think it is important to begin the class with the assumption that everything is on the table. Because as little as each of us likes to admit it, it is. There will be many migrations in the coming decades, many of them unwilling and unwanted. And it is always easier (not easy) to consciously choose to step away before you are forced to leave than it is to abandon in pain and storm and disaster your home and never be fully able to return. So it is important to ask - who should not stay in place?

For some people, "getting out of Dodge" is the way to go. That is, I think that some people should absolutely consider leaving where they are, and doing so sooner, rather than later, because they have little or no hope of successfully remaining in place.

In the next decades there are going to be a lot of migrants - and you may be one of them. Migrating and settling in a reasonably livable place might be better - or it might not, and you might want to wait and see. But don't do it in ignorance - find out all you can. The reality is that many people do more research on what movie to see than about our future, and the risks and benefits of the locations we choose.

So here's my list of when to think seriously about getting out. There will be exceptions in every case - my claim is not "you definitely must go" but "think hard about what you are choosing."

1. If you have an adjustable rate mortgage (ARM) and can't reset it, are already facing foreclosure, or have no reason to believe you'll be able to pay for your house. Or, if your current house was bought near the market peak, and you require two full incomes to pay for it and have little equity.

The odds are good you aren't going to keep your house in those circumstances - and the worst possible scenario for you may well be that you go into debt frantically trying to keep your old way

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of life open, which closes off other options. If you have a better choice, one that can provide some stability, or there is hope of selling and getting out from under, seriously consider it.

2. If you have young children or are elderly and have close ties somewhere but are living far away from them in a community that you are not invested in. Not everyone has people (family biological or chosen) who will give you a place at the table, thin the soup to make it stretch, let you sleep on their couch and otherwise cover your back. But if you do, recognize that these people are the beginnings of your tribe. Not all of us have tribes in one place - and some of us have multiple tribes. But if you aren't rooted where you are in some deep way, if you live there primarily for a job, and you can get back to your people think about it seriously.

The people who will most need the support of their family are young families themselves struggling to make do and older people who may need some help. Sometimes these people are even usefully related to one another. Not all family is good; not every friendship can go this far. But if you have these ties, they matter, and they are essential.

3. If you have children or parents you need to care for far away. If you are going to be dealing with your parents' decline, or if you don't have custody of your kids but want to spend time on them, you need to set it up in a way that doesn't make anyone rely on airline or other expensive long distance travel. That means that if they don't come to you, you go to them. It was once perfectly viable to live across the country from your kids, and say, have them spend summers with you - it may no longer be viable. I realize this will be enormously painful and disruptive to families, but if you are the resource for people very far away over the longer term, you need to find a way to be closer to one another, or accept that you may not be able to take on that role.

4. If you live in an extreme climate, likely to become more extreme with climate change, but you are not particularly and unusually well adapted to it. That is, unless we check climate change, which at this point seems unlikely, (if highly desirable) at some point, many places are going to be uninhabitable for many of the people who presently live there. Some may become literally uninhabitable over time, but more likely, what we'll see is that small populations, extremely well adapted to their environment, and extremely attuned to it, become native to many places as long as they are even marginally inhabitable. But the question is, "Are you one of them?"

If you need income from the sale of your house, you might want to think about it sooner, rather than later, because there will probably come a point at which the number of people who want to live there declines dramatically, and it will be even tougher to sell than it is now. Even if some places do become uninhabitable, they probably won't do so immediately - you might well be able to live out your life where you are. But remember that it will probably become gradually and increasingly hard - the summers will be worse, the storms will be stronger, the ice pack will be smaller, your allergies will be worse. Are you prepared to be that adaptable?

5. If you live among people with lousy values. I'm on the record saying that most of us can probably get along in most places with at least some people. I don't think everyone in your town has to be like you, or that ecovillages are the only (or even the best) way to find community.

If you belong to a minority community, you might want to live where people like folks like you, or at least tolerate them, rather than a place that is hostile to them. If you rely on a religious community, you might want to live where you feel that the cultural values reflect your own. If you don't want to be surrounded by religious communities, you might want to live in a place with a strong secular culture.

Personally, I've always had a lot of luck finding allies where I went, even if we didn't share much. But there are root values we did have in common - integrity, kindness, a desire for community. If those things don't exist, you might seriously have to consider another choice.

6. If you don't think your children (and by your children, I mean the children in your family, even if they aren't your own) have a future where you are. If your children have to leave to get work, if your children have to leave because it isn't safe or is underwater, are you prepared to part with them? Are you prepared for your family to be parted in circumstances that might not be conducive to regular cross-country travel? More importantly, if you have land or something you hope to pass down to your kids, are you prepared not to be able to do so? Is it an asset that they will be able to do without? Again, you can't know all this for sure, but it is worth thinking about.

7. If you plan to move anyway. That is, if you have a family place or somewhere you have always planned to return to, if you can, sooner may be better than later. It takes time to build soil. It takes time to get to know people and build yourself into the life of a community. It takes time to see fruit trees come to maturity. If you were planning on going anyway after a few more years of earning, or something, now might be the right time. That said, however, I'd be awfully cautious about buying, and only recommend this *if you can* leave - either by selling your current place or if you've been renting. But building roots is important.

8. If you aren't prepared to live in the place you live as its culture demands. That is, as we get poorer and travel and transit become bigger issues, living in the country is going to be a lot different from what it is now. Instead of living essentially a suburban life, commuting to activities not available, and relying on trucked in supplies, you may have to shop occasionally and mostly stay home in the country, making your own entertainment. Are you prepared to do that? Once upon a time, the country mouse and the city mouse lived very different lives, but cheap energy changed that. It may well change back.

Urban dwellers may have to make do in tougher conditions as infrastructure problems come up. My own analogy is this - if you'd be ok living in the worst neighborhood in your city as most of the people there live now, you'll probably be fine. But if you've been affluent and comfortable and might not be forever, be sure you can afford the city and like the life. I believe strongly that city, suburbs (most of them), and country all have a future - but the differences between them are likely to become more acute. If you aren't prepared to deal with those differences, you might consider moving.

9. If you live in an outer suburban housing development, particularly a fairly new one. This is the one exception I make to the question of whether the suburbs are viable. Generally speaking, I think a lot of suburbs will do fine. Others will adapt in different ways - some may become more like small cities; others may be more country-like. But the ones that I think the least hope are the larger developments that were built in the "drive 'til you buy" model of the last few years, where lower income families have to move further and further away from urban or suburban job centers. If your suburb was built on a cornfield forty miles from your job, think seriously about how you will get along either in an energy constrained world or one where energy is much more costly because of carbon limitations. Do you really think anyone is going to run public transport out there? Is there topsoil? Is it a place worth maintaining and farming? Are there neighbors? Are there going to be? If you are already in a half-finished development, you really might want to get out.

10. If you are native to another place. By native, I mean that many of us have a strong sense of

place, and a strong sense of belonging to a place. My husband once went on a job interview at UIL Champagne-Urbana. He recalls looking across the land and seeing the horizon and thinking, "Oh, there's the ocean." But of course, there was no ocean there - his misperception lasted only a second, but revealed something about his ability to live in that place - he comes from people who live on hilly land around water, and know the flat horizon as the space of the sea. It is possible that he could have adapted to the flat open land of the Midwest and learned to love it - but it is also possible that one's sense of place should be respected if possible. If there is a place where you feel at home, and no other constraints bind you, perhaps you will want to go there, and be there, and help other people be there.

Again, all of these examples will have exceptions. No one, especially me is saying "move now!" And some people who probably should leave will not be able to for reasons of family and obligation, underwater housing and job commitments. But do think about all your choices, as you consider where you go and stay.



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