When the Lights Go Out

Contributed by Peter Goodchild
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When fossil fuels begin to vanish, the first sign of the times will not be made of cardboard and propped up in front of an empty gas pump. The sign will be the flickering bulb in the ceiling, because electricity is always the weakest link in the synergistic triad that includes fossil fuels and metals.

When the lights go out, so does everything else. The house or apartment will be largely non-functioning. Not only will there be darkness throughout the dwelling between sunset and sunrise, but all the sockets in the wall will be useless. The "four major appliances," stove, refrigerator, washer, and drier, will be nothing more than large white objects taking up space, so there will be no means of cooking food or preserving it, and no means of doing laundry.
There will be no heating or air-conditioning, because these are either controlled by electricity or entirely powered by it. For the same reason, there will be no plumbing, so clean water will not be coming into the house, and waste water will not be leaving it.

And that is only one's own habitation. The entire country will be affected, the whole world will be affected. Computers will cease to operate, and computers have insinuated themselves into almost every device we use. There will be no long-distance communication: no telephones, no Internet, no transmission of data from anywhere to anywhere.

Money will largely cease to exist, because there will be no electronic means of sending or receiving it, and no way of balancing accounts. In fact money nowadays is not reckoned as coins or bills, but as data on a screen, and the data will no longer be there. All bank accounts will cease to exist.

Modern medicine will vanish. Doctors will have almost no means of taking care of their patients. Hospitals will be burdened with the sick and dying, and their will be no means of taking care of them. There will not even be a means of removing and burying the dead.

The police will be immobilized, because they will have no means of sending or receiving information. Since police forces anywhere have only enough personnel to deal with normal crises, it will not take long for officers to realize that they are powerless to do anything but stay home and protect their own families.

For anyone, it will be impossible to jump into a car and get help, because cars require gasoline, and the gas pumps are run by electricity. In any case, the oil wells and the refineries will have ceased operation. The biggest "vicious circle" will have taken place: no electricity means no fossil fuels, and no fossil fuels means no electricity.

For a while, people will try to get by with emergency devices and equipment. Backup generators can save lives for a while, but those generators are not meant to be running for more than a few weeks, because they themselves require fuel. On a more primitive level there will be battery-powered devices, and even simple oil lamps and candles, but these will not last very long.

"When the lights go out" is mainly a synecdoche, of course, because the incandescent or fluorescent light bulbs in a house will not be the major concern: in the daylight hours, one does not need light bulbs. But the flickering of bulbs will nevertheless act as an early-warning system, the canary in the coal mine. During a severe storm, it is the flickering of light bulbs that indicates that it is time to get to whatever emergency supplies have been put aside: bottled water, canned food, and in winter warm clothing. The unsolved problem, however, may be that the concept of "emergency" is usually regarded in terms of a short period of time. There is always the spoken or silent refrain of "until the authorities arrive." But those authorities will be waiting for other authorities to arrive, and so on ad absurdum.

On a more optimistic note, nevertheless, it must be said that there is a great deal that can be done. Of all the resources one can accumulate, the most important are those that are stored inside one's own head: knowledge, skills, wisdom. "Knowledge" is perhaps not the right word, though, because to have read or heard a particular fact does not automatically grant the ability to deal with particular issues.

Even more important than mere "knowledge" is practice. For example, I used to read a great many books on vegetable gardening, but when I owned and ran a market garden for several years I was constantly mumbling, "Why isn't this information in the books?" And there were several answers to that question. In the first place, the books were badly written. Secondly, it is not the overall principles that count, but the minutiae. Thirdly, those particulars often cannot be put into writing or even into speech: "I can't explain it, I can only show you" is an expression I often heard. A good gardener knows a thousand tiny tricks that lead to success, and it is those particulars that matter, not the general statement that one does not sprinkle seed in a snowstorm.

The skills needed for country living are rarely the same as those needed in the city, although anyone who has built up experience in what the books call "home repair and improvement" will be ahead of those whose knowledge consists of more ethereal matters. Hunting and fishing are not taught in academia.

When I say, "When the lights go out, so does everything else," I mean "everything in the city." What matters is not to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Living in the city will certainly be a case of the wrong place at the wrong time. There will be no food and no water, and no means of dealing with the victims of famine and disease. When there is an inkling that the light bulbs everywhere are about to fail, the answer is to be well outside the city limits. One should either be living in the country or at least have some property in the country and a well-tested means of getting there.

Even a plan of that sort, however, involves a few caveats. "Property" in the modern world is nothing more than a convenient legal fiction. If a gang of outlaws moves in next door, or even if there is a single oppressive neighbor to be dealt with, then the whole concept of "property" can vanish into thin air. I have known several cases in which people gave up house and land because they could not deal with troublemakers. What will it be like when the troublemakers are doing something more unpleasant than a little trespassing? So it is good to own property, but it is better to realize that ownership, in the modern sense of the word, might be nothing more than a scrap of paper.

Getting out of the city means knowing the roads not the main highways, but the back roads. In an emergency of any duration, the main roads become jammed, partly because of the volume of traffic but also because of accidents. In more severe situations, vehicles will even be abandoned, either because they are out of gas or because the passengers have discovered that it is quicker to walk. Knowing the back roads, and even knowing alternative routes among those back roads, means freedom of choice in one's movements.

The last matter is that of community. As mentioned above, the concept of property can be illusive, but there is more to consider in the question of who lives in the general area. Neighbors who take pleasure in noisy dogs, loud radios, or heavy drinking can make proximity unpleasant nowadays, but such people may not prevail in the kind of "natural selection" that will take place, where common decency will be everyone's concern. In any case, the greatest blessing of the post-petroleum age will be the demise of all-terrain vehicles, electronic amplifiers, and the other technological marvels with which people now ruin one another's enjoyment of "cottage country."

Even then, the trouble of having a neighbor may be less than the trouble of not having one. It has often been said, correctly, that in reality the loner will not survive. If such a person is the hero of a Hollywood movie, it is only for the sake of a story, for the vicarious excitement of defying the odds. No one can stay awake for a month, cradled in a corner with a gun. Without a family, a band, a tribe, there will be no means of distributing the tasks to be done.

It is not reasonable to expect a perfect neighborhood. Within the happiest band of jungle-dwellers there is gossip, discontent, jealousy, manipulation. Troubles and troublemakers can be dealt with in such a way that the community itself does not fall apart. In a primitive community, ostracism, for example, can be an effective means of resolving a problem. A community leader who lacks what we now call "managerial skills" can be replaced by one who does a better job. It is largely a myth to say that country people are nicer than city people; in any setting, neighbors are merely human, with common desires and antipathies and fears. What is important is not to wish for angelic neighbors but to have enough daily contact with them to anticipate how they will respond in a difficult situation.

When the lights go out, so does everything else, but that is not entirely true for those who are far from the city. Living out in the country when the lights go out means getting a better look at the stars.

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