Sailing away from Lotsageddon

Contributed by Ray Jason
09 March 2010

My lovely little sailboat just completed a most unusual catastrophe trifecta: she and I have now ridden out an earthquake in San Francisco, a multitude of hurricanes in Key West and a nasty flood in Panama.

During the hurricanes my land-dweller friends ridiculed me exuberantly for staying aboard. But then enormous trees fell on their apartments. And when a devastating tidal surge destroyed their ground floor belongings, while my sloop just floated above it, they gained a reinvigorated appreciation for my “stubborn stupidity.”

And during the aftermath of those disasters, their admiration turned into barely-concealed jealousy as they contrasted their grid-down ordeal with my self-sufficient, survival pod comfort.

Consider this: My substantial propane supply provided me hot meals. The wind generator and solar panel kept my refrigerator humming and the beer cold. A large stockpile of non-perishable foods insured me months of pleasurable eating. I had plenty of fresh drinking water because it arrived via a mechanical foot pump rather than from the out of commission power grid. And my 12-volt fans kept me cool while the rest of the town sweltered without air-conditioning.

But please don’t get the impression that what calls me to the sea-gypsy life is some perverse desire to chase after natural disasters as if I were a cub reporter for the Weather Channel. No, I am drawn to the ocean-vagabond path because it provides delights that cannot be attained when living ashore.

Some of the things that attract me to the cruising life are the incomparable freedom, the exotic locales I visit, the genuine sense of community amongst the sailors, my fondness for voluntary simplicity in a grotesquely complex world, the profound connection with Nature, the ability to travel vast distances using the wind rather than deceased dinosaurs, and the tiny carbon footprint that I leave astern.

But increasingly I realize that there is another aspect of the sailing life that makes it extremely valuable as our world spirals downward towards a massive unraveling.

A well-stocked and properly equipped sailboat is the ultimate escape vessel.

This article will elaborate on this proposition. I will split the discussion into two sections. The first deals with the “why to” aspects and the second, to appear at a later time, addresses the “how to” elements.

For a few years now I have been paying close attention to the warnings coming from what I call the Cassandra Choir.

Ms. Cassandra was the character from Greek mythology who could accurately foretell the future. She sounds like a real asset to the community, but instead of cherishing her, nobody believed her predictions, and so she was scorned.

These modern Cassies have been attempting to alert everyone to the grave perils that are jeopardizing life as we currently know it. Their cautionary messages are not being carried by the mainstream media but rather by what I refer to as the side-stream media - the internet, books and the lecture hall.

In an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of these careful and balanced analysts, the Establishment brands them as “doomers.” But in my personal spoof of politically correct lingo, I perceive them as "Reality Facilitators."

I urge you to follow the google brick road to the websites of Richard Heinberg, James Howard Kunstler, Carolyn Baker, Jan Lundberg, Sharon Astyk, Dmitry Orlov, Ted Trainer, Danny Schechter, David Korten, Gerald Celente, Daniel Quinn, Chellis Glendinning, Albert Bates, Joe Bageant, Charles Eisenstein and many others who have been sounding the alarm of possible collapse.

Their consensus is that great changes are rapidly approaching that will dismantle the world to which we are so accustomed. The basics of daily living that we take for granted, such as water, food, energy, transportation, communication and security will all be profoundly disrupted.

The catalyst for this breakdown will probably be provided by one of the Big Bad Es as I like to call them – Energy, Economy and Ecology. These three main
de-stabilizers have many subdivisions.

For example, will Energy rear its ugly head in the form of Peak Oil or perhaps as massive, rolling blackouts spurred by tired, overstrained infrastructure? As for the global Economy, the issues are so numerous as to be mind-numbing. Two amongst the dozens of possibilities are the dollar losing its reserve currency crutch or China refusing to buy any more U.S. bonds. As for Ecological woes, our population growth keeps roaring along even though we exceeded the planet’s carrying capacity billions of humans ago. And who can not notice the increased intensity of weather events in recent years.

The classic Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have morphed into the Four Dozen Horsemen. This explains the term “Lotsageddon” that I have created as the title of this essay. Who knows what the tipping point will actually be? And is that a Black Swan I detect flying low on the horizon? It is wise to remember that the final catalyst for the utterly horrific World War I was the assassination of an archduke who most people didn’t even know existed.

Now even though the Cassandra Choir keeps emphasizing the urgency of preparing for these looming catastrophes, the powers that be insist that these risks are exaggerated. The Establishment message is that they have everything under control and so we should just relax, grab the remote control and watch The Distracto Box. Of course, it makes sense for the Elites to encourage such denial, because the present system keeps bulldozing them more money and power every day.

Fortunately, the Reality Facilitators have recognized the futility of expecting significant change from those in charge of the system, and so they are urging people to use an end run approach. Instead of waiting for help from the government, citizens should build small, localized, sustainable communities. These would provide for basic needs such as water, food, shelter, power, medicine and security. They would also provide an emotional and spiritual safety net as things cartwheel out of control leading to fear and depression.

There is even a worldwide initiative known as the Transition Towns movement. The communities involved are attempting to anticipate and mitigate the forthcoming disruptions through planning, hard work and neighborly support. I vigorously applaud such efforts, but I have serious doubts about their ability to succeed. But before explaining my reservations, let me outline the spectrum of potential collapse.

Under Scenario # 1, the current economic crisis is perceived as just a cyclical correction and everything will eventually return to normal. Many of these adherents of this theory also see Peak Oil as a scam designed to increase oil industry profits, and see climate change as merely tree hugger paranoia that can be put off for a century or so. This is the version that the mainstream media spoon-feeds the population. Because of our human inclination to hope for the best, the vast majority of people believe that somehow things are going to be okay.

Those who believe in Scenario # 2 feel that the disruptions will be no worse than what Cuba, Iceland or Russia experienced in recent years. Admittedly there was suffering, hardship, job losses and wealth destruction, but there was no massive die-off.

People who see Scenario # 3 on the horizon predict that we will be forced to revert to a 19th century, pre-electricity, agrarian lifestyle. Farmers, blacksmiths and weavers will again be treasured in their communities. On the other hand hedge fund managers will become the stuff of legend. Children will ask their parents if they really existed; and if so, what did they actually do, what did they make?

Those who adhere to the Scenario # 4 worldview believe that a new Dark Age is approaching. Any vestige of civilized, compassionate behavior will vanish and life will become a matter of survival of the vilest. Such a mockery of existence might be characterized as Roving Bands of Cannibals R Us.

And unfortunately there is still one more stop on this downward bound train. And that is Scenario # 5, also known as human extinction. Interestingly enough, there are many people who believe that the rest of life on Earth would probably applaud this development. After all, it has been human excess and hubris which have extinguished or jeopardized so many of our companion creatures.

So now let me address these various scenarios and consider how valuable a well-prepared sailboat would be in each of them.

With Scenario # 1 there will be no earth-shattering societal collapse to escape. But there will still be the day to day

drudgery, stress, frenzy and emptiness that characterize modern living. And what is frequently promoted as the ideal cure for such malaise? None other than a tropical island with palm trees, a beach and a sailboat anchored offshore.

In Scenario # 2 there is no widespread death and destruction to avoid. But there are food shortages, rolling blackouts and currencies so laughable that they are replaced by bartering cigarettes and alcohol. And more profoundly, there is the numbing realization that life is not going to get better or easier.

With a properly prepared sailboat only a few days would be needed before one could depart Iceland and point the bow towards warmer and richer living.

Scenario # 3 seems like it will be the critical balance point. Can the Transition Towns movement, with its community gardens, walk-able towns, bike paths, cheap public transportation, communal decision making, farmers markets, sail-powered commerce and reinvigorated intercity rail service, help us retool our Way of Life swiftly enough so that the worst consequences of a massive collapse are averted? If modern, high-tech, petro-industrial civilization is going down, can we advance backwards to a 19th-century bucolic, agrarian existence of country doctors, general stores and local unplugged musicians? Certainly many people hope so; and I share that aspiration.

But this is where a serious problem enters the big picture - MARAUDERS! A friend of mine describes it in this very unsettling fashion: “The Amish are toast!” He admires their low technology, self-sufficient lifestyle, but he fears that famished hordes of desperate people will simply steal their food and wreak greater horrors upon them. As he describes it, “There are a lot of heavily-armed people out there with thick, tattooed necks and thin, tattered brains, who will stop at nothing in order to survive.”

In my research of the warnings from the Cassandra Choir, this strikes me as THE significant and dangerous blind spot. It seems like these gentle, compassionate commentators are hoping that every one else will abide by the same dignified code of conduct that they would use.

There are some who suggest that once marauding bands start terrorizing communities, the police and military will step in and easily dispatch them with their superior numbers and weaponry. Indeed, this is probably true, but I perceive two problems with this theory.

First, these enforcement personnel might go AWOL. For example, if the crisis was a virulent pandemic many police would opt to stay at home and protect their family rather than go out and risk infection. Or if their paychecks stopped arriving in grid down chaos, would they man their posts if there was no way for them to receive their checks or cash them?

And secondly, if the military and police forces did manage to suppress the violent marauders, wouldn’t the government then impose the strictest sort of martial law? And who would want to live in such a repressive, paranoid world?

So under Scenario # 3, where civilized standards of behavior are rapidly unraveling, would you rather be in a charming but unprotected Transition Town awaiting an attack; or aboard a well-stocked sailboat hundreds of miles from the nearest land and its terrifying depredations?

As for Scenario # 4 where humanity has degraded to the most debauched and barbaric conduct, there should be no doubt that sailing away is the best option. Although, in this regard, it can be argued that those “preppers” who are holed up in their bunkers will probably survive. But theirs will be a life of 24/7 vigilance and fear.

Such a desperate existence is unnecessary with a boat that can stay at sea if required, but that can also come ashore at many places that are uninhabited or where the humans living there are friendly rather than predatory.

Finally, in Scenario # 5 which would most likely occur through a nuclear war, the sea gypsies who escape – if they somehow survived -- might be like the monks of the Dark Ages who collected and preserved the core wisdom and culture of an extinguished civilization. They would become seagoing Keepers of the Flame, who would illuminate Humankind’s rebirth and next evolution in consciousness.

Thus far, I have addressed some general reasons for getting a well found sailboat, stocking it full of food and survival equipment and being ready to rapidly depart if societal conditions begin to deteriorate. Now I’d like to share with you some of my personal motivations.

Admittedly, I have led a contrary to ordinary life and have usually chosen the path less traveled, but this has also bequeathed me a different perspective that might be valuable to others.

I have been living full time on my 30-foot sloop since 1992. Most of my wanderings on the wide waters have been done alone. This voluntary simplicity life choice affords me substantial time to meditate on larger issues that most people rarely get to consider because they must dedicate most of their waking hours to the struggle of making a living.

For example, sailing from San Francisco to Hawaii by myself, I would often see the contrails in the sky of jetliners making the same trip. However, it would take them six hours whereas my voyage would span about three weeks.

For anyone up there who might have noticed the tiny speck of my boat on the ocean below, they probably thought to themselves, “Look at that poor guy down there. It will take him forever to get to Hawaii.”

Whereas my opinion was that they were the ones missing a magnificent experience. They never got to lie on the deck just a few feet from the unfettered dolphins dancing in my bow wave. Nor did they get to search for beautiful old glass fishing balls that had broken free of their nets; and then later present them as gifts to loved ones. And certainly they never witnessed a shimmering moonbow arching across the startled sky.

Also, when they disembarked in Honolulu they didn't have the extraordinary sense of achievement that bathed me in a kind of amber glow when I arrived. That's because I had accomplished something that was tough, dangerous and utterly invigorating. And by doing so I had taken a stand against high speed living and in favor of high quality living.

In fact, the sea gypsy life bequeaths me many philosophical rewards. Out there a human is constantly humbled by the majesty and power of Mother Ocean. Cross the wide waters on a small boat and you will never be deceived into thinking that humanity can "conquer" Nature.

And ocean vagabonding allows me to take a stand against runaway consumer capitalism with its hideous injustices, social costs and environmental destruction. I will not contribute to a system that enriches so few and impoverishes so many, while it simultaneously trashes the planetary nest in which we live.

Sailing also allows me to be active in a world that encourages passivity. Rather than sit numbly in front of a TV or make almost robotic pilgrimages to The Mall, I am exploring the actual world rather than its televised facsimile.

So, in conclusion, I hope my ideas will inspire many of you to consider a sailboat as the best possible approach to surviving the converging agonies that are probably headed our way.

Hopefully I am just a Collapsachondriac and there will be no world-shattering catastrophes. If that is the case, you will still have a seagoing magic carpet that gives you access to more wondrous places than anyone could ever visit in a human lifetime.

And if I am right, you will probably want to use your sailboat to find my sailboat, so that you can pass me a cold beer as a token of appreciation.

In the second part of this essay, I will suggest possible ways that a person can learn how to sail, buy a boat, equip it with the right tools, stock it with plenty of survival food and be ready to make a swift getaway.

Ray Jason (roamalone8@aol.com) supports his cruising by writing lighthearted articles for the sailing magazines. Obviously, he also thinks about and researches more serious topics. His book, Tales of a Sea Gypsy, is available from Ray's publisher at www.paracay.com. A bookstore can order it and it can be found at www.amazon.com.

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Further reading:

Sailing into the Future, by Captain Michael Kellick,
February 25, 2010,
on TheOilDrum.com and EnergyBulletin.net.

See the new website sailtransportnetwork.com

And learn about the Sail Transport Company

in the Puget Sound.