

I'm not prepared for Doomsday

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I finally finished piling up this winter's firewood on Sunday. I'd dropped the yellow locust trees a year ago and split the rounds last spring. It was a rare example of advanced "biomassic" planning.

Anticipation is required if you insist on heating your home with wood.

Unlike electricity, fuel oil and propane, wood heat is not a switch-on fuel. Wood has to be cut, split, hauled, stacked and, finally, thrown into the fire. You can't get warm unless you've danced through the first four steps.

Thinking ahead on wood protects me from running short, which still doesn't protect me from a marital shot across my bow that goes something like this:

"I'M FREEZING. IT'S DARK. IT'S ONLY 58 IN HERE!"

"Well, it was 48 this morning."

"Fifty-eight is not an improvement over 48. My name is not North Slope Sally. I'm not a Siberian Husky. I don't sleep in the snow."

"Fifty-eight is comfortable. It won't suffocate you with heat. Think *Gemutlichkeit*."

"Don't you pull that college debating junk on me! I'm COLD!"

My wife, who insists on nominal anonymity for good reasons, was born and raised in the tropics of North Carolina—Charlotte. In January, women of her acquaintance dabbed dew from their brows, not sweat. She is confident that 58 degrees will restore our polar ice caps.

The fastest way I know to raise ambient temperature and lower the level of living-room hostilities is to spin the electric baseboard heaters to "High." Doing so feels like defeat.

I've always been quick to assure our first-time visitors that we in Blue Grass have both "electric and indoor." (I've been instructed to limit visitation to the summer months.)

But what if we didn't have electric and indoor?

What if grid electricity vanished for a year or more? What if gasoline could not be purchased at any price? What if our stores no longer had food to sell? What if homes could no longer be heated by purchased energy and toilets were no longer flushed with municipal water? What if public order was replaced by self-help?

Over the past decade, many Americans have had a taste of these what-if scenarios. Windstorms, hurricanes, forest fires, floods, earthquakes—all have knocked out background systems that support life as we know it. They've hurt; they've cost a lot; they've caused inconvenience; they've had lasting consequences. But, in the end, most of each misery was limited to one part of the country, and the worst was over in a month.

Everything has yet to shut down all at once, everywhere.

A small-but-growing number of people have been planning for the day when everything will shut down simultaneously, everywhere and for a long time.

No consensus exists among them on the cause of this apocalyptic collapse. Some believe in the coming of a massive nuclear attack that produces an electromagnetic radiation pulse that zaps everything not enclosed in a Faraday box; or a biological attack, such as small pox; or an avian flu pandemic; or an economic melt down from hyperinflation; or magnetic pole reversal; or a jumbo asteroid hit; or Biblical Armageddon. None of these calamities are likely, but anything is always possible.

“Reality” television began its second season of “Doomsday Preppers” on Tuesday night. It's the highest ranked show on the National Geographic Channel. Death-at-the-water-hole dramas have shifted from lions on the Serengeti to soccer Moms on the lawns of suburbia.

I'm not a Doomsday believer, but I have started to think about making us less vulnerable to the temporary absence of the systems on which we depend. This led me to buy an emergency radio that can be run off a half-dozen different power sources, including solar and gerbils. I'm buying more flash lights, candles and gasoline cans. I've given some thought to stockpiling food.

But, unlike most preppers, I think gold will be of limited use at most if all our systems were knocked kablooeey for six months. If I'm hungry, why would I exchange a loaf of bread for an ounce of gold?

Maybe I need more than a shotgun, rifle and a .357 Magnum revolver. Preppers believe you can never have too much armament, because you have to anticipate the biggest threat not the smallest. This is an arms race with my own imagination that I choose not to join.

Horses, on the other hand, would finally earn their keep around here. (I'm told they taste good, but I dare not introduce that fact into our survival planning. I'll take the “ponies” off the table for now.)

Preppers who live in cities develop a “bug-out” plan. At the first word of disaster, each family intends to sprint to their country place where they will fort up. Most of these bug-out plans are likely to fail in a surprise,

split-second catastrophe.

It has occurred to me that we bugged out to Blue Grass 30 years ago. I've never gotten the proper marital credit for being ahead of the crowd. It has also occurred to me that our daughter who lives and works in New York City chose to bug back in as soon as she got the chance.

I answered the telephone at 7 a.m. two Sundays ago. A neighbor was "down." I was the closest doctor...of something, anyway. Years ago, I'd been called by the same family when a son on a bike had been hit by his father's pickup and was lying unconscious in the middle of our road.

Having no idea whether "down" meant not breathing, not conscious, not alive or not pleased with Obama's pending election, I grabbed our first-aid kit and a bottle of aspirin.

The 89-year-old was sitting in a recliner. I thought he might have had a small stroke. He was conscious and not in pain. He could move everything and was lucid. But he'd had a "spell" and couldn't walk unaided. Melissa (Ooops!) and I drove him to the hospital an hour away.

We should have gotten the rescue squad involved, because, as it was explained to me, situations like that could turn for the worse in a heartbeat.

I realized how clueless and unequipped I was for a medical emergency.

A doctor -- a real one -- gave me a list of supplies I should have, and I decided to enroll in the next emergency first-aid class. (My previous training came as a 13-year-old high school freshman. It involved a lot of splinting and slinging, as well as a sex-education component that was condensed to Mr. Evans, a former Marine, saying, "You boys know what this stuff is all about, don't you?" "Oh yeah, coach, we know. Heh. Heh.")

The prospect of a long-term absence of electricity, gasoline, communications and money is overwhelming. Skilled survivalists who can rig a rabbit snare and live off wild greens might make it. But for the rest of us, it would just be a matter of time before we ran out of food, ammunition or interest.

On a remote farm like ours, we might have a chance of surviving for six months without infrastructure systems because we have spring-fed water, wood heat and land for crops and livestock. People in metropolitan areas would not have much of a chance.

But we have none of the old tools for turning raw materials into food and clothing. Maybe I should stockpile grain and vegetable seeds. Maybe I should buy a hand-cranked flour mill, treadle sewing machine and candle molds. There's no end to the things we need if we're going back to the 18th Century.

I might worry more about Doomsday if I were 25 instead of 66.

Right now, I'm more worried about cranking up the wood stove to get to a blistering 65 this evening without using the baseboards.

If I don't, I may be testing my tossed-out survival skills sooner rather than later.

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