

When Technology Fails

Carolyn Baker

Rarely in the specialized milieu of industrial civilization does one encounter a Renaissance man or woman—someone who is well-versed in a wide spectrum of disciplines and who can expound upon them in writing that is both articulate and engaging. So when this writer discovered Mat Stein's phenomenal *When Technology Fails: A Manual For Self-Reliance, Sustainability, and Surviving The Long Emergency*, the publisher, Vermont's own Chelsea Green, was immediately contacted for a review copy of this fabulous tome on preparing wisely for the end of the world as people have known it.

While this book at first glance may resemble something of a 21st century *Whole Earth Catalog*, it is so much more. Whereas that classic of some three decades ago served as a primer for individuals and groups seeking to live simply and sustainably, primarily because it felt good and seemed like the right thing to do, *When Technology Fails*, feels as if it has erupted out of the urgent necessity of this moment. Its intention is unmistakable: to offer a "bible for emergency preparation and survival" as well as green and healthy living. However, one should not assume that this book is a "survivalist" manual. It is a book about surviving but also about living well in harmony with the earth community while using methods that allow one's lifestyle to endure and flourish.

The book begins by noting that technologies frequently fail and that the greater the number of earth's population and the more is consumed by it, the more the likelihood of irreversible failure of many aspects of technology. "Emergency preparedness," Stein says, "is cheap disaster and terrorism insurance." After offering a number of resources to introduce the reader to self-sufficiency, the book offers an explanation of the various threats now facing humankind: eco-threats, Peak Oil, bio and terror threats, and of course, natural disasters. As if to underscore humanity's intuitive sense of what lies ahead, Stein references the plethora of prophecies that have been around for millennia, originating primarily from indigenous peoples, and pointing to a culmination of catastrophes.

From here Stein launches into a chapter on short and long-term preparation-survival kits, first aid kits, and of course, food storage—recommending if possible, a cache of one year's supply. In the following chapter on "Emergency Measures for Survival", he includes not only the proper equipment and how to use it, but a remarkable section on developing a survivor personality and the importance of paying attention to one's intuition. Because some individuals may feel "intuition challenged"—as if they can't quite access it when they need it, Stein offers a "Testing Your Intuition" exercise which facilitates the process. Concluding this chapter and indeed all chapters in the book, are abundant references to books, websites, DVD's and other resources related to the topics at hand.

An extensive chapter on water discusses acquisition, how to disinfect, treat, and preserve it. In the face of energy depletion, one must assume that clean water may be available in the ground but power losses may make it

inaccessible. Therefore, the use of hand pumps is suggested and a number of sources for purchasing them provided at the conclusion of the chapter.

A lengthy chapter on food growing, foraging, hunting, and storage includes basic principles of permaculture planting, pest control, a brief guide to wild edibles, methods of storing, drying, smoking, and preserving food, basic principles of hunting and trapping, fishing—all followed by a host of references to resources on each topic.

Trained as an engineer at MIT, Stein has produced an extensive chapter on "Shelter and Buildings" that leaves little to be desired. Anyone considering building a structure from scratch or remodeling parts of an existing structure should study this chapter.

One of the most daunting challenges of a post-industrial world will be what has been known in the age of oil as "health care." As all institutions collapse, people will be on their own entirely in terms of healing their bodies and minds. Stein offers the best information on life after high-tech medicine. As well as a fascinating chart that illustrates the herbal medicinal counterparts to specific modern pharmaceuticals, Stein includes a section on colloidal and ionic silver, making one's own colloidal silver generator; recipes for colon, kidney, liver and parasite cleanses; homeopathy, electromagnetic fields, and various energy healing techniques.

One of Richard Heinberg's favorite questions when discussing collapse preparation is: Do you know how to make shoes? His chapter on "Clothing and Textiles" would no doubt delight Heinberg or anyone who has given thought to the lack of access to new clothing in a post-industrial world. Here one finds a wealth of information on spinning, weaving, tanning, and footwear.

Stein, the engineer, excels in his chapter on "Energy, Heat and Power" as well as the chapters on "Metalworking", "Utensils and Storage", and "Engineering, Machines and Materials." Equally fascinating is the chapter on "Better Living Through Not-So Modern Chemistry" in which he explains soap and candle making and the manufacturing of alcohol as a biofuel. Additionally, he discusses the making of vinegar, glue, and vegetable oils.

So is there any point on which anyone disagrees with Stein? Yes indeed. Whereas he states his intention to prevent the collapse of civilization—collapse is well underway and has been for some time; challenge at this point in history is not to prevent it, but to consciously open to it with honesty and logistical and emotional preparation. In the final chapter of *When Technology Fails* "Making The Shift to Sustainability" Stein addresses the attitude people must hold as the world's witnessing the dizzying changes and the dissolution of a global economy engendered and fueled by mindless, rampant consumerism. Here, Stein offers suggestions for collective action.

To recommend *When Technology Fails* for everyone is not highly enough if one takes the "long emergency" even a little bit seriously. For as the ancient Chinese proverb states, "Is it not already too late if one waits until one is thirsty to begin digging a well?" □□□

[source : <http://www.countercurrents.org/baker110209.htm>]