

Peak Oil and Societal Collapse: A Blueprint for Preparation

“...there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all...” - Hamlet, Act V, Scene ii

Introduction

My name is Steven Laurdan, and for the past year and a half I've been publishing an online weblog called *deconsumption* (written, for various purely practical reasons, under the pseudonym Steven Lagavulin). I stated in the very first post I wrote there that “my real interest and purpose for this journal is to try to come to grips with what quality of lifestyle one needs to adopt in order to be adequately prepared for the crisis to come”. The weblog was to be a tool for me, to help outline the complex journey I was determined to make toward understanding the full nature of the crisis which I sensed weighing on American society, and which I saw only tiny “snippets” of at the time. I'd been working as a financial consultant with a large investment-banking firm for almost a decade, but had recently left that position because I'd become convinced that there was no point in “investing” any longer. Not in the financial markets anyway. I wanted to step back and get my bearings on what I sensed happening around me, and to help myself (and hopefully others) to invest time and energy into understanding the full nature of the coming period of crisis. And I wanted to try to discover a reasonable plan of preparation.

So in a certain sense this document is the result of my work so far. And in another sense it is really only the beginning.

It has become inarguable to me that the next decade or two will usher in an unprecedented era of crisis and transformation for humankind. The fundamentally destructive characteristics of modern civilization and the immense burden of the recent and anomalous human population explosion on the Earth's resources and ecosphere has created incredible stresses on all the social and ecological systems we depend on—to the extent that signs of collapse now show clearly in a great many places. In fact, it is unique to this period of history that we witness so many crises appearing simultaneously and on such a scale.

It is important to recognize the scale and the degree of these problems, because this understanding proves most enlightening. The scale is global—these problems extend to the largest scale possible within the world we occupy. And these problems have developed to such a degree that they are now well beyond any remediation. No amount of political, technological or sociological change can reverse the course of where we are headed. Or perhaps it may be more correct to say that only a complete, immediate, informed and sincere transformation in all these spheres could bring about the possibility of avoiding the coming period of crisis—and the likelihood of this degree of sweeping change appears remote, at best. On the contrary, it seems that the worse the situation

becomes the greater the struggles we make to maintain the illusion of normality. All of which portends that we may have reached the end of a great cycle of human development—a terminal period of phase-change, if you will. And it’s one which has in fact been predicted or forecast many times and within many different cultures throughout human history....

It’s is not the purpose of this article to comprehensively explore the many problems we face. If the reader feels unprepared as yet to accept the scope of what I’m speaking about, I wholeheartedly recommend William Kotke’s book *Final Empire* as the most complete reference that I know of with which to begin a study of the many problems which—rather curiously I think—appear ready to overwhelm modern society at almost one and the same time. And even if you already have a sense of the approaching storm, I feel it is important to be as clear and as detailed as possible about the comprehensive nature of the decidedly *structural* problems we face, because while we are certainly seeing an acceleration in certain aspects of the general crisis right at the moment, nonetheless it is possible that these most immediate issues may be pushed back for the time being. If this occurred it would likely only serve to reinforce the peculiar hypnotism that modern people live under, and lull us back into our dreams of a perpetual, linear idea of “progress” which promises to lift humankind to ever higher states of achievement, comfort and enlightenment. However if we truly understand the very real stresses the worlds of both man and Nature are suffering, we will remain clear for ourselves that modern human civilization is essentially unsustainable, and that any such “respite” can only be short lived.

The crisis will come, it cannot be avoided. Certainly, there are many people who recognize the severity of what we face, but who have adopted a more optimistic attitude. This attitude almost invariably holds that either emerging technologies or techniques will replace our present more wasteful ones and allow modern civilization to continue on its present course, or perhaps that widespread education and recognition of our dire problems will result in a sweeping ideological change in the attitude of our various societies toward the way we live and relate. I do not wish to force a pessimistic view on anyone. In all sincerity, I feel that it is precisely through understanding and preparing for the problems we face that we can best face our future with confidence. So if I might introduce a somewhat spiritual concept, there is a well-known saying that I’ve found holds far more wisdom than meets the eye:

“Hope for the best, Prepare for the worst, and Accept what comes”.

I believe this saying is related to what might be recognized as a sacred Trinity, expressed in the Christian tradition by the words Hope, Love (or “work in service” = preparation), and Faith (or Acceptance). Thus it refers to three seemingly distinct inner attitudes, which yet can have a force or power in us if they can be brought into a right relationship. So our potential for real Hope is fundamentally dependent upon the actual efforts we make to become responsible for the life we’re given (*to Prepare*), as well as our understanding that what happens is yet outside our control (*to Accept*). Correspondingly, what we do now must be done in a spirit of Hope that we are in fact able to realize a

better life for tomorrow—and again, with Acceptance that the design is much larger than we can know. And of course our ability to meet what each day brings without a sense of emotional attachment, comes from the knowledge that we have done what we reasonably could, and that what we’ve done we feel was right. When these relationships are missing, or out of balance, our Hope is just the hope of an idiot, our Preparations have little real purpose, and what we encounter on the road we will invariably color with blame.

Therefore the task before us is to begin to prepare for the worst, so that through this preparation we can discover a more hopeful and confident attitude toward our lives. I read a quote recently that put it well: “Fear won’t prevent tragedy, but it will prevent joy.” And I might add my personal suspicion that the rampant anxiety so prevalent throughout most modern societies probably has its roots in an unacknowledged or unconscious sense of the stresses our civilization and planet are under. Therefore it may not be unreasonable to expect that in facing these issues and adopting a program to address them, we might find that we actually come to a significantly more hopeful state of being than we have today....

But what possible preparations could be embraced to fortify our lives in the face of the enormous and rather indefinite challenges that confront us?

For me, the most direct means by which to grasp the severity of what is before us is to understand that we have come to a place where every single one of the fundamental “systems” around which human society is formed is in an advanced state of degradation. If I can present the bird’s-eye view for consideration, then perhaps it will help to clarify what we are up against. Because as each of us first begins to approach an understanding of the coming period of crisis, we do so from whatever particular aspect or point of view happened to first come to our attention. And yet it’s important to see that the bigger picture doesn’t get any prettier, either. For instance, “Peak Oil” is only a part of the problem modern civilization is buckling under—although admittedly it appears to occupy a central place, and may perhaps prove to be a lynch-pin for almost everything else.

So as an initial step we should first clarify for ourselves what we are preparing for. In this respect, I’ll describe a very basic outline of the many crises impinging on our world and our lives. Then it will be important that we make some consideration about when or at least in what order we might expect these crises to flare-up on us, because, as there are no “off the shelf” solutions for the comprehensive problems we must ready ourselves to face, we want to be able to prioritize our actions and preparations with at least an educated guess about which issues we might face most immediately.

Background Concepts

- I. Overview of Macro-Issues
- II. Timeline of Tipping Points
- III. The Fast Crash / Slow Crash argument
- IV. The Cities, The Suburbs & The Sticks
- V. Blueprint for Preparation

I. Overview of Macro-Issues

There are five over-arching crisis-themes we might identify as contributing to the collapse of modern civilization. These “macro-issues” can further be broken-down into several more specific and overlapping contingent issues. And while it isn’t possible within the space of this paper to cover any of these issues in any more than summary fashion, abundant material and evidence can be found elsewhere.

Over-Population – The one central issue we need to grasp is human over-population. In fact it could be said that all the other crises we observe derive to some degree from this one fundamental issue.

Several sources put the human “carrying capacity” of our planet Earth—i.e. the maximum sustainable load for the human species based on available resources—at roughly 2 billion people, and even that assumes stringent sustainability and consumption levels. The world’s population currently stands at around 6.5 billion people, and at an estimated growth rate of 1.5% is projected to double by 2040. Current resource availability is not sufficient to adequately sustain even our present population numbers. It is unlikely that this doubling will be able to proceed.

It’s also interesting to note that roughly 75% of the world’s populations live in urban areas, and that number increases dramatically each decade.

Many sober scientists anticipate that a substantial reduction of numbers is therefore inevitable, not solely because the Earth’s carrying-capacity has been exceeded, but also because this pattern of population explosion -> resource exhaustion -> population crash is actually an observed and recurring theme throughout nature. It comes about whenever a species living otherwise in a state of balance with their environment suddenly discovers or is introduced to a vast—but essentially non-renewable—food supply. The species experiences a vibrant, almost hyperactive growth spurt as its numbers increase, describing a sharp parabolic curve upward to the point of “overshoot” (in respect to the available food supply). And at that brief, pivotal peak-moment in time the available food is rapidly exhausted. The resulting crash is referred to as a “die-off”.

Contingent Issues: Famine, Disease/Pandemic, Resource Depletion, War (over Resources)

Resource Depletion (Peak Oil) – Resource depletion is the “yin” to over-population’s “yang”, as the two inseparably drive each other. Yet in the scope of human history we can see that this situation—the sudden cultural imperative toward resource exploitation fueling a population explosion—is not a “natural” development. It is always a sign of a system out of balance, and we need to recognize it as an aberrant event in the millions of years of human history on the planet. Not that times of human boom and bust have not occurred previously, but the scale on which they happened heretofore had always been isolated or localized. So what changed in recent history?

It’s probably not possible to isolate the exact moment at which the imbalance occurred, but we can generally isolate three important factors or events which led to this situation. The first was a sort of background event: the gradual development of “Empire culture”—a culture which celebrates power over both people and Nature, and the acquisition of material gains as being highly honorable and respectable pursuits. This developing cultural hunger for Power and Money set the stage for what was to be a kind of one-two punch of resource exploitation, the first “food” being literally Money and the second “food” being Power itself (hydrocarbon energy).

The first punch came about with the “discovery” by the Spanish of vast precious metals reserves in Central and South America. Interestingly, while the indigenous populations considered gold and silver to be sacred, they did not “worship” these metals the way the Europeans did. What resulted—under the auspices of a “religious crusade”—was the effective gutting of the continents, and the wholesale murder and enslavement of their peoples in service to this gold-rush by various European powers. Meanwhile, back in Europe the massive inflows of riches fueled a prolonged burst of scientific and industrial enterprise that has not abated to this day—and solidified in the human world-view the idea that we hold a rightful place as Masters of the Universe.

The second event happened right on the heels of this explosion of human enterprise, developing out of it, in actuality, with the “discovery” of fossil-fuels—initially coal, then oil and gas. No other known resource contained the massive potential energy that these resources afforded, not to mention their vast chemical and synthetic applications as well. As for the oil-boom which resulted...well, we’re living it today. The benefits and the consequences are myriad, but suffice it to say that the seemingly limitless reserves of this dynamic new food has propelled human population numbers far beyond anything that could have been attained more gradually without it.

The drain upon the planet’s other natural resources from supporting this population boom is equally massive. In every major area we might identify as important to modern life, demand has outstripped the ability to replenish supplies. The reason for this goes beyond simple “numbers of people”, because in addition a kind of Ponzi scheme is in effect whereby resource extortion allowed humans to achieve advances in technology and productivity, which contribute to greater resource extraction, which in turn fuels further advancements, etc..... As a result, our planet has already been adjudged by scientists in

many environmental fields as having been “farmed-out”. The current methods for mass-productivity now utilized virtually throughout the globe, and most especially those comprising the agricultural “Green Revolution” of the past few decades in previously “under-developed” countries, are almost entirely predicated on the availability of cheap oil. Massive amounts of fertilizers, soil supplements and insecticides are needed to bolster farming in soils that have been leeched of their essential nutrients. And of course the farm machinery which allows for large-scale factory farming with minimal manpower, and the comprehensive, global distribution networks which allow peoples to live in mega-cities and places far from “the land”—all of these are significantly vulnerable to an increase in oil scarcity (or at least a decrease in its availability).

All told, it’s not a question of “if”, but of “when”. Many believe that “when” is now.

Contingent Issues: Fossil-Fuel Depletion, War, Famine, Health Issues & Disease, Economic Depression & Unemployment

Environmental Destruction - To add to these problems specific to Resource Depletion and Peak Oil, the destruction to the Earth’s environment resulting from the pollutions, waste products and toxic contaminants we produce is tragic. The Earth’s oceans have been decimated by over-fishing and environmental damage, the old-growth forests have all but disappeared, the atmosphere and waterways have been grievously corrupted by countless pollutants, and the list goes on. Researchers have shown that these issues are no longer simply “concerns for the future”—they have reached a point of no return. The degeneration is severe, and its effects are already apparent around the globe. However most of us have been shielded from recognizing these effects by the illusory “bubble” we’ve built around us via the magic of cheap fossil-fuels.

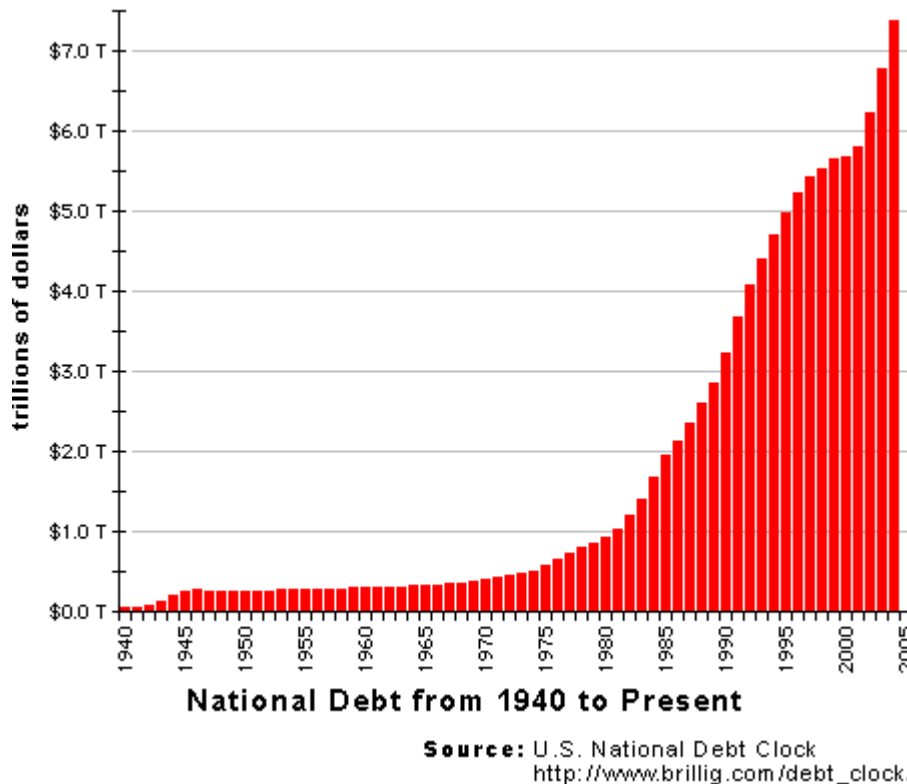
Contingent Issues: Famine, Displacement of People (Environmental Refugees)

Economic Crash/Depression – The American Dollar has become the backbone of the whole world’s economic system. It is also what is called a *fiat* currency, meaning one which has no intrinsic value whatsoever other than an illusory one created by the consensus agreement of the populace. History shows us that fiat currencies are a distinctly modern phenomenon, that they have a highly dubious history, and that they inevitably fail.

Contrary to popular image, currency is not simply “minted” or even printed. For ancient currencies, in which the “coin” was itself made from the resource material of value, this was true. However for our modern fiat paper currencies the value represented by the almost worthless paper is the shared agreement that it reflects the willingness of investors to lend money to the government. Because of this, it is more correct to say that money is not so much “printed” as it is *lent* into existence. This lending happens through the

issuance of bonds. And it implies a direct relationship between government debt levels and monetary inflation—both of which are predicated almost solely on the general level of investor confidence in the country in question.

I mentioned “parabolic curves” in the last couple section when I described the human population explosion. Maybe you’d like to see what one looks like:



The above chart represents the increase in U.S. Government debt over the past 7 decades—or conversely the increase in U.S. Dollar bills. This situation has only been permitted to go on because of the willingness of the world’s countries to absorb (and thereby “support”) this “Dollar explosion”, and to integrate them into their own economies. That willingness is waning. And yet the curve continues to rise as you read this....

There is also an intimate relationship between the debt and money markets, the equities markets, and the derivatives markets. These latter especially, represent an enormous, global system for leveraging many times over the value of the underlying currency. In fact the derivatives markets have been likened to a thousand mirrors reflecting every Dollar invested. There is no way of knowing how much money they currently represent, but realistic estimates put it at around \$250 – 500 trillion—which I prefer to think of as somewhere around half-a-*quadrillion* dollars. That’s really not too shabby considering they barely existed at all even twenty years ago....

Contingent Issues: Currency Crisis (Inflation/Deflation), Debt Crisis & Default, Unemployment, Derivatives Crisis

Socio-Cultural Clashes (Disparity / Polarity) - East vs. West, Industrial Elites vs. Democratic Will of the People. While terrorism certainly falls in this category, the larger issue entails a growing (and groaning) disparity between rich and poor, both within and between societies. On the whole, we could define most modern strife as resulting from a widening resentment toward what has been labeled “Empire Culture”, which encourages the systematic extortion of the poor and powerless by the rich and powerful, as well as the resulting ideological and social emasculation of the middle-classes. This aspect is crucial to acknowledge if we are to rightly recognize war as a fault of our socio-cultural system, and not simply “in the nature of things” as institutionalized wisdom would have us believe.

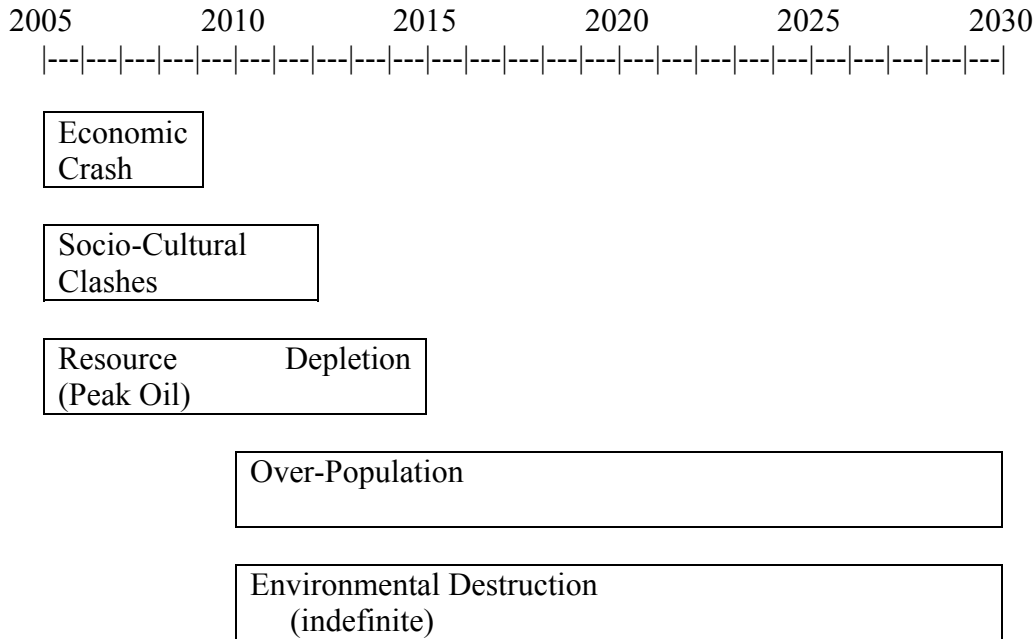
This is perhaps a difficult concept to grasp, as it is not something “outside” of us—such as is the case with the other issues we’ve identified—so that we might observe things more dispassionately. One illustration in this regard is to note that—as ironic as it might sound—there has been a gradual degradation in the idea of warfare over the centuries, and even noticeably in our present era. In ancient times, war would often be contemplated as an “art”, and it was by and large conducted according to dignified terms: warriors engaged each other only at predefined times and conditions, and fought according to predetermined rules, with the strictest ideals of honor, courage, and respect towards one’s enemies being upheld. Thus, the life of the more general community was affected solely by the final outcome. It seems it was implicitly understood that if the chaotic and destructive forces of war could not be avoided altogether, they should at least be contained and subjected under an ennobling ideological framework. With the gradual spread of Empire Culture over the centuries, however, “campaign” warfare became more prevalent. This type of warfare tended to break through these noble bonds of understanding and agreement.

Thus in our present times warfare can be seen as becoming a progressively more destructive and “boundless” enterprise. Indeed, the whole of society is not only affected by it but has actually been employed *in service of it*. And now finally, with the appearance of “covert” methods of warfare and the rise to prominence of terrorism, we seem to have reached a point where the forces of war no longer recognize any boundaries whatsoever, whether spatial or ideological. Thus it might be rationally posited that there is only one remaining stage left in this downward spiral: an outbreak of war which rages completely out of control, and which seeks to consume substantially everything on the planet.

Contingent Issues: War/Terrorism, Dependence & Failure to Address Other Problems, Polarization of People, Authoritarian Control Issues

II. Timeline of Tipping Points

Based on these issues described above, I have created a simple guide—a kind of yardstick which allows me to visualize how these various issue measure up in importance when preparing for the future:



The purpose of this timeline is to recognize a defined period of time *during* which I believe a crucial “tipping point” will be reached for each of these macro-crises (and *not* the length of time they might last...). So for instance, if we begin with the top item, it shows my belief that sometime between right now and the year 2009, we will see, if not a precisely defined triggering event, then at least a widespread and undeniable recognition that our world economies are slipping into the dumpster. The actual resulting depression which unfolds might (and undoubtedly will) last much longer than the period outlined—I’m only trying to show that “Economic Crash” is an immediate concern that I need to begin to prepare for. Two other immediate concerns are Socio-Cultural Clashes and Peak Oil, but I can visualize with this timeline that I also feel that it’s possible those issues might not erupt until after an Economic Crash. And thus when I begin to undertake my preparations, I’ll want to weight them according to this timeline.

III. Fast Crash / Slow Crash Argument

As we formulate a blueprint for our preparations, we should bear in mind something I call the Fast Crash / Slow Crash Argument. What we see as we look over the various systemic crises outlined in the timeline above is that they seem to indicate a future in which a kind of “cascading collapse” unfolds over the course of perhaps several decades. If this is the case then we may experience a relatively “slow” crash, or one which happens in a gradual but persistent manner, like a glacier plowing through a mountain village. For example, while a comprehensive financial crisis appears to be an immediate concern (and will come inevitably), yet we should also recognize that it has thus far been staved-off through “monetary controls” (inflation) for several years now. In fact, if pressed I would say that I could even view a case where it might be held at bay for a few more years (which, it should be pointed out, would effectively only *increase* the severity of the crisis when it finally breaks). And if this were so then we may find that the next 15 years or so consists “merely” of an unyielding depression, creating a corresponding fall in oil demand which may stave off oil and resource depletion issues for a longer period of time. Thus the result might then be that, while the fundamental outlook will not have changed in the slightest, we would yet find ample opportunity to realize the preparations we need not only for ourselves but probably even for a wider segment of society.

However there is an opposite, yet very real and very probable, scenario. Perhaps instead some specific event flares-up and acts as a catalyst for precipitating the whole scale of issues down upon us all at once. This might likely foil all our plans for any significant preparations. For instance as I am writing this, a recurring rumor has just been given new life: there’s a warning circulating in the media that a certain plot was put in place even prior to 9/11 in which some large number of nuclear devices were hidden in various U.S. cities. And according to this latest incarnation of the rumor, they are due to be “set-off” sometime in the next 90 days.... Now such a story is obviously quite horrifying, but then again if you’re reading this can probably assume that this “American Hiroshima” rumor is little more than a high-profile “urban legend”. But I bring it up because it’s an obvious, if overly-dramatic, example of the type of event that could trigger 1) financial collapse, 2) war, 3) authoritarian “lock-down” of civil life, 4) a desperate race to control oil supplies and resources, 5) environmental destruction, and 6) put a significant portion of the world’s population in a place where their basic resource needs could no longer be met. Pondering such “fast” crash scenarios invariably puts us in a rather anxious frame of mind, and that’s not a helpful place to be. But since our purpose in outlining a preparation plan is to free ourselves as much as possible from worry and fear, we need to inform our preparations with this consideration.

VI. The Cities, The Suburbs and The Sticks

As a general rule, our response to the many critical issues facing human civilization will be colored by where we live now, as well as by the conclusions we draw as to where we should be living if we want to best be prepared for a long period of increasing self-reliance. In modern, Western society we can outline three basic types of communities: Cities, Suburbs, and Rural or Small Town communities. I can only generalize about these types of locations, as obviously there are wide differences between specific locations even within each category. And there are also widely differing viewpoints as to the how suitable each is for meeting the approaching crisis. My own biases are both practical and ideological: I believe cities to be too complex and too deeply predicated on all the unsustainable features of modern life to be a viable long-term option; I feel *some* suburban locations may be able to re-invent themselves as localized, self-sufficient economies, but the majority will not; and while I find that rural areas offer the most enticing qualities all-around, one should be very discerning before embracing any particular one.

To further add to these uncertainties, we might look to a lesson learned during the last Great Depression in America: while it was rural farmland which bore the brunt of the initial hardship, yet in the later stages a shift came about as the crisis began to take its toll on the urban-industrial centers—at which point farmland began to actually appreciate in value. With a farm after all “you could always eat” (although it should be acknowledged that unsustainable farming practices were a major lynch-pin for bringing on the depression in the first place, as the Dust Bowl crisis would eventually illustrate...).

Cities are incredibly complex entities, and can therefore break-down for surprisingly simple reasons. All in all, I can’t justify any reason to suggest that someone “duke it out” with our coming problems by remaining in them. The primary attraction, however, is obviously jobs, and if you currently have a job in the city then that’s a pretty good reason to stay...for the time being, at least. Still, with some creative planning it’s possible to downscale one’s life to a point where we should be able to find or create adequate enough employment outside the city to fit our needs. And it should be stated that, while you can certainly grow food on your urban lawn, can you really grow enough? Especially considering that hungry neighbors (or just neighbors tired of paying escalating prices for food) will likely be raiding your garden each evening....

The Suburbs – writer James Kunstler has argued long and eloquently about the coming ground-zero that is modern suburbia. His central argument is that suburbs are a concept unique to—in fact *wedded* to—our fleeting era of cheap oil. And many other critics as well have highlighted the difficulties soon to be faced in both the suburban “lifestyle” and in the suburbs themselves. They hint that these areas, being neither city nor country, will prove especially vulnerable to economic and social dislocations and crises.

However in fairness it should be recognized that not all “suburbs” can really be called “suburbs”. The term more strictly applies to a particular planning trend which started in

the 1950's with a view to creating homogenized, organized "housing and community developments". The concept appealed to the desire in the burgeoning middle-classes to have a "nice" place to live, away from the "problems" of the cities—and yet while continuing to *work* in them. However there are also many so-called suburbs which are really just older towns and communities that got swallowed-up by city sprawl. Since we will want to identify areas that have substantial basis for self-sufficient living and localized economies, it may be helpful to recognize that some of these suburbs might have at least the potential to break-off from the cities once again and rediscover an independent identity. A chief requirement for this, of course, is that the area has sufficient independently-owned farmland available to maintain an adequate food supply.

Rural areas and Small Towns – the obvious benefit to these areas is that they are still close enough to nature to support a re-birth of real community, not to mention being at a distance from the large urban centers most likely to fall into chaos as widespread crisis sets in. And certainly the idea of having several acres of arable land with a more-or-less sustainable home on it would seem the perfect solution to our coming problems. But one of the crucial concepts to recognize is that sustainability can't really exist without the integrated efforts of a community of people. For this reason, it's probably best not to envision "rural" as meaning "isolated". We would probably envision our "perfect location" a small agricultural community within a few miles of a small town—one having a population of say 10,000 to 50,000 people.

Furthermore, city-folk like myself might be dismayed to discover that a great many rural and small-town homes and communities were built to fully model the comforts and conveniences of the cities and suburbs, and thus they are hardly "sustainable" at all and are just as dependent on cheap oil as anywhere else. In fact, such communities might actually be *more* vulnerable, since they're so remote from the manufacturing and distribution "hubs" of the urban zones. And while they may be surrounded by sufficient farmland and natural water resources and such, much of the rural farmland in America has been depleted beyond use (barring massive, fossil-fuel based supplementation) or is dependent on complex, long-distance irrigation systems. Even such land as hasn't been farmed yet will probably still take some years to bring to adequate production levels.

Finally, we could add to these factors that many rural areas possess a certain degree of xenophobia and closed-mindedness. Still others have become "dumping grounds" for the toxic wastes of nearby urban centers. All in all it becomes clear that one's choice of "ideal location" in this regard is by no means an easy one.

Blueprint for Preparation

Now having hopefully established a common basis for what we face, I'd like to outline the path and direction that I've become convinced will offer us the best all-around preparation for confronting any and all of the challenges which lie ahead.

The blueprint I'm going to present might best be viewed as an *itinerary*: a plan for a journey ranging from the first few steps we take outside our own door, on through the period of crisis (however long it might last), and finally to a better and more hopeful future on the other side. Like any itinerary, we know that the journey we plan for now will not be the one that actually unfolds; yet without a plan, we're just children wandering into the wilderness—and realistically, no good can be expected of that.

You may wish to change this itinerary, and of course you may. I cannot know your particular situation, and so I present this only as a kind of *outline* for directing your activities and thoughts in a more helpful manner. And ultimately it will *have* to change, since like all journeys the very act of setting-off on them brings new information, conditions, situations, and impressions—all of which remind us to remain flexible and to learn to improvise. Also, not everyone will wish, or be able, to follow this path through to the end. Nevertheless, I feel that *for where we are right now*, this is the best ideal being offered. Every step we make in this direction should help to lighten our burden when the storm begins to unfold.

Finally, I'll state here that my sole wish in this regard is to help awaken you to the possibility that you can meet these events with Hopefulness instead of Fear. And that in fact this might well be precisely what is being asked of us.

I've organized this journey under three general headings according to immediacy. The first heading, Emergency Preparations, highlights things we should undertake right away—essentially “disaster preparations”. “Cutting Our Ties to Modern Life” outlines important issues which are slightly less pressing or which take more time to bring about, and which actually mark the beginning of our journey toward a different way of living and thinking about our lives. Finally, there are certain aims and goals which I believe represent our ultimate ideal, and which we need to be factoring into our other preparations. These are grouped under the heading “Establishing a New Foundation”.

- I. Emergency Preparations
 - 1) Grab ‘n Go Bag
 - 2) Stock up Food, Water and Other Essentials
 - 3) Prepare Escape Plan & Destination
 - 4) Think it Through (but Don't Dwell)

- II. Cutting Our Ties to Modern Life
 - 1) Begin Communicating with Others

- 2) Get Out of Debt
- 3) Investments
- 4) Downsize Home / Life (if necessary)
- 5) Begin Acquiring New Skills & Habits
- 6) At the Crossroads: Sustainable Home or Sustainable Community?

III. Establishing a New Foundation

- 1) Join an Ecovillage / Work Toward Establishing a Sustainable Community
- 2) Navigating the Currents of Change

I. Emergency Preparations

We should begin by addressing preparing for a “sudden” emergency—any type of large-scale issue that takes us and our community by surprise. While images of nuclear explosions or biological terrorist attacks have been drummed into our heads by a fear-mongering media, we should also acknowledge the slightly more “mundane” emergencies, such as flash-floods, fires, chemical spills from tanker-truck and railcar derailments, chemical disbursements from plant explosions, gas main explosions, etc. In fact, if you go to Google News and search under the term “evacuation” you’ll find there are a myriad of reasons why people of perfectly optimistic character should prudently take time to prepare beforehand for the possibility of sudden catastrophe. Prepare, and then let go....

Every individual should spend a weekend, maybe two, putting together an emergency plan and supplies. This is good foresight for any type of very sudden and unforeseen crisis demanding immediate evacuation, such as flooding, an earthquake, chemical spill, etc. A good source for help in this regard can be found at www.ready.gov.

1) Grab ‘n Go Bag

It’s prudent to keep a Grab ‘n’ Go bag (sometimes called a “bug-out bag”). This is simply a backpack or sport-bag you keep tucked away in your closet, and which contains a couple changes of clothes, some spare cash, and back-up supplies for anything you would absolutely need to have to get you by for a few days if you had to evacuate *immediately* and make a run for it. The point is to have thought through ahead of time the essential items you’d need and to have them already assembled in one bag you can carry easily. The Grab ‘n Go Bag will form the core of your evacuation plan, so that even if you’re afforded more time to respond, you’ll be under much less stress knowing you’ve already collected the absolute essentials.

A sample list of what this might contain is available at www.ready.gov, but essentially you’ll want to stock your Grab ‘n Go bag with spare supplies of any items you require

and use on a regular basis (i.e. medicines, contact lens solutions, etc.). Some special items to consider are spare cash and credit card, a few energy bars, a hand-powered emergency radio (a company called Grundig makes an excellent one which sells for around \$30-\$40 on Ebay), and perhaps a “magnet-powered” flashlight which requires no batteries and is charged by shaking it back-and-forth for about 30 seconds (one goes under the brand name NightStar). You’ll probably need to do a little housekeeping on the bag twice a year, to exchange winter clothing for summer, and to replenish any items that might have aged in any way. This should generally be done each Spring and Fall.

If it suits you, you might want to consider a “camping case”: a large plastic, lidded storage tub (like you can find at any Target store) stocked with whatever camping supplies you prefer. Assuming you have a car, you could throw this in the trunk at a moments notice and it’ll give you the option to hit the road very quickly and then to camp for a night or two wherever you decide.

2) Stock up Food, Water and Other Essentials

Many types of possible crises will not require immediate evacuation, but may nonetheless cause a temporary disruption of your normal way of life. In these cases, you’ll want to have certain basic preparations made so you can “shelter in place” for a period of time, and deal effectively with a loss of basic services such as power, water, heat, etc.

In this regard, you should assess your longer-term water and food needs right away. Stock your pantry with at least a month, maybe two, of canned or dried goods and bottled water. And make it a habit to drain a gallon or two from your hot water heater every two or three months, to clear the sediments—it not only prolongs its life, but your heater is the primary water storage for most homes so you want that water to be as potable as possible. You should also consider buying a small battery-powered television (and ample batteries, of course), a hurricane-lamp or two (with oil), and if you have a fireplace and live in a colder climate, you’ll want to lay-in some firewood. You can usually find ads in the local paper advertising good firewood delivered right to your home.

If you wish to prepare for a more prolonged period of uncertainty and change, you’ll need more sustainable food and water supplies. This is going to involve gardening on some scale, and typically a rain barrel for rainwater collection (if you don’t have a reliable groundwater or fresh water supply available).

3) Prepare Escape Plan & Destination

Get into the habit of never letting your gas tank go much below half-full. Also, if you live in a heavily populated area, then along with the grab 'n' go bag you will want to spend a little time formulating a set of escape routes and plans. Some questions you'll need to have specific answers to are:

- 1) How would you get outside the city as quickly as possible by car...by motorcycle...by bike...etc.?
- 2) Can you find an alternate route that avoids bridges, tunnels, freeway congestion?
- 3) Do you have a reliable map so that you could improvise if major roads or overpasses are blocked or inaccessible?
- 4) Where would you go to first?
- 5) How / Where would you arrange to meet-up with family and friends if they were not with you and phones were not accessible or working? (This step is easily overlooked but incredibly important).
- 6) Should you make any special preparations ahead of time to ensure your escape plan works smoothly?

In other words, spend time thinking things through beforehand, so you'll have ready-made responses to work with should you need them. This step also helps to get your mind focused on envisioning the realities of what could happen to you, in your particular situation, should a crisis of any sort arise.

If you live in an urban (or even suburban area) it would be immensely helpful to line up a "vacation home". This is somewhere between say 50 and 150 miles from a city (roughly a ½ tank of gas) where you could go at a moments notice and live for perhaps a couple weeks until the situation gets under control. If you already have some type of cabin or second home, terrific. If not, you might make arrangements with friends living in a more rural area. Perhaps you might even consider renting a small apartment somewhere, if it's in any way practical (perhaps it's somewhere you visit often or want to move to eventually). You might also want to arrange to have food and water stored there in case it's needed (remembering to rotate supplies about twice a year). The key to a "vacation home" is that it creates flexibility.

Conversely, if you already live in a more rural area, you could prepare ahead of time to be able to take in loved-ones who might need to flee the city for a week or two. Again, stock-up and rotate stores of food and water. And most importantly, let them know you are ready to help them should they ever need it.

All in all, evacuation planning can really pay-off in spades should an emergency arise, since if you are able to hit the road quickly you'll get a lot further a lot faster than those who aren't already prepared.

4) Think it Through (but Don't Dwell)

Studies have verified that perhaps the most important factor in disaster preparations is to have comprehensively visualized, and even rehearsed, our response ahead of time. A recent article entitled “*How to Get Out Alive*” appearing in Time Magazine highlighted research findings (including those from eyewitness accounts on 9/11) which showed that, faced with a sudden “shock” or crisis, unprepared people typically freeze in the face of the unknown. Like deer in the headlights, we become strangely calm and passive, our thinking overloaded with the struggle to grasp “what does this mean”. (Interestingly, it was also revealed that in this state of confusion we become highly suggestible to any seemingly authoritative voice telling us what to do...). Therefore, since emergency situations come in many forms and it's impossible to account for everything, it may prove invaluable to spend a weekend or two addressing a few general questions and concerns (while you're putting your Grab 'n Go Bag together...).

For instance, the most immediate question to ask should a crisis arise unexpectedly is whether to leave the area or shelter in place. The answer to this will usually be readily apparent, but not always—and it probably hinges on the question “how bad could things get?” If you've ever been in an earthquake you'll know what I mean: as the shaking gradually builds momentum, the tendency is just to wait and see if it's going to get bad enough to where you feel you have to react...basically a game of chicken where you stand in frozen expectation wondering who'll flinch first—you or the building.... Or as another example, suppose you learned that rioting had broken out in certain areas of your city. How could you know whether it would be put-down by the authorities or escalate into your neighborhood? As you can see, circumstance themselves will have to dictate your responses, but advance preparation will ensure that you can indeed *respond quickly* once a decision has been made.

Our next immediate concern will be contacting our loved-ones if they are not already present. More than likely, someone will be at work, at school, at the store, etc. when disaster strikes, and may not even know what it happening. So it's important that everyone is on the same page about how to respond. All loved-ones need to discuss in advance 1) several options for getting in touch with each other, and 2) where to meet-up if communication is impossible. Because whether we've decided to flee or stay in place, our further actions will hinge on knowing the answer to these two points.

If you can afford it, all members of the family should have mobile phones, as they provide great flexibility of communication. However if for any reason mobile phone lines aren't working or available, you'll want to remember the two alternate methods: “land-line” phones and email. Using a normal telephone is an obvious choice admittedly, but you'll want to make sure you have a list of important contact numbers with you in your wallet or purse. Email is a rather more unreliable manner for contacting someone in a hurry, but might be useful for sending a quick “CALL HOME NOW!” message to someone who works at a computer most of the day. All in all, the point here is to act quickly to get in touch with everyone, even if you're not sure there is any need to respond

right away. Even just a quick call to say, “Hey, have you seen the news? I’ll be here at the house if you decide to leave school early...” can go a long way toward relieving anxiety and helping you keep a rational focus.

Having prepared thoroughly to either evacuate or shelter in place, and having ensured that our loved ones know how to get in touch and / or where to meet-up if they cannot, we’ll have created a significant space for ourselves in which to evaluate the situation more rationally and determine any further actions.

II. Cutting Our Ties to Modern Life

Until now we’ve been discussing preparations for a tangible, immediate disaster. Now we want to address the ways in which we can begin to restructure our lifestyle to be more in line with what I believe will be the central theme defining human life over the coming years. That theme I’ve taken to calling “deconsumption”. Thus the following measures will focus toward helping us work against the misguided ideals of our present era of consumption so as to acquire a degree of freedom and detachment from things as they begin to disintegrate.

1) Begin Communicating with Others

The first step is to start communicating your concerns, especially with your loved ones. This might prove to be the most difficult item in this entire list, because coming to an understanding of how very real and very dire the present situation is for the human race takes time and preparation. So much of what we see about us, so much of what we are told, contradicts that there is any problem whatsoever. And the issue is further compounded by the fact that a great many people don’t make it a point to question what’s going on around them, not to mention that many don’t even really *want* to know. But this step is crucial, because through communication we can begin to include other people’s thoughts and experiences and energies in our exploration of these issues. Thus we will open ourselves up to a broader understanding, and we can be moving into the future in a more fluid and responsive way, without clinging to a static preconception about how to prepare. Communication is the beginning of community, and community is what we will ultimately be seeking to rediscover.

Still, it’s often those closest to us who are the first to discount or discredit our concerns. In this regard I certainly can’t offer any relationship advice, but generally patience and persistence will help. Some family members you hardly suspect it of may already be on the same page to some degree. Others may need to be approached more indirectly and slowly. Some may respond better to reading copies of articles, others need to discuss things more directly. Also remember that it’s next to impossible to discuss this topic without letting emotions take over, so if someone is particularly critical or argumentative

or fearful, don't allow the discussion to become a debate—this invariably only causes people to firm up their resistances. Our only aim right now is to discover a way—not to convince anyone—but to simply make sure they know that *we* hold these concerns, and that *we* believe that prudent preparations and adjustments are reasonable. Perhaps all you really need to say initially is that you read an article on how important it is to take basic steps to prepare for sudden or unexpected disaster, and that you thought you'd make it a weekend project to do that....

And don't lose sight of the fact that it may not even be necessary to emphasize the *crisis* issues at all. In my experience, many people already hold a longing to discover a simpler, more responsible and more meaningful way of life for themselves, but don't know where or how to begin. Most of preparations I'm discussing here are in reality only steps in that direction.

2) Get Out of Debt

Begin a serious and systematic campaign against your debt, including your mortgage. Somewhere along the line, the American Way of Life became synonymous with borrowing money to buy things, and to this day many people don't even consider their largest debts to be "debt" at all (curiously, this is especially true for more affluent people). But debt is debt. And millions of people are about to re-discover that fact over the next few years. Debt should not be something we always seem to have and live with—it should be something we approach only after serious consideration and with no small amount of anxiety. Now hopefully you don't have much and doing this won't be too great a burden, but if you're like the average American you're going to need to radically change your lifestyle in order to get this under control. Debt is perhaps the primary means by which people are enslaved to modern civilization. Therefore if we wish to become free of this culture, we must begin by freeing ourselves of debt.

The argument comes up often that if our society were to experience a Fast Crisis, that perhaps individuals might escape having to repay debt altogether. And perhaps this is so...but I believe it is dangerous and lazy thinking. The next few years will likely be the most uncertain times any of us have ever faced. To "bet" that some sudden crisis will come along and absolve us of our sins seems irresponsible to me. There is a certain ethical or even moral theme which underlies most of these preparations and having to do with recognizing and accepting responsibility for certain ignorance and weaknesses so prevalent in our society. Plus, given a developing struggle between desperate individuals and desperate bankers, I'd have to put my money on the bankers. The recent closing of the bankruptcy window and the rise in minimum payment amounts serve as important signals that the bankers see what is coming and they don't intend to be left holding the bag. And always keep in mind that in former times there existed "debtors prisons", where those who could not pay were forced to work off their debts....

3) Investments

[Disclaimer: I am not presenting investment advice in this paper, nor should anything mentioned here be construed as such. The following suggestions solely represent my personal opinion, and are presented only to illustrate a particular manner of thinking about wealth preservation within the context of the specific themes being discussed.]

I consider “investments” in this regard as being any vehicle by which we might store our excess savings...after all debts have been paid and we’ve otherwise gotten our selves to the place we wish to be for the time being. So, seen from this point of view, we’re not considering investments in the distinctly “modern” sense of being a means by which to profit from speculative activity.

I’m highly dubious about investing in anything solely represented by pieces of “paper” or electronic promises, which rules out most of the standard asset classes we’re used to thinking of including stocks, bonds and even dollar bills. Obviously that makes investing a difficult consideration for anyone with a large investment portfolio, or anyone dependent on an income, but I’ll offer some possible alternatives in a moment. Mainly I feel we want to anticipate the very real possibility that many financial firms might fail over the coming years, or that paper certificates of any type may become non-negotiable.

I therefore believe the safest place to invest will be in hard assets. The first which probably comes to most people’s minds is gold (and other precious metals, especially silver). In fact, a great deal of time is currently given to the gold question—both pro and con. I can of course only offer my personal, subjective opinion here as well. I believe that precious metals are an excellent way for storing our wealth over the long term. And I also suspect they will benefit greatly during the *initial* stages of the coming period of crisis, since they tend to rise in value as a reflection of uncertainty. I think this will especially be the case if there is a sudden “shock” event which precipitates things. However there are a couple caveats about investing in gold to keep in mind. One is that if people’s lives become too greatly disrupted then gold is going to be just as useless as any other luxury, and the things of real value will be only the immediate necessities: water, food, medical supplies, etc. If this is the case, then direct barter of goods will become the dominant means of trade. The second consideration is the possibility that if the U.S. Dollar crashes substantially, the government may initiate a re-monetization into some new currency. To support these “new economic measures”, gold—which will undoubtedly have gained greatly in value in relation to other currencies—will have to be outlawed altogether. This may no necessarily mean any confiscation will occur, but it would mean that transacting and trading in gold, silver, etc. will be greatly hampered—which will almost certainly cause the price of gold to plummet. Still, the reason I favor gold having some place in an investment portfolio is that it has proven to be a timeless currency—which means that it should, over the long run, outlast the whims of political and cultural changes. So one could still tuck it away for future worth, perhaps even pass it on to children, etc.

If you do wish to store some gold (or silver), I'd suggest straight bullion-value coins: gold bars, Eagles, Maples, Krugerrands and such. I don't favor rare or collectible gold coins because of the premiums involved, and because I imagine they'd be difficult to barter with—and ultimately, that's what we might end up doing some day. But if collecting is your thing, terrific...some people think this acts as a loophole should the US government decide to confiscate gold again, as occurred during the depression. Someone once suggested that gold Eagles serve a secondary benefit for those living in the U.S., in that if you are ever asked to declare the value of your gold holdings you could truthfully and correctly state only the \$50 face value minted on the coin.... On a side note, if you choose a bank safe deposit box over a personal home-safe, call the bank every so often to make sure they continue to allow their customers to access them in private. If they insist that a bank employee accompany you while you access it, remove your items immediately. Also, I don't personally suggest gold ownership in "electronic" form such as through company stock or commodity accounts, since these are really only "paper" assets, and in some worst-case scenarios you might never be able to recover your funds from the financial institution. Perth Mint Certificates, however, are a very attractive investment vehicle for individuals with large amounts of money to invest, and represent individual ownership of physical gold held by the Perth Mint in Western Australia. But again, their safety and value assume your ability to take delivery of the metal at any time in the future.

So basically the problems with owning gold are the same now as they have been for thousands of years. Authorities like to control it, and you have to safeguard it yourself, so the more you own the bigger the safe you need to store it in. And if you own enough of it, you build a walled "safe" around your holdings and call it a castle....

There are other assets worth considering when keeping in mind that the over-arching societal theme going into the next era will be "deconsumption of our lives". Real-estate is one of them, even amidst a widely recognized global housing bubble (which *The Economist* magazine identified as the largest bubble in history). In this light, I suspect that good farmland will always hold its value, whether you actually farm it or not. As society begins to restructure itself around localized economies, we should logically see a corresponding boom in small-scale community farming, dairy, cattle, etc., as well as a more general desire by individuals to embrace hobby-farms and rural communities. One advantage to owning land in a farming community is that you can generally rent it out either to farmers looking to expand their cropland or to dairies and ranches for grazing cattle, thus providing you with an income opportunity on your investment.

We might also recognize a likely opportunity in housing designed for sustainable living, whether for our own residence or as a rental or even speculative opportunity. Even absent high-tech appliances like solar panels, basic sustainably-designed architecture and renewable systems can go a long way toward providing comfort and self-reliance. Such residences entail some small but important trade-offs in overall convenience, but the advantages they offer are significant: they're far cheaper to live in and extremely reliable in a world which might experience persistent "systemic" failures in water, heating, garbage and sewage, etc. You can find architects and builders who specialize in this type

of housing almost everywhere, and while there are possibilities available for any budget, sustainable design is generally no more expensive than buying a comparable “utility-dependent” home. Of course, “location, location, location” is still the golden rule....

I also suspect good investments might be had in less obvious things such as high-quality hand tools and equipment, manual machinery and items for household chores, bicycles and bike parts, etc. In fact, small, efficient motorcycles or motor scooters may be desirable for many years, since it is unlikely that gasoline become completely unavailable anytime soon (the streets of all but the most affluent countries are teeming with them). Also, why not stock a case or two of good booze away—that’s a time-tested item for barter (of course avoid beer or anything low-proof which won’t age to well).

One other important new “asset class” we could call Personal Training and Development—acquiring skills or knowledge of crafts which may be helpful in the future. This could be anything from simple farming to more advanced permaculture techniques, food storage and preservation methods, self-defense, essential medicine, small-engine repair, even weaving, woodworking, boat-building...who knows. But I think such skills or crafts should be ones which do not so much anticipate a *complete* collapse of civilization as they do a reinvention of local manufacturing and local economies. And they should probably be trades and skills which don’t depend on getting cheap materials, tools, items, etc. from far away places. We’ll cover these more in a moment....

4) Downsize Home / Life (if necessary)

If one makes it a serious aim to get out of debt, then perhaps the most important step in this direction to consider is downsizing your house. And without doubt this is going to be the only option for many Americans over the next few years. They simply have too much house for one income, and the two-income dream that our culture has adopted in recent decades is a trap waiting to be sprung on those who depend on both to get by. But even if your mortgage payments are not overly burdensome, it doesn’t mean your house isn’t still a financial liability. If the balance of the mortgage (and associated home-equity loans) is close to the fair-market value of your home, then it’s possible, in a falling market, for the market-value of your home to sink below its actual loan amount. That’s what is known as being “upside-down” on your loan, and it means you effectively can’t afford to *sell* your house because you owe more to the bank than you would make from the sale. And ultimately, whether you feel your mortgage situation is at risk or not, downsizing your home can dramatically improve your finance situation. So you might consider down-sizing to a much nicer rural home—and paying down your other debts with any gains (keeping in mind there are important tax consequences to consider, as “down-sizing” apparently goes against our cultural imperatives...). While some cities will weather the storm better than others, cities in general are complex entities, and complex entities break down for surprisingly simple reasons. George Ure, who runs the excellent website UrbanSurvival.com, has described what he calls “city hypnosis”—the

tendency for people to remain in cities despite the decreasing quality of life they actually offer, because they assume that things are better there than in rural areas. But what's interesting is that most people in rural areas similarly think that urban-dwellers are idiots to live the way they do. Certainly, cities nurture a greater range of diversity in human life and expression, and because of this they can seem more dynamic and exciting, especially to the young and the immature. However city-dwellers generally won't find that they have a significant level of self-sufficiency to fall back on should those utility and service support systems break down for more than a day or two (again noting that neither will many rural families). Also, most city dwellers are too reliant on a lifestyle of "personal convenience"—a fundamental aspect of city infrastructure—to respond efficiently to a sudden breakdown, and their sheer population density typically incites strife and rioting when they do. But in the end it all really boils down to jobs, and jobs are more available within the cities than outside of them. However if those begin to go, so too will most of the perceived "advantages" of city life....

5) Begin Acquiring New Skills & Habits

As I mentioned earlier, we should anticipate doing more things for ourselves in the future, and also being able to do more things for our community in trade and barter. Make it a point to work to develop at least one unique practical skill (if you don't already have one) that you could use to barter with. Perhaps you're already knowledgeable about plumbing, electricity, construction, well-drilling, etc., skills and trades which will no doubt be very useful. But if not, you might benefit by studying less obvious skills such as cheese-making, sewing and tailoring, small engine repair, clock and watch repair, growing specialty items like peppercorn plants, whatever.... It should preferably be something most people don't know, but that most people will value...and again, something for which you don't need too much technology or specialized equipment. Be clever about it. For myself, I found a non-profit in Wisconsin that gave classes in installing solar hot-water heaters. I figure hot water will always be a luxury that people won't want to live without, and there's a company that makes the panels locally. I'm also curious to learn about building and running a home-made whiskey-still...my guess is that if things really start to fall apart, the feds will have their hands pretty full over the next decade, and probably won't worry too much about a new generation of bootleggers....

Some of the skills we'll need to learn, however, will not be so specialized. There are countless resources on gardening and small-scale farming. A good book on sustainable growing within limited space is John Jeavons' classic *How to Grow More Vegetables...*, or his scaled-down and more accessible primer on the same subject, *The Sustainable Vegetable Garden*. An excellent publisher for a whole host of books on how to approach rural life and hobby-farming is Storey Publishing (www.storey.com). You don't necessarily need to undertake a large garden right away, the point is just to become familiar and experienced with the basic skills involved and know how to do so sustainably. At the very least this will allow you to supplement your diet. You can begin

to learn right now just by planting a modest garden in your yard or even on your apartment balcony.

Similarly, raising and caring for poultry and small farm animals was small part of the daily chores for most people before the last century. If you've ever tasted real, farm-raised chicken you'll never buy the chicken-factory meat you get in stores again. And the squeamish will be glad to know that butchering can usually be "outsourced".

Of course the flip-side of trying to grow your own food is being able to preserve it during the winter months. As electricity becomes unreliable then so will refrigeration, so as civilization begins to break down we'll need to relearn the basic human rituals of structuring our activities in anticipation of the seasons. In this regard, you should begin to study the all-but-lost art of preserving food without refrigeration. This means canning and pickling certainly, but also salting, drying and other processes such as lacto-fermentation with whey. (You may have heard that in ancient cultures salt was so valuable that it was often used as currency, and this is why—salt is a valuable additive for preserving the harvest through the fallow months). One good, easy, and comprehensive introduction to traditional food methods is Sally Fallon's "Nourishing Traditions"—which, since its introduction in 2000 has spawned chapters of its associated Weston A. Price Foundation worldwide. The Weston A. Price foundation educates and lobbies in Washington, D.C. about the incredible nutritional benefits which need to be reclaimed in our diets from the processed-food industry. And in a similar vein, a rapidly growing "Slow Foods" movement is gaining great popularity throughout Europe.

And on a final note, I'll mention that as we approach times of greater social hardship we should try to constantly remember that simply striving to be a good person will earn us more goodwill and support than anything we might through opportunism. It's not the easy path, to be sure...but that's why it holds greater rewards. So we might remember that whatever our future holds, we will not be facing it alone.

6) At the Crossroads: Sustainable Home or Sustainable Community?

Ultimately the most complete answer to the many issues impinging on our modern lifestyle is to completely reinvent a *new* lifestyle, one which is less vulnerable to these issues. As I've been trying to outline, this entails creating a more self-sufficient and sustainable way of life for ourselves and our family. And yet it's unrealistic to believe that anyone can be truly *self*-sufficient. Life itself demands that we depend on each other and work together toward forming healthy, vibrant communities.

Yet while modern empire-culture has steadily worked to create a vast and complex inter-dependence among people, unfortunately that dependence has been only the far-flung "virtual" dependence of globalism and state administration, as opposed to the tangible, directly-experienced dependence of truly co-operative community enterprise. To put it in more practical terms, if we bought our clothing from manufacturers located even a couple

hundred miles of our community, we could quickly re-establish any links which might be broken by temporary crisis. But if there is an ocean between us and our shirt-makers, we'll have to quickly re-learn how to make our own shirts.

So we stand before a difficult situation. The path of self-reliance is already difficult enough to pursue on our own—to then expect that it's only truly possible when we involve an entire *community* of people adds a wholly different order of magnitude to the struggle. In this respect, I have no ready answers. Ultimately, this question represents a crossroads for all of us who recognize and choose to take this journey toward greater self-reliance. It's also the crossroads between mere survivalism and actually creating a new culture which can adapt and endure. And if you're really able to come to this point in your thinking and preparations, then I suspect you'll find the answer already in front of you. You'll either already feel that you're in a place that will work for you—and that having realized within your own life what is needed to create a space or buffer between you and a dying way of life, you also have a good idea as to whether the community around you can achieve this as well—or if not, then you'll have recognized that you need to move somewhere else in order to seek out a like-minded community of people.

Fortunately, if you find that you need to establish a whole new community, you'll not alone in this choice. In fact, what you will discover is that tens of thousands of people across nearly every region of the world have already made this decision for as well....

III. Establishing a New Foundation

1) Join an Ecovillage / Work toward Establishing a Sustainable Community

Having loosened our ties to a moribund way of life as much as possible, the next step would be to actually cast ourselves adrift of the sinking ship altogether.

Should the breakdown of the various systems underpinning society occur in a Slow Crash fashion, there may be the opportunity for locally-based, relatively self-sufficient communities to evolve naturally where they can. But it is much more reasonable to expect to have to prepare for this more intentionally, and while we still have the convenience afforded by modern life to do so. And because this will take a long period of time, it should be started as soon as possible. I don't believe that we can shield ourselves from a collapse of civilization while we simultaneously attempt to cling to and support that civilization. If we wish to make responsible preparations, we should begin to make a break with "modern life"—and begin *now*, rather than waiting until the necessity is upon us.

Making a complete break with society means establishing for ourselves a truly self-sustaining (or at least "locally-based") and sustainable community life. This conclusion has already been reached by many. In just the last ten years a latent "ecovillage movement" has suddenly begun to flourish worldwide, gaining in sophistication and even

starting to be taken up by a more mainstream current. According to most estimates there are presently several thousand such communities worldwide, the majority in existence less than ten years. Figures vary, but the average successful community numbers between 50 and 300 people, although interestingly, few number more than 500 people. They vary greatly, and each reveals its own distinctive character and principles. Some have organized around commonly-shared spiritual practices, while others come together to explore new models of community and culture. A great many practice common aims toward realizing more responsible ways of living such as through permaculture, renewable energies, equitable economies, non-violent relations and conflict resolution, holistic healthcare, etc. But despite their wide range of seeming disparities, intentional communities worldwide have eagerly started to integrate and to organize themselves, creating crucial networks for information, education, sharing and support...not to mention forging important new “trading routes” which might one day lead toward a healthy inter-dependence and the reinstatement of truly localized, democratic enterprise. Several of the most recent projects hope to expand on these advancements even further, described by their desire to establish themselves as “world-class” communities....

As a side note, it should also be recognized that there are many types of “intentional communities” which are not formed around any direct awareness of self-sufficiency and sustainability, although most embrace some kind of steps in this direction. The term “ecovillage” more properly identifies a particular subset of the larger “intentional community” movement, one which actively seeks to reinvent a way of life which maintains a responsible and sustainable relationship with the Earth. In this respect, three basic themes have been identified as being more-or-less central to all ecovillage communities:

Ecological Responsibility — living in harmony with Nature and respecting the Earth’s resources

Social Responsibility —the elimination of hierarchical social relationships, encouraging non-violent and non-competitive interaction, and respecting the dignity of all living beings; in this respect, child-rearing is a central focus for many communities.

Green Economics — local, non-corporate, sustainable and responsible enterprise

And while it’s not the purpose of this article to analyze this ecovillage movement in great detail, it should thus be clear that what is happening now is vastly different from the utopian communities and religious communes and such which have dotted most of human history. The present ecovillage movement is most unusual in the suddenness of its growth, and I suspect it might represent a kind of survival-response within our species consciousness to the terminal phase of instability which modern human civilization is approaching. Yet it should also be noted that ecovillage communities differ fundamentally from “survivalist communities”, since their purpose and aim is rooted in hope and not in fear—in aiding a positive effort for transcendence, adaptation and acceptance to prevail over the basic negative reaction of “fight or flight”. Contemporary ecovillages are life boats, and they know it—intentional refugees cutting themselves

adrift of a sinking ship. Or conversely they might be seen as the hopeful seed-pods of a new human society, humbly germinating in the underbrush of decaying civilization. However it would be wrong to say that a vision of impending crisis informs all the people who choose to embrace such a responsible way of living (although there can be little doubt that a certain sense of “mortality” is a primary catalyst). Because the overriding vision in these communities is by no means a rejection of the world—it is, on the contrary, an intense love for it. Theirs is not an act of quitting but rather a redoubling of the effort to prevail. The single common theme which drives all intentional communities is the desire to rediscover the very meaning of “community”, and to renew a sense of cooperation and a respect for one’s place within a larger whole which was common to more natural societies not yet influenced by the power-games of empire culture. Thus what comes through clearly in every profile of a successful ecovillage are the benefits their members experience right now, today, and which make all their efforts worthwhile: the rediscovery of relationship, of meaning and “quality” in their lives, and a renewed feeling of hope for both themselves and their children.

However in all fairness it should be accepted that for many people, joining an ecovillage may only represent an *ideal*, and that a change of this magnitude might prove too great a hurdle. Certainly if you have significant debts, if you have a large family strongly “rooted” in the community you’re in now, if you have serious health considerations, etc., then it’s important to be realistic about what will be possible within your particular situation—as well as remaining open to additional options and solutions that I haven’t considered here. Nevertheless I’d encourage you to study the matter carefully and to keep the basic premise of it present in your thoughts as you go about your preparations and begin to organize your life in this direction. As a general rule, ecovillages strive to include anyone with a serious interest (the highly renown Camphill communities integrate care for the mentally and physically handicapped with sustainable agriculture and spiritual life), so what seems to be a hurdle at first may turn out to be only a minor bump in the road.

2) Navigating the Currents of Change

Assuming we make the choice to become part of a more independent and self-sufficient community, we should nonetheless recognize that we will always exist and operate within the context of a larger society, and likely one that is going through great distress and upheaval. So it’s going to be important that such communities maintain an acute awareness of the larger picture and how it might involve them. Many people have had a “survivalist” image planted in their head by Hollywood, whereby hungry, desperate marauders are continually threatening the houses and villages of otherwise law-abiding and well-meaning people. However actual history shows that human beings in distress do not typically act this way—the most common exception being very limited cases of civil strife occurring during systemic breakdowns in large cities, and which generally “burn themselves out” fairly quickly. So, on the contrary, we should recognize that the kind of ongoing bloodshed by paramilitary gangs and warlords which is occurring in

certain African countries is *not* a spontaneous social response to famine, poverty and disease—although those things are certainly rampant in many of these areas. These thugs are actually being armed and “instigated” into conflict by specific Western-based interests seeking to sow unrest and enforce their control over resources within the regions.

But be that as it may, as hard times begin to set-in communities (and households) should probably try to remain low-key and well-liked. Because when people are hungry and unemployed, they will no doubt applaud government acts to do things like seize farmland to put people to work on. Similarly, they’ll also hold goodwill toward those who help them and can educate them to live more self-sufficiently.

While it is unlikely that human civilization is going to return to a decidedly primitive existence, it may still be important that certain skills and knowledge be preserved so that developing communities can begin to teach themselves and others, as well as building and vitalizing fresh economic links and “trading routes” for a new civilization. So it’s probably a good idea to create a library of important information, in case for some reason ready-access to books becomes difficult.

In the end, we need to not only make preparations for ourselves, but all our efforts must also take into account that we are sowing the seeds of a new and more responsible way of living for our children to adopt. This is why establishing and maintaining the seeds for a culture of sustainable, equitable, conscionable living will be critical if we do not wish to repeat the mistakes of our predecessors. So if we can focus beyond mere survivalism, and recognize that we are creating little pockets of a more caring and responsible culture, then we can face this future knowing that we did all that we could to try to make the world a better place than we found it. Then even if these crises overwhelm us, we will be blameless.

Conclusion

The future the human race is moving towards is very uncertain in its details, but what is quite certain is that it will only represent a return to the “norm” for the way in which human beings have led their lives throughout the millenniums. The period of crisis which brings this about might unfold in a few short and tragic years, and leave the human race shocked, dislocated and struggling to create a sense of stability once again. But then again, it may unfold over decades or even generations, allowing time for us to find our way more carefully toward a new way of being. Things could begin to come apart at the seams tomorrow morning...or conversely, tomorrow many bring us a brief respite and a fleeting feeling that the storm clouds are dissipating and all will be right with the world once again. Regardless, the path outlined here is one of personal empowerment, and thus will be worth taking no matter what our future brings.

This return to the norm will nonetheless represent a new stage, a new era, a new way of living for the human race, since in the flow of time nothing can ever truly go back to the way it once was. Individuals may face the same situations at different times in their lives, but each time they face it from a different stage of being...and hopefully, a different level of maturity.

Probably the greatest difficulty with this idea of returning to a more traditional way of living is simply that we *think* it will be hard. Because of that we may have a strong tendency to admit resistances and excuses beforehand, or to give up at the slightest obstacle or distraction. Yet we should keep in mind that people, tribes and families have lived essentially self-sustaining lifestyles for millions of years. As most anthropologists now recognize, the popular image of “primitive” life being difficult, short and violent is grossly in error, born out of a narcissistic self-importance in early modern thinking; most cultures actually had significant knowledge and understanding, and led relatively rich, stress-free, comfortable lives. No, it’s likely only the transition period itself back toward this simpler way of living that will be difficult. But that’s all the more reason to begin to make that transition *now*, while we still enjoy the luxury of doing so at our own pace.

If we look at our lives dispassionately, we will see that Life continually presents us with hardships and challenges which are designed to show us the ways in which we need to grow. In younger people, we often recognize these bittersweet challenges as “growing pains”. And the seeming intelligence behind this design is sometimes referred to as “destiny”. Yet it is precisely our willful struggling to cling to the way things are—to the way *we* are—which creates our suffering, and which causes us to become “stuck”, and thereby doomed to repeat the same mistakes again and again until we’re ready to accept what we’re being asked to learn.

I am convinced that humankind is now being asked to learn some important lessons, and thus to grow-up a little. I believe we are being asked to put away our “childish things”, to begin exercising more humility and responsibility in our relations with the Earth, with each other, and with ourselves. It is this recognition that informs all of the preparations I’ve outlined, so that they represent some initial indications toward a path of growth and maturity, as I understand it. But I’ll also add that whether you accept this premise or not, these suggestions will still prove helpful.

It’s crucial to understand and to remember is that we ourselves are part of a culture which is living life wrongly, destructively, disrespectfully, and out of balance with Nature and our own being. And it’s worth noting that this is actually the original basis for the religious concept of “sin”; therefore when we say we wish to “prepare” to meet the coming crisis, we could just as correctly recognize that what we really seek is to “redeem” ourselves—to embrace a change for the better in the way we live and think. And seen in this light, each step we make along this path serves to create even greater opportunity to realize further steps toward transformation. This is crucial to understand, because it helps us to see why it’s a mistake to prepare for the future from a place of Fear. To do that shows that we’re simply clinging to and protecting our current “wrongful” way of life, and trying vainly to force the world to adapt itself to our personal wants and

desires. Aside from the simple fact that we cannot stop the tide with our hands, such an approach can bring no real transformation, and thus it truly doesn't offer us any "future" to begin with. To bring back the image from earlier, we should try instead to have Faith that there is in fact a larger "plan" in which we participate, to be willing to make the efforts needed to align ourselves with that plan, and then to look toward the future with Hope—the Hope that we will discover the wisdom and fortitude to recognize and adapt ourselves to what is being asked of us. And then all our "preparations" will not be preparations at all...they'll be an act of service to ourselves, our children, our community and our world. In other words, they'll be an act of Love.