

PART FOUR

Whole Systems

LESSON 31

Putting It Together

At this point, it may be helpful to glance back over the ground we've covered in the last thirty lessons. From one perspective, those lessons have simply offered a grab-bag of potentially useful methods for producing and preserving some of your own food and some of your own energy on a scale small enough that an individual, a family, or a very small group could easily put them to work. In the future that is taking shape around us right now, methods like the ones we've covered will almost certainly offer better options than continued reliance on gargantuan technostructures utterly dependent on a limitless supply of increasingly limited resources.

The hope of providing better options of this kind was a central motivation of the appropriate tech movement of the 1970s and early 1980s. Still, for a great many people who were involved in appropriate tech back in the day, the goals of the movement weren't limited to the provision of helpful strategies for an age of crisis. Beyond that necessary work lay the hope of constructing, at least in outline, ways of living on the Earth that would be humane and fulfilling as well as ecologically sustainable.

These hopes rested on a tradition of social criticism that has been forgotten and buried every bit as thoroughly as appropriate tech itself. From the Great Depression right up through the coming of the Reagan era, a sequence of brilliant social thinkers—Lewis Mumford, Norman Brown, E. F. Schumacher, Theodore Roszak, and Christopher Lasch, to name only a few—subjected industrial society to close analysis and showed just how destructive it was to every human value, very much including the happiness that the cheerleaders of the industrial system insisted it was supposed to provide. Central to the thinking of all these authors was the recognition that a life spent frantically attempting to satisfy manufactured cravings for consumer products, at the expense of more authentic human needs, does not lead to fulfillment. The fact that these same lifestyles also endanger the health of our planet and the long-term prospects of our species is simply one more layer of bitter icing on an already unwelcoming cake.

Such ideas are hardly popular these days. Still, they provide a crucial part of the framework for practicing the green wizardry of appropriate tech, and attempting to integrate the practices of the last thirty lessons into your life without at least a little attention to that broader picture makes things a good deal more difficult than they have to be.

Here's an example. I routinely field emails from people who are seriously troubled about the future. They see themselves as trapped in a system that's already started to go to bits around them, but they lack the money and other resources they would need to weather the approaching crash. A good many of them are living in apartments with nowhere to garden and few options for energy retrofits, and they quite reasonably worry about what's going to happen when access to energy becomes intermittent, food prices spike, and what now counts as a comfortable urban lifestyle begins the long downhill skid into the shantytown existence many Americans will encounter in the decades ahead. They want to know what options I can suggest for them.

I do have a suggestion to offer, though it's not one that many of them are eager to take. The most important thing people in that situation can do is to get off the consumer merry-go-round and stop spending money on the dubious conveniences and even more dubious entertainments that eat such a large portion of all but the poorest Americans' incomes these days. The goal of that strategy is to bring expenditures well below income, so that the money left over can be used to get out of the current, unsustainable situation.

Most Americans can cut expenses by anything up to a third by giving up the energy- and money-wasting habits of the consumer economy. That may involve moving to a smaller apartment with lower rent, fewer amenities, and a bus line nearby; it may involve not buying the new computer every two years, the plasma screen TV, and the other expensive toys so many people think they have to have; it may involve learning to cook, eat, and enjoy rice and beans for dinner instead of picking up meals at the deli; it will likely involve plenty of other steps of the same kind. The payoff is that you get the extra money you need to learn the skills that will make sense in a deindustrial economy; then, you can save up a down payment for a fixer-upper house with good solar exposure, a backyard well suited for an organic garden, and a basement where you can get to work learning to brew good beer. For many people, using less now is the entrance ticket to a better future.

There's another side to these preparatory steps, because it's impossible to downshift in a blink from a modern American lifestyle, with all its comforts and privileges, to the close-to-subsistence lifestyle most of us will be leading in the middle future. There's no good to be gained by following the lead of those old-fashioned survivalists whose idea of being ready to feed themselves, once the rubble stops bouncing, was a nitrogen-packed tin of garden seeds, a random assortment of tools, and a manual on how to garden, which they read halfway through on a slow afternoon ten years ago. Those who adopted that approach have been very lucky that their doomsteads have never had to function as anything more

serious than deer camps, because if they'd tried to feed themselves that way, death by starvation would have been the inevitable result. Growing food in an intensive organic garden is a skilled craft requiring several years of hard and careful work to master, and if you hope to rely on it for even a small part of your food, you need to get through the steep part of the learning curve as soon as possible.

The same thing is true of most of the other skills that are needed to live comfortably in hard times. If you don't know how to do them, you're going to make a lot of mistakes, which means you'll suffer a great deal more than you have to. The sooner you start that learning curve, the easier the curve will be, because you'll still have the resources to pick up the pieces when your early efforts fall flat. It's entirely possible, for example, to live through summers south of the Mason-Dixon line without air conditioning—people did it for a very long time before air conditioners were first marketed in the boom times following the Second World War—but it's not simply a matter of gritting your teeth and sweating. It requires certain skills and, for most recently built houses, certain modifications. If the thermometer hits three digits when you haven't yet installed the attic fan or figured out how to open a couple of windows at the right angle to catch the breeze and keep heat from building up, you could be risking heatstroke. Starting the learning curve now provides a margin of safety you'll be glad to have.

Most current talk about the impact of peak oil assumes that the end of the industrial age is a nice, cleanly marked point located conveniently off somewhere in the future. That's a potentially lethal oversimplification. Those Americans who have run out of their 99 weeks of unemployment checks and become members of the new class of economic nonpersons have already been pushed out the exit doors of industrial society; for them, the end of the industrial age has arrived. That same eventuality could show up on any of our doorsteps with 99 weeks of warning, and quite possibly less. If that happens to you, will you be better prepared to meet it if you've cut your expenses, cleared your debts, mastered the art of getting by

with less, and learned the skills and bought the tools for a backup profession or two, or will you be better off if you've been spending everything you earn, and then some, in standard American middle class style? You tell me.

All this amounts to variations on a common theme, which is that the rules governing life in a stagnant or contracting economy are precisely the opposite of the rules governing life in an expanding one. In the growth economy of the recent past, it usually made sense to spend money freely and gamble that you could always get more, because the sheer fact of continued economic growth meant that more often than not, you would be right. With the end of economic growth, the principle once made famous by Wilkins Micawber, the amiable moneylender of Charles Dickens' novel *David Copperfield*—"annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen pounds nineteen and six, result happiness; annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery"—once again comes into force.

I don't have anything so elegant as Micawber's principle to offer. What I suggest, rather, is an acronym—LESS—that stands for "Less Energy, Stuff, and Stimulation." In outline, that's the strategy I'd like to propose for those who want to weave green wizardry into a broader way of life. Just as it's a lot easier to heat a house with solar power when you've already taken care of insulation and weatherstripping, it's a lot easier to live a life in an age of decline when you've made sure your life isn't leaking energy and other resources from every available orifice. That's what the LESS strategy is meant to do; think of it as a way of weatherstripping your life.

The last part of the acronym, "stimulation," may seem surprising, but it's a crucial part of the recipe. For the last thirty years and more, Americans have been pushing their nervous systems into continual overload with various kinds of stimulation. A mind that's constantly flooded with noise from television, video games, or what have you, is a mind that never has the time or space to think its own thoughts. In a nation that's trying not to notice that it's sold

its own grandchildren down the river, that's probably the point of the exercise. Be that as it may, recovering the ability to think one's own thoughts, to clear one's mind of media-driven chatter, manufactured imagery, and all the other thoughtstopping clutter we use to numb ourselves to the increasingly unwelcome realities of life in a failing civilization, is an indispensable tool for surviving the challenges ahead.

"Stuff" may seem a little less puzzling, but getting out from under the tyranny of excess ownership may be every bit as challenging for many Americans as shaking off the habit of stimulating the mind into a state not far removed from coma. As far as I know, ours is the only civilization in history in which building and managing storage facilities for personal possessions has become the basis for a significant economic sector. It's a critical issue, though, because our passion for what I've elsewhere termed "prosthetic technologies"—machines, that is, that are designed to do things that human beings are perfectly able to do for themselves—has built up habits of dependence that could easily, and literally, prove to be fatal if they're not broken before demand destruction puts the machines and the power needed to run them out of reach. In an expanding civilization, your success is marked by what you have; in a declining one, your chances of survival may well be measured by what you can readily do without.

"Energy," finally, may be the most obvious factor in the equation, but some of its aspects are far from obvious to most Americans today. A very large fraction of the energy that props up the American lifestyle, for example, gets used to manufacture, package, ship, retail, power, maintain, and dispose of the heap of consumer goods that people in this country commonly mistake for having a life. Another very large fraction, as just suggested, goes into technologies meant to keep human bodies and minds from doing things they're perfectly able to do, and, as often as not, become unhealthy if they're not allowed to do. For every watt-hour that can be saved by direct methods, there's more than one—very often, many more

than one—that can be saved by indirect methods such as buying used goods from local sources rather than new items from chain stores with intercontinental supply chains, or leaving the latest round of flashy entertainment devices to collect cobwebs in a big box store while you do something less futile with your time.

Still, the basic concept should be easy enough to grasp. The habit of living beyond our means is as much an individual problem as a collective one, and it's a significant factor keeping many people stuck in a set of lifestyles that are as unsatisfactory as they are unsustainable. Freeing up the money, the time, and the resources to make the shift to a more sustainable way of life needs to be high on the agenda of anyone who's seriously planning to deal with the cascading crises of the decades ahead of us, and using LESS may be the single most important and accessible tool for doing that.

Exercise for Lesson 31

The exercise for this lesson may already have occurred to you as you read the paragraphs above. Choose one way to use less energy, one way to have less stuff, and one way to get less stimulation in the course of your daily round. Try them for a week, and see what you learn by doing so. If the changes seem beneficial to you, consider making them permanent and/or making more changes of the same kind.