

Learning to Love the Energy Crisis



Far from dreading the energy crisis, I find people positively looking forward to it. Woolens heavy with camphor are being shown off, the wearer feeling virtuous in sporting them. Parents are casting covetous glances at their kids' ten-speeds.

The funny thing about crises is that we dread their onslaught, complain bitterly about the necessary sacrifices, then remember for years what a "great experience" the disaster was. Nearly a decade later New Yorkers still brag about their blackout. Londoners can grow positively nostalgic about the blitz. And in California, two 1906 Clubs still bring together survivors of the great earthquake.

My friend John Wood, who's a psychologist, says that the bittersweet attraction of crises is underrated as a positive human experience. "Who doesn't remember Pearl Harbor as a tragic, though exciting, time?" he says. "When President Roosevelt died, it was a great day. Everyone listened to everyone else, all the women cried and the men became soft and everyone had plenty of time—no place to rush off to."

Most of us remember exactly what we were doing the day John Kennedy was killed. But who remembers the day in 1963 when nothing went wrong?

Our impending shortage of energy is going to give us lots of days to remember. Cutting back on our use of fossil fuel will have the incidental effect of forcing us inside ourselves for human resources long dormant, and on each other. In the process families may revive as working units; commerce could grow more local again, more walk-to-able; and 50-mph speed limits should slow life's pace, making each driver coming in off the road easier to be with.

BACK TO THE OLD ROCKER

A front-porch revival is something I'm looking forward to as air conditioning grows more costly. A San Franciscan I met returned to his boyhood Mississippi home recently, looking forward to being waved at and howdy'd by familiar faces rocking on porches. But the porches of his town were bare. The people who used to sit outside, it turned out, were now inside being air-conditioned. Perhaps today in this Mississippi town wicker rockers are being dusted off, and the summer-evening out-of-doors may grow popular again.

Less air conditioning will also reduce

noise pollution, as will fewer plane flights, reduced traffic on the street and more selective use of appliances at home. Acoustic experts say the cacophony of electric dishwashers, food blenders, garbage disposals, ice crushers, cheese graters, juicerators, coffee mills, carving knives, meat grinders and trash compactors can make in-home noise levels leap well over 70 decibels. Since normal conversation is hard against background noise exceeding 55 decibels, the din of fuel-consuming appliances may be one reason family members seem not to talk so much, or at least not to listen. The less we use electric cheese graters, the more we may talk.

THE FAMILY THAT EATS TOGETHER

Once I spoke on "the generation gap" to a women's group. Afterward one salty old gal got up and said, "I'll tell you what brought the whole thing on. Dishwashers. That's right, dishwashers. Before we got the infernal thing, doing dishes was the time I got to know my kids. One would wash, another rinse, a third dry and I'd put them away. We fought a lot, but we talked, and really got to know each other. Now that we have a dishwasher, there's no time when I talk so much with my kids."

Not just washing dishes together, but preparing and eating meals as a family could be another side effect of the energy crisis since it takes so much paper to package, electricity to freeze and gas to cook the individual boil-pac servings and TV dinners that have wrecked our family meals. The drain on resources of so many things individual, not just Del Monte Pudding Cups but cars, televisions and phones, will force us to share more in general among family and friends. Cars especially will become not a source of privacy as they are today—a place to pick your nose in peace—but a setting where we'll be forced to get reacquainted while sharing rides.

As gas begins to be rationed, or sky-rockets in price, I'll not only be doing my own ride asking and offering, but biking more, and walking. Along the car-glutted streets of our southern California neighborhood, walking these days is an act of social deviance, and constitutes possible evidence of suicidal tendencies. But there *are* stores a short walk away and, as I'm forced to use them, perhaps I'll get to be a regular—"known" to the merchants in a way I'm not at the bargain

barns and supermarkets I drive to today.

The irony is that so many side effects of our energy crisis will prove desirable in their own right: thermostats lowered to where they should have been anyway; year-round daylight-saving time; reduced speed on highways (and lowered insurance rates); turning off some lights.

Less light at night is something I'm particularly looking forward to—especially those damned globes that burn all night in front of the apartment house across the street and make it seem like I'm sleeping in the middle of a nightclub. Now, excess light may not be one of our more conspicuous pollutions, but doctors say it can rob slumber of depth and quality. Since sleep and the lack of it seem of such current concern, who knows how much our collective temper may benefit from less light at night?

TOUCHED BY HUMAN HANDS

I don't mean to be frivolous about the energy crisis, or minimize any suffering it may entail. Our environment is designed for an age of abundant fuel. Making America more foot-oriented, less heated in winter, cooled in summer, and more dependent on human hands will involve the pain of readjustment. But we will adjust. Wearing heavy sweaters wasn't all *that* bad, or those evenings out on the porch. As gas prices go up by a dime, we may see more streets converted to malls. Add 20 cents to a gallon and some bike paths may finally get built. And a doubling of the price of gas, or rationing, will do more to get cities building mass-transit systems than a thousand editorials, twice that number of speeches or a hundred bills introduced in Congress.

And after a year of enduring the energy crisis, the extra human energy required to make up for dwindling fuel could force us to lose more pounds than Weight Watchers have managed in a decade.

The greatest irony of our energy-crisis "sacrifices" is that so many could result in things we've longed for all along.

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