

Crash Course In Resilience

We can strengthen our communities and ourselves to prepare for the uncertain world of failing economies, climate change, and oil depletion.

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PEEK INSIDE THE RESILIENT COMMUNITIES ISSUE OF YES! MAGAZINE

To cherish what remains of the Earth and to foster its renewal is our only legitimate hope of survival.
—Wendell Berry

When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.
—Victor Frankl

Not long ago, a rocket took off from a Florida launching pad taking Americans to the moon. The moon shot signified to many that Americans could do anything we set our minds to.

Today, in another part of Florida, toxic oil is washing up on beaches. Hundreds of miles of Gulf Coast have been devastated, and people whose resilience was tested by Hurricane Katrina are being tested even more severely today. There are good reasons to believe many more of us will have our resilience tested in coming months and years.

Future historians may see this time as a turning point for Western civilization. In the popular zeitgeist, there is much discussion of end times. Millennialists await the Rapture. New Agers point to prophecies that 2012 will mark the end of the world (but perhaps the beginning of another one).

The End Of Cheap Oil

More secular folks also warn of big changes ahead. Concern about energy supplies is one reason. Author and energy analyst Michael Klare says we have already extracted the oil that's easy to get; from here on,

we're into the "Age of Tough Oil," and the human, environmental, and financial cost of each additional barrel of oil will be higher than the last.

Fossil fuels contain millions of years of stored sunlight. A liter of oil, according to Transition Towns founder Rob Hopkins, is the energy equivalent of five weeks of hard human labor. In a society that relies on fossil fuels for transportation, food, warmth, and light, the loss of an abundant and inexpensive form of high-quality energy is no small thing. There simply isn't anything else out there quite like it, and many geologists believe we are at, or close to, the peak production of this powerful source of energy.

The U.S. Military agrees:

"Assuming the most optimistic scenario for improved petroleum production through enhanced recovery means, the development of non-conventional oils (such as oil shales or tar sands) and new discoveries, petroleum production will be hard pressed to meet the expected future demand," says the Joint Operating Environment 2010, published by the United States Joint Forces Command.

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This is not to say that oil will suddenly become unavailable. It does mean getting the oil we depend on will exact a higher and higher toll on people and the environment. Just look at the devastation caused by tar sands development in Canadian forests, the oil spills in the Gulf and now Michigan, and the impact on people as far flung as the Niger Delta and the Amazon.

It also means oil prices are likely to continue rising, especially if the economy starts to expand again, and with China and India's new energy purchasing power.

Even if we could get ever-increasing quantities of fossil fuels (by using even more coal, for example), we have the problem of climate change. World leaders meeting in Copenhagen failed to come to terms with the biggest threat humans have ever faced—the possibility that runaway climate change could make the Earth uninhabitable.

Scientists point out that the amount of carbon already in the atmosphere will cause further disruption before the climate stabilizes, and no one knows where it will stabilize—whether the new climate will be anything like the one we count on to water our crops, maintain stable coastlines, and provide adequate supplies of drinking water.

The Economy

On the economic side, corporations have come through the global financial crisis they instigated with bigger profits than ever. But the Main Street economy of real goods and services, with jobs for ordinary people, remains stalled. Decades of tax cuts to the wealthy and the outsourcing of manufacturing have hollowed out the real economy. Our infrastructure is breaking down after years of maintenance deferred by governments starved of tax dollars.

Our military is overextended, too, in its mission to ensure U.S. access to oil and other resources. The costs to wounded and traumatized members of the military and those who care for them, to civilians caught in the battles, to taxpayers, and to future generations have yet to be calculated.

We now have diminished resources to respond to the intertwined economic and energy crises. And our democratic institutions are so compromised by big-money interests—and the media, think tanks, and politicians they control—that these foundational issues aren't even on the political agenda.

This set of crises may be severe enough to throw our way of life into chaos and decline. We don't know. In quiet conversations, many admit that they are learning to grow food and wondering how their children will survive life on a very different planet.

For some, of course, the chaos is already here. If you are a fisherman on the Louisiana Coast, a young job seeker in Detroit, a laid-off steelworker in the Ohio Valley, or a wounded Marine just back from Afghanistan, you may already be living in chaos. Some impoverished communities have been in crisis for decades.

The political Right frames the turmoil people are experiencing as a reason to hate immigrants, liberals, or people they say are “moving ahead of you to the front of the line.”



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