The Night the Lights Went Out

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Lately, I've been immersed in thoughts of surviving "after the crash." It all started three years ago when our theatre group, unable to find a suitable published play for us to perform, decided to collectively write a play of our own about "the end of the world as we know it." In *The Wobble*, as it soon came to be known, five actors on tour get stranded on an island (similar to the one on which we all live in the Georgia Strait between the southwestern coast of British Columbia and Vancouver Island) when they experience 'a wobble' that appears to be the cause of the permanent collapse of all power and communication systems.

The play oscillates between the past (when the wobble happened) and the present (sometime in the future) when people are gathered in the community hall to reflect on how they had come together to help one another survive. For example, this ranges from building communal ovens and sharing food and lodging to attempting to resolve a brewing controversy–the outcome of which will have a profound social and cultural impact on the future fabric of the community. Though the issues are serious, the play is interlaced with humor, and while it doesn't offer any solutions, it does raise some important questions about our values and encourages us to imagine the kind of community in which we want to live.

As the theatre group started to formulate the outline of *The Wobble*, it was uncanny how reality began to mirror our fictional story as we struggled to coordinate our busy schedules, confront our resurfacing egos and political agendas, while honoring the unique skills and insights that each of us brought to the production. Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, the tragic news of the South Asian tsunami was a stark reminder of the very real horrors that would ensue after such a disaster. Incredulously, we found out that even the concept of a wobble was not all that farfetched when Canada's national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, validated our title in its December 29, 2004 headline: "The Day the Earth Shifted: Quake Made Planet Wobble."

Closer to home the following year, Katrina hit New Orleans, and ever since news of that fiasco subsided, frequent foreboding media stories have anticipated unpredictable and severe weather conditions that are directly linked to our gluttonous appetite for the earth's resources–particularly fossil fuels. While this came as no surprise to many of us, when our own version of Mother Nature's wrath came pounding on our doorstep, I received a valuable lesson in primitive thinking–and humility.

As a prelude to what was soon to follow, in mid November, 2006, just as winter solstice was steadily creeping closer and rapidly diminishing our daylight hours, we were forced to contend with four consecutive evenings without power–the first phase of several intermittent scheduled power outages that would take place over the next month to enable the provincial government to replace outdated underwater electrical cables that link Denman Island to its main power source on the much larger Vancouver Island to the west of us.

For the record, Denman Island is mostly rural; people here expect the power to go off from time to time during the winter months when strong winds and heavy rains, or occasionally, wet snow, inevitably cause branches and/or trees to fall on power lines somewhere along the regional grid. Also, unlike more urban areas where a network of municipal and city water systems continue to operate during short term power outages, we access water from a well or, in some cases, a nearby lake, and while some have composting toilets or outhouses, most use septic fields

for disposal. What that means for us is that when the power goes off, the water pumps stop working too, and when that happens, water ceases to flow through the taps–and you've got one more flush of the toilet till the power is restored.

So, when word gets out that there's a "wind or snowfall warning" in the forecast, people get out the standard emergency supplies: candles, lanterns, transistor radio, matches, and batteries. We also clean any dirty dishes, fill the tub and any other large pots or containers with water (we keep several five gallon jugs full at all times), and turn off the computer. And that's exactly what we did before a cold front dropped a rare 10 inches of snow on the region, and as anticipated, the power cut out.

We knew we were going to be snowed-in for a while but expected our power to be restored within the usual 2448 hours. However, the next day we heard the dismal news on the radio that, in addition to the widespread extent of damaged lines in the region, access was now obstructed by the deep snow and freezing temperatures. We could expect to be without power for up to a week! While being without power and running water for a day or two is either an annoying nuisance or a welcome respite from civilization, surviving five days is–well–a humbling experience.

Psychologically, I prepared myself for the long haul. *Every day, hundreds of thousands of women around the world walk miles in small groups to fill large containers of water and carry them back home, with dignity and grace, on their head.*

I initiated, with some resignation, a methodical ritual: scooped up snow into large pots, carried them inside, and placed the pots on the propane cooking stove in the kitchen and the woodstove in the basement which heats the cabin. *Thankfully, we have a back-up propane tank and plenty of firewood*. Outside and inside, downstairs and upstairs, I vigilantly monitored the transformation of snow as it melted into water. I learned that a large 15-inch-high pot full of snow melts down to only a couple of inches of water!

Forget using five gallons of water to flush the toilet! We shat into a bucket–*it's fucking cold and windy outside*–and disposed of it later. *We need an outhouse!* Upstairs and downstairs, inside and outside, the repetitive cycle continued. *Water is heavy; my muscles ache*. Water for cooking, water for dishes, and water for bathing–but only the most essential parts–my face, teeth, underarms, and crotch. I slowly squeezed every drop of water out of the cloth to maximize its potential–and reused it whenever possible. I recalled a line from the play, "We can go 21 days without food, but only a few days without water." I know why it's called blue gold–every drop of water is, indeed, precious.

As the days passed, during my brief sojourns outside, I looked around me and pondered how the indigenous Pentlatch integrated themselves within this web of plant and wildlife. I noticed a growing satisfaction with the essence of my work. What made it so tedious is that, for starters, we're just not set up for life off the grid, and because the home of my closest neighbor is two hundred yards away, each of us performed these same tasks–alone. *After the crash, it'll be a group activity and we'll share stories and sing songs together*. I heard that old refrain, "You don't know what you've got till it's gone," but I considered the possibility that it could be instead "You don't know what you've lost till it beckons you."

Yet, while we worked in isolation, people did call each other to make sure everyone was okay and, in the evenings, there were frequent potluck feasts where we shared stories, laughter, and homemade wine. I heard that the Back Hall in the village center, which has a woodstove and kitchen facilities, had been opened up, providing cooking options and warm shelter for those people on the island whose only source of heat is electricity. Once back home, we returned to our nightly games of Scrabble until suddenly, out of the silence, erupted the rumbling hum of the refrigerator. "The power's back on," one of us called out. After refilling the water jugs, we each bathed and then resumed our individual projects.

But the ordeal wasn't over yet. Soon after the power was restored, we were hit with a torrential rain storm with hurricane-force winds of 175 mph that wreaked havoc throughout the whole region as it whipped its way across the coastal area of southwestern British Columbia. People recounted the "sheer terror" they felt as they observed these ferocious winds rip apart and uproot some of the tallest and oldest trees–many of them Douglas Fir and Western Red Cedar which can grow up to 300 and 200 feet respectively–and hurled them through the air as if they were matchsticks. Even the old timers couldn't remember a storm so fierce. Yet, although there was widespread residential damage of varying degrees–including several homes that had trees crash through the roof with people inside–amazingly, no one was hurt. Well, at least not physically. Many of us who didn't have chain saws couldn't leave our driveways without help from our neighbors and those without generators are forced to endure yet another five days without power–and five more days without running water.

Our rehearsal schedule for our upcoming performance of *The Wobble* was, once again, postponed. Yet, I knew what I was going through was the real rehearsal.

Prior to the storms of 2006, I had, somewhat naively, considered myself to be someone who was fairly independent; someone who could "weather the (aftermath of the) storm." I don't shower every day or flush the toilet after each use, for example, so I was surprised at how quickly my nerves got frazzled from the underlying stress associated with unexpected and extended disruptions to the regular rhythms of my daily life. It crept up and took its toll. And I was not alone. We were all a little short-fused and cranky. As one neighbor summed it up, "Everyone's feeling a little bushed right now." There's nothing like "cold turkey" to shed light on the magnitude of our dependent addictions to numerous technologies.

Scenes flashed before me from the books I'd been reading: Derrick Jensen's *End Game*, and the futuristic novels, *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler and, my favorite, *Into The Forest* by Jean Hegland. I decided I want to live a life less mediated by technology.

I plan to build a cob outhouse, a solar food dryer, and I'm organizing a communal canning session at the Back Hall. I'm also learning more about local wild herbs and edible plants, wild fermentation and, yeah, I'm assembling an emergency kit too. Yet I'm aware that, no matter how efficiently I prepare, ultimately, our survival will depend upon each other–and our collective willingness to give and receive mutual aid.

A week later, I sat down to luxuriously read the newspaper under the luminescent glow of a lamp. The Quebec government (in eastern Canada) announced its plans to flood 1,000 square miles of wilderness when they dam and divert the majestic Rupert River–one of the world's last free flowing rivers–that roars 1,000 miles westward through the northern part of the province to the Hudson's Bay. I dropped the paper on my lap and repeated out loud to myself–"one of the last free flowing rivers in the world."

I turned off the light to grieve. *I want out of this industrial state madness!* I recalled the first line of *The Wobble*, "Do you remember the night the lights went out and the hum stopped?" When the wobble makes the lights go out once and for all, I just hope I'm here on Denman Island.

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