



In a survival situation, for some reason, people always want to look for food first. It is like knowing that the grocery store is far away, or that there is no McDonald's around the next bend, makes people suddenly ravenous and afraid they might starve to death if they can not find some tasty bark ASAP.

I know that I can go for most of the day without eating, much. I do not *eat* breakfast (a cup of sweetened tea is breakfast). Sometimes I do not sit down and have a lunch, although I might grab a handful of nuts, a couple of crackers or some dried fruit...and a cup of tea. I drink a lot of tea.

The point is that I do not need a lot of food.

Several years ago, I was working late, because my boss was dictating a speech for a ceremony the next day, and I had been tasked with transcribing it for him, but he was not recording it. He was telling me what he wanted to say, asking me to read it back and proof it, suggest changes and fill in words when he could not think of the exact term. It was taking a very long time. I lived in

a communal setting, and meals were served at designated times. There was no going to the kitchen and grabbing a tray of leftovers if I missed the meal time. If I missed getting to the dining room on time, I would miss that night's meal, and aside from having a coffee pot and a little refrigerator, I was not permitted to cook in my room.

As it got later, suddenly I was starving. Just the knowledge that I would miss a meal was enough to make me hungrier, which is crazy, because I had had lunch and breakfast. It had not even been 12 hours since my last meal.

In a lost-in-the-woods survival scenario, this is the mindset that people find themselves in, and, unfortunately, it could kill them.

**Fact:** The average person can survive *without any food at all* for three weeks.

**Fact:** One can die of exposure to the elements in as little as three hours.

In a true lost-in-the-woods survival scenario, all of the experts agree that the first order of business is to secure shelter.

The irony is that people, especially here in America, seem fixated on ensuring everyone has enough food, while shelter seems a secondary concern. Homelessness in some of our nation's cities is rampant (in the Los Angeles area, an estimated 70,000 people are homeless — roughly the population of Maine's largest city). The press always seems to place a greater emphasis on the food issue with regard to homelessness, but contrary to popular belief, we do not need a lot of food to survive. When faced with extreme survival, most people stumble around trying to find the tastiest bark, when in fact, they should be trying to build something in which they can escape the cold, the wet or the sun. Reality TV fans will

note that the teams on the popular *Survivor* who had a comfortable, weather-tight shelter that allowed them a good night's rest performed better and felt better than those teams whose shelter did not keep them warm or dry.

Unfortunately, here in the US, we do not look at our housing as shelter. Houses are an investment, and we talk about the places we live in terms of value and equity. These homes are not places where we plan lives, but rather one more asset in our portfolios.

When my husband and I bought our house in 1997, we believed, like most Americans, that this house was temporary. We had high hopes of finding a more permanent home some undefined time in the future. This house was good enough for a start, but we were sure that, eventually, we would find a little place out in the country, on a few acres, where we could pursue a more self-sufficient life.

I think our dream probably sounds very familiar to most people, especially those of us who live in the suburbs and have dreams of the country life. The original American Dream had very little to do with what we modern people consider success and prosperity. It was not about having the latest and greatest gadgets, the best clothes or the right car, a big house with a picket fence and 2.5 kids. The original American Dream had to do with being self-sufficient, whether that means having a piece of land and taking care of one's own needs or owning a profitable business or having a successful career. The Dream is security, and my husband's and my vision of security was a rural home where we produce our own food.

At some point over the next eight years, it finally dawned on us that we were probably not going to move, that our dream of a rural homestead was not likely to happen, and that whatever we had hoped our lives would be would have to include what we had.

It was at that point that our house ceased to be an asset in the economic sense and started to be an asset in the survival sense. As

long as we have our house, we have a place where we are safe and protected.

I lived for many years in the rural southeastern Appalachia area of Kentucky. Sixteen of the 100 poorest counties in the United States are in Kentucky, and the community where I lived was number 83. Life there could never be described as easy, and people truly did *toil*, but if you asked them, they knew they were poor, but none would have described themselves as destitute.

In fact, I recall stories about life in that area during the 1930s, when the worst thing that was happening had nothing to do with the worldwide Depression and had everything to do with trying to get corporate America to be fair. People were poor, but people in that part of the country had always been poor. Money was not something that people had, but what they did have were large gardens, land enough to raise a few animals and a house. By 20th-century suburban standards, not much of a house, but it sheltered them from rain and snow. It got cold in the winter, but there was a good coal stove (also, often used for cooking), and it got hot in the summer, but there was always a nearby creek for keeping cool.

The bottom line is that if one has shelter, everything else comes a little more easily.

The most prevalent form of housing in the United State is the single-family home, most often located in a resource desert area called “suburbia.” Authors and documentarians have lambasted the suburbs as unsustainable, and *in their current incarnation*, I would not disagree. Unfortunately, one-third of the population of the United States (and a good deal of the population elsewhere) lives in what could be described as a suburb, and moving all of us out of the suburbs and into the country or into the city is not likely, especially given the short amount of time we have to react.

So, for the sake of our scenario, let’s focus on what suburbanites

have that is unique to their particular habitat and might, with a little imagination, be used to their advantage.

1. Suburban homes have a yard space, usually between 5,000 and 40,000 square feet (roughly, one-tenth of an acre to an acre of land). Not a lot, but more sometimes just means “more,” which isn’t always better.
2. Suburbs are “close” to amenities. While “close” really is subjective, and some people would say that anything within a 50-mile radius qualifies, I (and most of my survivalist fellows) would classify close as within walking or biking distance. Most adults can walk a steady, comfortable 4 miles per hour on a fairly level, fairly smooth surface, like a road or a sidewalk. Anything more than 20 miles away would probably not be “close.” My suburb is 12 miles from the “city,” about half that from a large “town,” and only 2 miles from the town center of the seasonal resort community to which I pay property taxes.
3. Suburban homes are usually single-family residences. People who escape to the suburbs want to have some sense of privacy, but recognize that being interdependent might not be such a bad thing.
4. Suburbs do not, typically, have any businesses (except for the occasional “home business” that usually doesn’t attract onsite clients, like my “virtual” office service).

In short, suburbs are residential communities where everything is carted in. We live here, but we are supported, entirely, by outside resources.

While the suburbs have been horribly maligned as “the worst misallocation of resources ever,” owning a suburban home has its merits.

So, while few of us will be able to pay off the mortgage for our suburban homes within the timeline of this scenario, we should at least accept that we would be better off not moving, and that what we have is considerably better than a cardboard box.

Just for the sake of argument, however, let's consider some of the benefits of keeping our suburban homes.

First is the fact that we all have a little bit of land. True, most suburban landscapes consist of lots of inedible grass, ornamental flowers and shrubs, with an occasional shade tree to break up the monotony, but the fact is that there is land. It doesn't take much time, energy or money to build a raised bed or two and plant a few vegetables. Those authors who have seen, first-hand, the effects of collapse all say the same thing: a piece of land on which to grow food helped the people to survive the worst, and like cologne — a little goes a long way.

Second, the suburbs are close to amenities; which means that when gasoline supplies become scarce, those in the suburban areas will be close enough to urban centers to get what they need. An article about farmers in Argentina stated that there is plenty of fertile land, and farmers are growing a lot of food. Unfortunately, the people out in the rural areas are going hungry, because the food is being trucked into the urban centers. Being halfway between rural farms and urban centers, suburbanites have geography squarely in their favor, and even if we could not convince the farmers to stop in our neighborhoods, getting to the urban markets would not be as difficult as it is for those living further out.

Third, the single-family residences in most suburban neighborhoods are fairly large. The movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, about a young man who played and won the Indian version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, featured a boy who was actually from the slums in Mumbai, India. When the filming was over, he went back to the slums. Recently, the movie production company purchased

an apartment for him and his family of ten. They are currently living in luxury in a one-bedroom 250 square foot apartment. Their entire apartment would fit in one room of my house. The reality of that put things into perspective for me, and I realized that, while I've always thought my house was small (and compared to the "average" suburban house, it is), by global standards, it's a mansion.

I will go into greater detail in later chapters regarding how to grow stuff on our small suburban lots, and even how to travel from here to there in a low-energy world, but the third advantage we suburbanites have is the one that will, likely, prove the most valuable. With our big houses, we could very easily turn our suburbs into small self-sustaining, walkable communities.

One of the biggest complaints regarding the suburbs is that most of us commute to our jobs, and because we drive to these jobs, suburbanites are accused of being a drain on resources. But we don't have to drive to work. In my opinion, the worst move we made as a society was listening to Henry Ford. First, there's the whole car thing, but that aside, what Ford gave us was a system for mass production on an assembly line. He made everything more efficient and took the life right out of us. So, instead of one very well-made piece of clothing, what we have is a closet full of cheaply made shirts. Instead of one very well-made chair, we had landfills full of cheaply made and now broken pieces of furniture. We divided our lives between our homes and our work, often resulting in one or the other suffering.

That the suburbs were purposely separated from business centers is the only real design flaw in the suburban model, but there is no reason why we should accept the current standard as a fact of life, especially when it can be easily changed.

Many businesses can be adapted to a home-based setting, and in fact, most of them likely started out as a home-based business.

Like most metaphors, the term “cottage industry” likely reflects a time when manufacturing was done at home, in a cottage, if you will. Many modern entrepreneurs started out working at home. The founders of the Apple computer company began in a garage, and Mrs. Fields, reportedly, started her cookie business from her kitchen. Less than a century ago (such a small amount of time in the greater scheme of things), most business owners actually worked from home (although that wasn’t the terminology used back in the day), and in older communities, this is still evident. On Main Streets across the country, storefronts are on the bottom floor of buildings with living quarters above the store. People lived where they worked.

Most suburban homes have enough space for both living quarters and “business” quarters. There’s no reason not to have a living room become a dressmaker’s shop, convert the utility room to a hair salon, have a cobbler’s bench in a garage, or turn a basement into a brew pub.

As gasoline becomes scarcer, and the 40-mile round-trip commute becomes less possible, we will need to find new ways to make a living. Whether the exchange is with dollars or pure barter, we will still need to have something we can trade (either goods or services) to acquire what we will need that we can not provide for ourselves. Very few of us will be able to provide for 100 percent of our own needs, and it would be very useful to consider one’s own talents, training, interests and education and how those can translate into a business.

Twenty-one days may be too little time to see a business become profitable, but starting to think about the possibilities, writing down some ideas, sketching out some plans and maybe even researching the codes and licensing requirements could be started and finished in that short time. The first step is to start planning ways to keep the shelter.

Because, in a survival situation, shelter is the first order of business.

What's funny, in a sad kind of ironic way, is that when I have the conversations about how we should be investing our extra money in paying off our houses or making those structures more energy efficient, I invariably end up debating why it is not a good idea to invest all of our cash in our homes, especially given how the housing market has recently buckled, and certainly, if I owed a great deal more money on my house than I could reasonably expect to pay, I might feel differently. Even with the economic downturn, however, and the housing market bubble, most houses are still worth close to what the homeowners owe, and it's worth it to keep those homes and try to pay off the debt.

So, let's suppose for a moment that my advice is heeded, and we have taken every liquid asset we have and paid off the mortgage, and then spend the next three weeks working on a business plan for a home-based business idea that we believe will support us, and then, *nothing* happens. Then what? Well, the house is paid off, which means, even if the house isn't worth as much as the original bank note, nothing is owed now. It would be kind of like paying off a car loan. Over time, the amount paid is considerably more than the car will ever be worth, but once it's paid off, it can no longer be repossessed — no matter what — and there is some security in ownership.

If things go back to the way they were before the housing bubble burst in 2008, that house, now owned free and clear, could translate into a nice little chunk of change for the owners, should they ever decide to sell.

In addition to paying off the house, we also went through the steps of writing up a business plan for a potential home-based business, in which we'd be our own boss. We've researched the laws and know what the municipal ordinances require (or prohibit)

and what licenses are needed to get started. We may have even started printing flyers or doing other marketing around the community, and if we did really well, we might have even had our first customer.

In short, if *the end of the world as we know it* (TEOTWAWKI) doesn't happen...

We own our house, in the suburbs, with a nice little piece of land, far enough away from the city to be removed from all of the problems inherent to city living but close enough to reap all of the benefits. In short, if the world as we know it doesn't end, and life goes back to the way it was at the end of the 20th century, we've secured our financial future by owning a piece of fairly valuable real estate in what is a fairly desirable location, and having what could be a profitable, small business.

And that's bad, because...?

After we've committed to staying in the suburbs, we should take some steps to make sure that it is a good shelter, the first of which should be to list any repairs or upgrades that need to be done. We started painting our house two years ago, but never quite finished. We should make a point of doing that this year. There are also a few places where some of the outside trim is rotting, an invitation to insect infestations, like termites and carpenter ants, neither of which are welcome guests. Make sure the foundation is sound and the roof does not leak.

After repairs, some upgrades should be considered. The value of a properly insulated building can not be overestimated. In today's terms, insulation saves on fuel bills because of less heat/cool loss. In a lower-energy society, insulation will ensure that a warm house stays warmer when it is really cold outside, and that a cool house stays cooler when it is really hot outside. Replacement doors and windows can be incredibly expensive, but if it is in the budget, there's no better time than now to replace leaky doors and

inefficient windows. While there are some low-energy techniques, like wall hangings and window quilts, that can be used to keep the temperature in our homes comfortable, the better option is to just properly insulate in the first place, and then, if heating fuel becomes scarce or we're faced with cooling our homes without AC, it will be more easily accomplished. We all know it is something we should do, and really, there is no better time than today, Day 1, to get started.

In summary, where you are, right now, is probably the best place for you to be. Make sure you can stay there, because 20 days from now, we will be a much less mobile society.