

Technology Is Not the Problem and Not the Answer

A friend stopped by today to show us some information on an avant-garde suburb in California. It was doing all the "right" things—passive solar design, 50% reduction in energy use, compost toilets, narrow streets, participatory democracy in its planning and growth. And it stuck in my throat. It was still a dumb suburb. Nothing was really changed, and I began to wonder what really would have to happen before my stomach said, "Yes, this feels RIGHT." Renewable energy sources and small-scale technologies are necessary changes—but if they're still being used to do the same things, we really haven't made any strides towards a better society.

We've been designing a house we plan to build this summer and have been asked by several people if we were planning to have electricity. Well, yes, we *were*, though we knew from experience we would be using rather little. Yet something started to rub, and we started thinking more seriously about it. We listed pretty quickly what we would lose—stereo, electric typewriter, lights, sewing machine, refrigerator . . . some had simple and workable alternatives—cold boxes, treadle sewing machines, kerosene lamps—yet there was something quite different it seemed, lurking underneath such losses of convenience.

One night the week before, I'd stayed on the land we'd bought and had seen the stars like I'd seen never before. So intense and brilliant my eyes ached. Stars upon stars upon stars, with smudges of more stars behind. Stars like diamonds on the branches of every tree. And the moon, telling time with its shadow, that I'd been separated from for so long by roofs and walls and streetlights. I remembered another night then, a year or so ago, when we arrived at Pragtree Farm late in the evening and walked across the field to Woody and Becky's

cabin. Woody was sitting outside on a stool at the edge of the field humming and playing his guitar in the peace and stillness of the moonlight.

To most of us, night is a forgotten and foreign thing—darkness something to be shut out at its first approach with the flip of a lightswitch. Yet there is more than the fearfulness of night—there is the calm and peacefulness that we miss—resting, taking a deep breath and letting go of the tensions and the activity of the day. We lose our chance when we flip on the lights and let the day go charging on into the night. We lose the daybreak in the same act, not slept out as if we'd gone to bed when day ended. The electric light gave us more day, but too easy and too much light—it took away the night, lost in the reflections in the window, lost with the tranquility of nightfall, lost with the stars that give perspective to our small frittings about, lost with the moonset and daybreak that enfold us with the ebbing and flowing rhythms of life of which we are part, but of which we have lost our consciousness.

Our losses from a technology never lie on the same dimension as our gains. We see the gains because they're new, but they blind us to the slipping away of other things that may be of greater importance yet which never get measured in the balance.

Electricity—whether from the wind or the atom—gives us music in full living stereo. All the music of history. But too often, too much. It's not special enough to *really* listen to. We only half hear the music, we miss the music of the wind, we lose the music of ourselves making music. We lose the music of the moment.

How we will build our house and how we will live I don't know yet. But I do know that our changes to date are only

cosmetic. They're only dimming the lights so we can see beyond. They're only getting up the courage to take the first real step, to learn to choose and say no, to give up that which loses to us the irreparable bonds of life and leaves only that gnawing emptiness that no lights or stereo or TV or other diversions can ever fill.

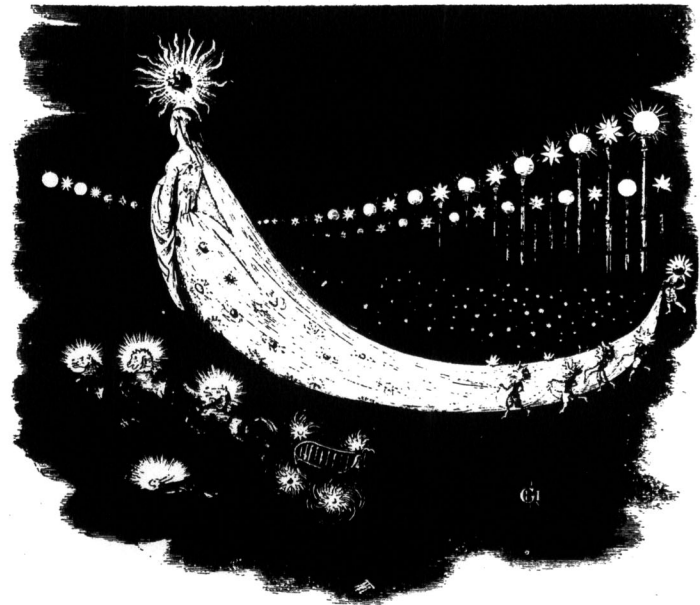
Our focus on technology, on the one-dimensional improvements in our material life, in the quantity or sophistication or ease of producing things, has a basic flaw which we have ignored. Yet it shouts at us every day. It shouts in the locked doors and barred windows of our cities. It whimpers in the lonely bodies behind every door. It shrieks in every rape and groans in the deadness of every bureaucrat trapped in a role and a structure that drains one's soul and lifeblood.

Our actions are meant to sustain our relations with other people and the rest of our world, not just to produce the material needs of life.

The work we do and how we do the things that provide for our needs are carriers of these less tangible dimensions that are vitally more important than the obvious product itself. We see, and seek, and measure the product of work but not the product of work on the worker. We see the daily tally of crime and the unsuccessful efforts of a militarized police force, yet don't see in the success of the unarmed British Bobbies or Community Patrols that moral authority is the vital power.

Co-Evolution Quarterly ran a short essay by a convicted rapist on how to prevent rape. His suggestion was to charge a suspect with indecent exposure rather than rape. The rapist became a deviant rather than a hero to his friends. He received a heavier sentence, but more, the ridicule of his peers. The human dimensions—our dreams and fears and joys and uncertainties—are the real thing we're after in all we do, and we've lost sight of it.

We've lost sight of how much of our activity is not to provide for our material needs but to sustain our social and spiritual needs. How much energy goes into love and courtship! And what a seemingly inefficient process. Yet it has enduringly proven a most effective means of forming the bonds that ensure not just the conception but the nurture and protection of our young. Cars and houses and jobs and friends, as any advertiser can rightfully tell you, are more important for their symbolic quality than their material ones. The status they indicate, the values and achievements they express, the respect and self-respect they generate are fundamental and real.



The real effect of most of our technology on these dimensions of our lives has been devastating. Most of what that technology has given us—easy work that neither challenges nor produces things of value nor makes us valued; TV that replaces interaction with other people with inaction; autos that take us away from difficult situations and challenges rather than giving us opportunity to overcome them—take from us far more in these ways than they give us in their obvious and superficial benefits.

The efficiency of how we work or produce things is in reality not usually very important. Much of what we produce is wasteful or wasted anyhow. Far more important, and far more ignored, is what happens to us or to our relations to others or to other things in the process of that work or producing those things. We're technologically smart, but street foolish. We put the product before the process, whose real product is people—how we feel, how we relate to others, the part we play in the cosmic dance that gives both joy and meaning to our lives. It is these things we should be concerned with, and these by which we should measure the value of what we do and the technologies we use to do them.

—Tom Bender