

Book Review

An Adventure Living With Simple Technology: A Review of *Better Off: Flipping the Switch on Technology*

Charles C. Linnell

Eric Brende, (2004). *Better Off: Flipping the Switch on Technology*. New York: HarperCollins. \$13.95 (paperback), 234 pp. (ISBN 0-06-057004-0)

Organizations, such as the Peace Corps, Habitat for Humanity, and the Heifer Project seek to improve the quality of life for people while improving the environment. These organizations try to create a mind-set among their participants to use technology in a sustainable manner. Judging by the ever-increasing numbers who contribute time and resources to these earth-friendly, altruistic efforts, it seems that interest is growing for “doing more with less”. Increased demand for organic foods, interest in creating sustainable living/working communities, and frustration with the dependence on, and prevalence of, electronic media, has created interest in living more “simply.” Learning to work with basic tools, machines, and living without modern technology was Eric Brende’s goal when he embarked upon an eighteen-month graduate research project in an Amish farming community.

Better Off: Flipping the Switch on Technology is an examination of how people can live a simpler, more fulfilling life without modern technology. To put this concept to the test Brende, a graduate student at M.I.T., took time off from his studies and committed to live in a remote Amish community in the Midwest with no electricity or motorized machinery. Specifically, he wanted to experience what life would be like living independent of the great American power/communication grid by using simple tools and horse/oxen-powered machinery for daily farm work. He wanted to observe the social and physical effects on himself and others that the lack of modern technology would have in a secluded, very religious, farming community. He was also interested to see how this lifestyle affected Amish family life. How were the roles of men and

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women altered compared to the families with which he was familiar? How were the children educated about life and work? What were their customs and beliefs related to the use of technology?

The author begins by questioning whether or not our 21st Century lifestyle, that includes SUVs, cell phones, cable TV, laptops, microwaves, long commutes, and sedentary electronic work environments, has made life easier or has it made it more complicated, unfulfilling, and less healthy. He hypothesized that these health and mental issues, prevalent in current society, are due to a lack of work-related exercise and stimulation gained from successfully completing a physical task. Without sounding dogmatic, he presents a convincing argument for appreciating hard work and living life at a more manageable pace. He suggests throughout the book that we should minimize our use of modern technology and focus more on community, family, exercise, and productive work with simple tools.

At M.I.T., Brende became interested in the social and environmental impacts of modern technology after taking graduate courses titled *The History of Technology and Science, Technology, and Society*. The more he studied, the more convinced he became that society was missing the importance of clarifying the difference between the use of basic tools for work and exercise compared to the less healthy, sedentary, and repetitive environment of automatic machines. Whereas simple tools are designed and used with physical labor to make work easier, Brende contends that complex machines are often “fuel-consuming things that deprive people of the act of thinking for themselves, physical exercise, and lack of family and community involvement” (p. 7).

On a bus trip to visit family members in the Midwest between semesters, Brende met and spoke with an Amish man and asked about his community’s lifestyle. Here was an opportunity to apply his interest and research in sustainable technology in the real world. He asked if it would be possible to come to their community to live, study, observe, and work for a year. Brende soon received a letter inviting him to become a part of their settlement. However, the Amish had a few requirements – in order to preserve their privacy he had to promise not to reveal where the community was located. He and his new wife would be required to participate in daily and seasonal work and abide by the rules of the structured Amish lifestyle. The author agreed gladly. Although his wife was initially hesitant, by the end of the project she became an ardent supporter of the simpler lifestyle. His Amish landlord provided a small house with no electricity or running water and loaned him a few acres to raise crops for food and profit – he successfully grew and marketed pumpkins and sorghum, which his wife used to make and sell molasses. There was a spring with a cistern on a hill near the house. After receiving permission, Brende dug a water line to the house and installed a gravity-fed hand pump in the kitchen. One important tie to the twenty-first century that they were allowed to keep, after much discussion with the elders of the community, was their small car. Brende and his wife justified it by saying that it was to be used only for emergencies (Brende’s wife was pregnant) and an occasional research-related

academic trip back to Boston and M.I.T to meet with his graduate committee. They agreed to follow the rules of the community – working hard, helping neighbors, living very simply, living without electricity, and with a privy.

Needless to say, as they drove to site of their new adventure to live a life free of modern technology, the author and his wife were nervous. Living without modern technology would present challenges. How would they wash themselves, their dishes, and their clothes without a bathtub and shower, a water heater, or a washing machine? Even though they had been studying organic gardening techniques and animal husbandry, would they be able to grow, harvest, and prepare food and feed themselves with no chemical fertilizer, no herbicides, no motorized machines, and no refrigeration, using an ancient wood-fired cook stove? Would they be accepted into the Amish society? Would they be able to master the techniques required of horse/oxen-powered transportation and machinery – that included traveling to the local farmers' market, plowing, tilling, and cultivating? Would they be able to hold their own with the increased physical demands of Amish shared farm labor? As they came nearer to the settlement and the paved road turned to gravel, they noticed that the land, woods, and fields were well tended. Houses, barns, and outbuildings were very neat and structurally sound. When they arrived at the small farmhouse in which they were to live, they noticed that the inside was clean and newly painted. Their landlord had even plowed and tilled their garden area. They felt that they were ready to begin their adventure.

The author regularly compared the lifestyles of the Amish farmers with the work routines and family life of people in the technologically dependent life they had left. These observations usually ended up with an examination of the dynamics of work – how simplifying technology would impact the workers, their communities, and the environment. The farm work that the author and his Amish colleagues performed every day, except Sunday, was providing not only their living, but also a way to bond with their neighbors by shared labor. This created a sense of community that Brende had never experienced before.

In reviewing this book the reviewer's own biases for using sustainable and appropriate technology were apparent. In a perfect world, experiences like Brende's would hopefully excite and motivate students to give more thought and ask questions about how we are using technology today and the resulting impacts. How do other societies cope with technological change? Are small, self-sustaining farms and the cultures that promote them a thing of the past? Or do they hold the key for managing the sustainable use of natural and human-made resources in a responsible way. There are many problems facing the world today. If students could learn alternative ways of working and living it could lessen our dependence on non-renewable resources and we would all be better off. Just to show that Eric Brende practices what he preaches, he now has reclaimed an old house in St. Louis and is making a living driving a pedal-powered rickshaw and runs a thriving, homemade soap business from his basement.