

## BE PREPARED

This is going to be hard to say just right but I'll try.

North America and Europe, the two most "western" parts of the world, are struggling with an economic disaster and very divided political views of what to do now. To me they, we, begin more and more to look like rudderless ships wallowing in an ocean that is getting stormy. We are split in two or more ways of seeing.

Simplifying, I see three blocks: a determined, vocal, loud, group of people who are angry because things are no longer as they were. They express their anger by voting for extreme right wing representatives who believe in let's say the Ayn Rand view of what humans are: It's essential to be selfish, every man for himself. Get rid of everything that supports my worthless neighbor; if they cannot afford a meal, or a doctor's visit, so be it. Everybody who does not think as I do is an enemy, immigrants must be expelled. I don't know how large this group is, I'm guessing maybe a quarter of the 800 million largely white people.

Then there is the opposite group that is equally vocal and fiercely attached to a point of view that we're in this together, that every human being has worth, that we must take care of each other somehow. This group is not one movement but hundreds, thousands, of different but vaguely similar ideas: human rights idealists, workers rights, planned parenthood, all the feel-good movements that blossomed half a century ago. Possibly another quarter of the total 800 million men, women, and children of "the west".

The remaining half of the west is already in real trouble surviving in a dead economy, and is uncertain about all the shenanigans going on in Washington and Toronto, London, Berlin, and Paris. This 50% is not blind and deaf to the politics on both side of a deep gap and have shown they will stand up and be counted when threats come too close to home.

Of course I am grossly exaggerating with this simplification, but roughly this is what I see. Divided people, moving away from each other by the hour. What I need to say, is that in my view today seems very similar to what I experienced in 1939 and 1940. Just before WWII which changed the world forever.

The first seventeen years of my life I knew I was a fairly privileged child in a multi-cultural environment in SE Asia that I experienced as safe, pleasant, interesting, warmly accepting. My parents tried hard to make me feel western, but they never succeeded very well. I felt more brown than white. When I finished high school my parents insisted I go to university in Holland, to get "culture," meaning western art in museums, concerts, "civilization". Travel to Europe at the time was by boat, a leisurely three weeks through the Indian ocean, the Suez canal, the Mediterranean, from there the ship went on another week to its destination in one of the West European harbors. I traveled on a Danish freighter: allowed 12 passengers at the time. We got off at Genoa, Italy, to go by train, a little over a day to our various destinations. As soon as the train entered France, the world changed. Our train was sidetracked it seemed every hour, to let pass more important trains loaded with canons and tanks, soldiers, ammunition. I was shocked to the core. It had never occurred to me that it was even possible for a normal flow of life to be so rudely and utterly overthrown by preparations for war. I could not imagine, and nobody could explain, what the war they expected would be about. All I heard was words: Hitler, Germany, fear. When I finally arrived in Amsterdam, more than three days delayed, my first question to an aunt I barely knew who came to meet me was "When is this war going to start?" What war? No, no, she said, why would Germany threaten the Netherlands. No, of course not.

Two weeks after my arrival in Amsterdam was the official start of what we call World War Two: September one, 1939, the invasion of Poland. But to the Dutch Poland was far away, life went on as it had, nothing threatened. Nobody believed that we in such a small insignificant country faced any danger. Eight months later the Germans attacked the Netherlands (and Belgium and Luxemburg), The Dutch did not have much of an army but we were told "our army has held the Germans back." For one or two days people were surprised, anxious, but life was still normal.

I don't remember when it was that we heard that the Royal Family, the Prime Minister, and the Cabinet had fled to England. That was a shock. We were without a government. The fifth day the Germans bombed Rotterdam from the air. I was there. Some of the planes were double wing, all of them small.

Each pilot dropping one or two bombs, first explosives then incendiaries. We saw the entire city go up in flames; Rotterdam burned for two weeks, the entire inner city leveled, melted.

The nation was in shock. The world had stopped. No electricity, no phones, no water, no gas, no cars, shops were closed. Everything closed, locked. A total breakdown of the normal world.

It is easy to write the word "shock" but difficult to describe what it means for an entire population of at that time maybe 12 million Dutch people. And probably the same in all countries of western Europe. From a normal routine, cars, bikes, shops, running water, street lights, the bread shop in the next block, garbage pickup, trains and buses on known schedules -- suddenly: nothing. The shock of waking up to an entirely changed life. I think of it as a sudden wrenching evaporation of innocence. The cosy, functioning, world we had created for ourselves smashed in one or two days.

I remember being less surprised than most because I had expected something although I had no idea it would be that extreme. It helped me not going crazy. People around me were either totally frozen, literally unable to function, or crazy, wild, running around, unable to accept. And there were a few who were pillars of calm and strength. Not the people you would expect, not the trained emergency workers, but a grandmother, a 12 year-old boy.

I am writing this because I sense the same thing just around the corner today. Much sooner than anyone imagines perhaps our now very complicated, extremely uneven, but still more or less functioning world may break down from one day to the next. And we are going to feel the shock of loss of innocence.

It helps to be prepared. It helps a little to know that it is possible even for this society to suddenly come to a screeching halt. What do you do when your refrigerator stops, when stores have been sold out or robbed empty? What if you cannot use your car because there is no gasoline. No TV because there is no electricity. No water to flush the toilet. Calling 911 no longer works because no phones -- it is you who must give first aid. All these things are possible, much more possible than anyone can imagine. And in a country "where everyone has a gun" what do you expect?

I know from my own experience--I went through it twice, once at the beginning and worse at the end of the war--what it is like to be without the many services we never question. These things already happen in areas that had tornadoes, storms, floods, nuclear disasters. It can happen on a much, much larger scale as well. I know, I have experienced, that it helps to at least have accepted that it is possible.

As we found out money is the least important issue. Survival is trading skills for things, and things for skills. Survival is always local in your immediate environment. *Survival is what our brains are for* -- not inventing another gadget, a bigger and better way of killing an enemy. Humans are fabulous adapters. We've proven that by surviving all over the different climates and circumstances of this wonderful planet. Trust that you will find a way to survive. You can survive. Not as an individual but with your extended family; include your neighbors. Surviving requires groups of old people and young, strong men and stronger women.

What is most important now is not to lose your footing in the shock of suddenly finding yourself without all we think we cannot do without. We *can* do without. Millions, billions, of people already do without. All I can say is the old boy scout motto: Be Prepared.