

Peak Oil Healthcare Upskilling

By
Paul Roth

This post is a follow-up one after my earlier article about upskilling for the energy descent future. It's been triggered by another question, this time from a healthcare student in the USA. His email says that he is just completing his undergrad biological sciences degree, and he was wondering whether a qualification in medicine or naturopathy would be better preparation for the societal changes that are sure to come after peak oil. Please read my earlier post first if you have not already done so, as I will not revisit its content in any depth.

Hierarchy of needs

Maslow talks about a hierarchy of needs in his work *Man's Search for Meaning*, starting with the most basic ones necessary for physical survival, progressing to the more social and interpersonal ones.

In order to put learning and knowledge in context, I would like to propose a hierarchy that one could ponder when considering post-peak upskilling in healthcare:

Daily wellness practice

By this I mean some sort of mind-body technique (eg meditation, yoga, tai chi, Qigong, or self-hypnosis) that needs no material or equipment, improves physical and mental health, and requires regular practice to master.

Family healthcare

This step recognises the importance of the health of your family (at all times, but especially after peak oil) for your own physical and mental well-being.

Community healthcare

This is the goal that many have in mind when they start a healthcare course: providing care to the local community. While this will take up most of your time and attention, I would urge you to look past it and have big dreams by moving on to the next levels.

Healthcare teacher

If there is a splintering and relocalisation of life in a post-carbon world, it is likely that complex and energy-intensive education systems will undergo simplification. While no-one can foresee how far that might go, I think one must always have in mind the next generation of healers after

yours. There is a long tradition of clinical teaching whereby working health professionals provide clinical training to their younger peers – I can see this continuing, and predict that it will assume even greater importance in the future, especially as you progress to the next level.

Healthcare mentor in an apprenticeship system

In the old days of medicine in England, an aspiring student would apprentice themselves to a local doctor or surgeon and learn on the job. I think this model will assume great importance in essentially all vocational pursuits, as education becomes localised and more informal. There is also a precedent in traditional societies, where one would be called to be an apprentice to a local shaman or medicine-man; knowledge would then be transmitted bit by bit as the student proved themselves worthy. The Eastern martial arts, and religions such as Buddhism, also worked on this model. It involves a commitment from both parties, and implies a long-term and trusting relationship.

Healthcare master

My conception of this final level, the pinnacle of achievement in any field, is one that must be bestowed by others rather than self-assumed. It is the stage that is reached through years of diligent learning, practice, and self-reflection. It embodies the ideas of intuition, wisdom and modesty. It is awarded by a community to one who has demonstrated that they care about others, through selfless acts of compassion. It is the goal that we all should aspire to.

Qualification characteristics

My earlier post deals with course length, cost, dependence on external materials, and whether or not formal qualifications are needed or not. In this one I will discuss several other things that I think are important:

Personal interest

You need to really like something to spend the rest of your life doing it. Also, when you are passionate about something it is often easier to succeed, and you tend to attract patients and others into your life that you can enjoy working with.

Ease of learning

It may sound simplistic, but a course that you find easy is better than one that is difficult or even impossible for you to master. Why? Getting a course completed and obtaining clinical experience is of paramount importance, especially when the timing of peak-oil is uncertain. It also allows you to access post-graduate courses that are otherwise inaccessible (thereby allowing you to focus on what most interests you or to gain a secondary qualification).

Ease of remembering

Again it maybe over-simplifying, but it is probably better to choose a course that you will find easy to remember. Inherent in this is having an intuitive understanding of your subject matter. An example: I have noticed that I can grasp and retain some areas of medicine very quickly; in contrast there are those areas that I have always found tough going (and while I have the basic knowledge I do not have the inclination to study them further, or need to refresh them from time to time). Why might this be important? Because no-one knows exactly how tough life is going to become. I always think that one should prepare for the worst – if you're cold, confused and half-starved it is going to be the simple things that you remember, and it will be the intuitive things that you do to help yourself and others.

Emphasis on basic skills and knowledge

The course that teaches you the fundamentals that can be applied to almost any situation should be better than the one that deals with minutiae (compare the first-aid ABCs with learning how to drill burr-holes in a head-injured patient). Such training will allow you to apply your skills to many unforeseen scenarios (ie ones that weren't rehearsed, practised, or even thought of before they happen), using improvised equipment in an imperfect, and perhaps physically-challenging, setting.

Flexibility

I think that an eclectic mix of skills will serve you better than becoming a specialist in one small area. The 80/20 rule applies here: you will use a small percentage of your knowledge and physical skills the majority of the time. The problem is that you won't know beforehand which small percentage it will be. So there is no problem combining medicine and massage, or herbalism and nursing and so on – it just gives you a greater repertoire for problem-solving. Or even one healthcare discipline (say physiotherapy) and a non-health one (say botany or carpentry): you might become a community resource for wildcrafting natural-growing plants; or perhaps help to plan and build a small community hospital.

Independence from technology

It's obvious that, to be successful once oil becomes scarce and infrastructure starts to break down, any healing modality needs to be either (i) inherently independent of high-technology (like massage); (ii) adaptable to a low-technology future (like preparing one's own herbal remedies rather than relying on commercial extracts); (iii) amenable to stockpiling of equipment before peak oil; or (iv) able to be performed successfully with scavenged oil-age detritus (eg acupuncture using needles fabricated from car parts or electrical wiring etc).

Location and portability

The main trust of this idea is the location where one might practice: can it be done outdoors as well as inside; at night or in the dark as well as in the light; while out walking (or hunting ?) with minimal equipment? Also, is it amenable to always being carried with you (like a herbal first aid kit or acupressure), or can your gear be moved quickly if you need to evacuate or hide?

Materials

In closing I'd like to focus on materials and extol the virtues of simplicity. Start thinking about how you might pursue your vocation with a few simple tools rather than many. How you might use recyclable or natural materials rather than petroleum-sourced ones. How you might use items found in nature rather than manufactured ones, or how you might salvage or adapt "waste" items.

Consider how you might make your own equipment if you suddenly have to start from scratch. How you might store any necessities. Do they have a shelf life? Will they go off, rot, or be eaten by mice, rats or cockroaches? What type of containers will you need, and where will you get them? What happens if they break? Do you need to control the temperature or humidity level of your storage area? How might you purify your materials if they become contaminated?

Summary

How can you pursue your chosen field so that you make do with less? I would love to hear how you might adapt your vocation to energy descent, so that others may benefit from your insights and creativity. Please leave a comment below if you can.

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