

Chapter Six Concerning Time & Technology

end leaned back against the tree and seemed to focus on a distant lava outcrop.

He frowned a bit and said, “It’s perhaps an odd thought, but here, with all the time in the world, we don’t have much time for real self-indulgence of any kind. What we’ve discovered is that when life is occupied by real needs, such as food and shelter, and community, we don’t seem to need to spend our private time worrying about whether or not we’re aging. We don’t devote much time to autobiography—‘journaling’ or writing diaries, or even keeping histories—although a couple of historians are building a collection of writings that document our history in this place. We keep careful project records, too, especially when it concerns agriculture and discoveries we make that have future potential. But although many of us write about the world around us, we don’t spend much time writing personal reflections about our individual selves. It’s not that we’re not introspective, but our understanding of who we are individually is tied up so closely with who we are as a community that it’s hard to become preoccupied with one’s own ‘feelings.’ And it’s not as though we’re happy-go-lucky, cow-contented, vapid entities like Wells’s Eloi either. But if you understand the nature of the thought experiment, which begins with the question of what people really need in order to live authentic, human lives, you have to think about what the consequences of determining the relationship between needs and desires might be.

“By the time we left the old world, we had already thought long and hard about what we would require to make a new life. We knew we would have to feed, clothe, and house ourselves. But beyond that, the possibilities were almost

entirely open. One of the first questions that occurred to us was the role of modern technologies. Which of these would we need? Several people thought that electricity would be something we'd either have to take with us, or manage to re-invent as soon as possible. But as we discussed the question, we began to realize that electricity might be one of the big foundational problems that had led to what the world became. Electricity was one of the technological filters through which modern human beings had come to see their world, and which affected almost everything they did. People who lived in industrialized nations simply had a great deal of trouble imagining a world in which one couldn't simply flip a switch in order to create light.

“But since many of us were already involved with the whole question of time, either in a philosophical or scientific sense, the role of electricity in the perception of time quickly became a consideration. The fact that the electrification of homes and cities had essentially negated the natural rhythms of day and night, and thus significantly altered human understanding of the natural world, made us start thinking about how many other effects this single invention had generated (sorry about the pun). Of course human beings had, almost from the beginning, used fire in one form or another as a means of extending daylight. But the finite nature of oil lamps and candles and campfires didn't produce much impact on time-sense. It wasn't until daylight could be extended indefinitely, not only in private spaces, but in whole cityscapes, that people could completely ignore the day/night cycle. But what would happen, we began to ask ourselves, if we couldn't rely on something as simple and seemingly fundamentally necessary as the light bulb?

“It's not as though we came to see electricity as some great 'evil' influence on humanity; but we did realize fairly quickly that if not the actual root of the modern reliance on continuous technological 'advances,' electricity was at least partially culpable. So we began to talk about what it would mean to give it up. Once we had made the decision to do just that, and once we were here, we

ended up having ‘more’ time. Now, we rest when it’s dark; we don’t continue working. We gather together to talk or to enjoy one another’s company, around campfires or in candle- or lamp-lit rooms, or we sleep, or we make love, or we read. But we don’t stay up all night working.”

Theo looked at him and laughed, and then Bend laughed, too. “Well,” he said, “most of the time we don’t. Once in awhile someone will imagine that planting by moonlight is a good idea and will mess about in a garden after dark, or someone will arrange a night walk, but mostly we just stay put. Then, as soon as the sun begins to rise, we get up and get to work. We rest again in the afternoon, in summer, at least, because we’ve usually been hard at it since dawn. In summer it gets pretty hot by midday and we gather at one of the pubs for food and a beer, and then go back to work later, until sundown—when the sun ‘sinks’ below the western range. Winter days are less hectic because there’s less field work to do, and so most of the project work begins in earnest around the autumn equinox and keeps up until spring.

“After the initial discussion about the effect of electricity on human life, we began to look into its effects on the environment, and discovered that the problems (like light pollution and disruption of life cycles) were manifold. This more or less clinched the decision, because we were not the only species being influenced. Since we were trying to minimize our impact on the natural world, doing without light bulbs became a powerful metaphor for what we wanted to accomplish.

“What the absence of electricity started to accomplish almost immediately was a return to more physical sense of time, and an appreciation for the natural rhythms that accompany diurnal and seasonal changes. One of the first things we noticed, even with all of the incredibly hard work it took to set things up when we got here, was that nobody was anxious any more. I guess it’s easy to be relaxed when you’re really tired, but the sense of calmness was palpable. There were enough of us working on basic necessities, and things were set up

quickly enough that any initial unease about where the next meal would come from, or what we would do if there were a big snow storm—any of that evaporated as soon as we had the houses up and the gardens planted. Within a couple of years all of our major crops had been sown, and harvested at least once, and the ‘first fruits’ were celebrated fervently.

“It took ten years before we had any good wine, but in the meantime we had *sake* and beer and the best water we’d ever drunk, and good bread and vegetables, as well as the occasional chicken or lamb or goat or bit of game. So we celebrated everything, until finally we settled down to a few seasonal traditions and the occasional marking of a life-passage. The first babies were feted throughout the valley. When the first death occurred, we remembered the dead man’s life in a week-long festival. We read his writings aloud, shared his favorite poems and books, played the music he loved, and planted another vineyard in his memory. Since he had known he would die fairly quickly after our arrival (although he underestimated his remaining time by about six years), he had made sure everyone knew how to mark the moment. And since we can’t effectively cremate anyone, he chose the spot where he wanted to be buried—where he could feed his favorite grove of trees on the mountain. No marker, no fanfare, just a simple burial and a gentle return to the soil.

“So, time here is marked in multiple layers: days, seasons, crops, ripenings (the first fruit on an plum tree, for example), passages, lifetimes. But, except for a couple of antique wind-up clocks—and some interesting, very specifically designed hour glasses—no mechanical time. No timers. Bread’s done when you can smell it and it makes the right sound when you thump it. Wine’s ready when it tastes right. Time’s marked, for the most part, by lines drawn on the brewmaster’s slate, although we do have calendars and do reckon traditional days, weeks, months, and years. But everyday time passes with a regularity we feel in our bones rather than note on a piece of paper.”

Pen laughed and said, “well, my bones tell me it’s time for a nap.” Lirit had already fallen asleep, curled up next to her father. Bend commented that Pen had been awake since just after dawn, and it was beginning to get late, so they decided to make camp and continue in the morning. The three adults dozed in the late afternoon warmth, to the sound of bees buzzing around the wildflowers. As he drifted off, Bend noted that this would be a good year for honey, and Theo agreed.

