

OP-ED

I study collapsed civilizations. Here's my advice for a climate change apocalypse.

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I am an archaeologist and a wilderness survival instructor. Because I study societies that have collapsed, and since I teach basic outdoor skills, people ask me about what to do in a natural disaster, social upheaval, or some apocalyptic event. Right now, much of that concern relates to climate change. What I would do, where I would go, and what equipment I would take?

I understand the preoccupation with things falling apart. We face serious problems, like climate change. Perhaps because we worry, we envision the post-apocalyptic world. However, the great number of zombie fantasies and natural disaster movies suggests more than just a concern for the future. We seem to enjoy the fantasy. We like imaging life after civilization collapses. Like wiggling a loose tooth, it hurts in a good way.

I understand the appeal of these post-apocalyptic fantasies. They resonate with the rugged individualism and self-sufficiency that we imagine in ourselves. In the post-apocalypse, we would be able to start over, from a blank slate: decluttering on a global scale. Our needs would be immediate, and our focus clear. The tasks might be hard, but decisions would be easy. Life would be simple.

As a survival instructor, I can teach you the skills we think would be important. These are relatively simple – fire starting, shelter building, direction finding, and even picking locks. We can learn all the cool stuff from the movies. Armed with that knowledge, we imagine ourselves heading out to the woods with

our families, with our chosen clan, surviving on our own. We will be self-sufficient. We can get back to basics. Surely, these types of forgotten outdoor skills will allow us to negotiate the collapse brought by climate change, neoliberalism, authoritarianism, zombies, or a meteor, right?

Wrong. As an anthropologist who studies human societies, I know this is not how it plays out. An apocalyptic disaster will be nothing like those fantasies. It will be harder than we think, and we will need different talents than the survival skills I teach. I study how people live and how societies change, in the past and present. I cannot predict the future, obviously, but no likely disaster scenario fits our fantasies. No tragic yet convenient event will allow us to discard our complex, messy, and ever-changing social reality and live out our rugged individualistic fantasy. We will not be by ourselves, with only the people we choose, avoiding those we do not understand or trust. We will not be free from the need to cooperate and compromise.

Any of the plausible scenarios for disaster, like unchecked climate change, will involve billions of survivors. We will find ourselves in large groups, in rapidly changing situations, and we will have to negotiate that. We will not escape the messiness of contemporary society. Any post-apocalyptic reality will not be a time machine to a mythical past we long for. It will not be a simpler, uncluttered life. We will not be able to run away. We will have to stay and fix things, and if we succeed, we may not recognize ourselves.

While the wilderness survival skills certainly can't hurt, it will be empathy, generosity, and courage that we need to survive. Kindness and fairness will be more valuable than any survival skill. Then as now, social and leadership skills will be valued. We will have to work together. We will have to grow food, educate ourselves, and give people a reason to persevere. The needs will be enormous, and we cannot run away from that. Humans evolved attributes such as generosity, altruism, and cooperation because we need them to survive. Armed with those skills, we will turn towards the problem, not away from it. We will face the need, and we will have to solve it together. That is the only option. That's what survival looks like.

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