

The 10 books needed to re-start civilization

Author: Pete van der Walt

Well, it's finally happened. No more Internet, no more fossil fuels, no more telephones. The price we paid for the end of nation states was an end to electricity, global transport, sewage systems and the global financial system – not necessarily in that particular order. Either way, the party is over... the system didn't last and, provided we manage to dodge the apocalyptic mosh pit itself and outrun the warlords in the immediate aftermath, we have to start from scratch. Totally and completely.

A handful of families have to begin again in an untamed area of earth that somehow managed to make it to the other end of the tiff in one piece and largely unspoiled. The stakes are not just their own lives, but the very future of the species. There are at least 10 books they will need. I am sure you will have your own list. I'm sure your list may not agree with mine. But you still live in the present and I'm writing from the future. Trust me. You want to go with me on this.

1. The New Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency by John Seymour. Published by Dorling Kindersley
(This ain't about being voted off the island, this is actual survival. So you'd want to leave the drama and make good friends with the physical types that are good with their hands or used to be scouts. Your Marketing Executives, Accountants and Lawyers are not going to be useful, I'm afraid. Anyone who used to be a scout, or did something, you know, real for a living – you want to befriend and be pretty nice to. – Ed)

John Seymour learned and practised and taught bona fide, off the grid self-sufficient living in Switzerland, England, Ireland and Africa. In this book, perfect for rugged, if paranoid realists and suburbanites romanticising the simple farm life, you get all the know-how you need to restart that whole 'having something to eat' schlepp, now that your supermarket has evaporated along with the rest of the mall.

Seymour's book is your one-stop manual for living off the land. It includes a wide variety of useful topics, beginning with old school, no GMO, even no tractor, hands-on, Amish-style farming: How to clear fields, preparing land, planting by seasons, specialised plans for 1 or 5-acre holdings, tools, pest fighting, companion planting and seasonal gardens. He individually covers fruits, veggies, nuts and berries. He teaches you how to care for and raise, even assist in birthing cows, sheep, goats, geese, bees, pigs, horses and chickens. He even covers timber, because his next section is as important.

Want to learn how to make fences and hedges? Gates? Manual ploughs? Pack a corn stack? Clear or drain land? Use drip irrigation? Mill grain or wheat by hand? It's all in there. All the hard, physical labour stuff needed to enable, supplement, and usefully conclude the manifold agricultural duties.

The book is beautifully illustrated in a charming, wholesome, good-ole-farm life sort of way. And yet, its knowledge and instruction are encyclopaedic. Make your own bread and butter, cream, jams, preserves, beer, wine, honey, pickles and chutneys ... and compost.

Generate electrical power from the wind, the sun, water or your dry toilet. Make your own bricks. Manage waste. Do basketry, pottery or spin wool and cotton.

This book is first on my list, and if you want to rebuild anything resembling a civilization within those awkward first few decades, it should be on yours.

2. Physics for Scientists & Engineers by Douglas C. Giancoli. Published by Prentice Hall.
(Understand the magnitude of the end of the world. Words like high tech are gone. Starting from scratch, it will be

several hundred years before we get to like, share or ask Siri. The modern humans think they are much smarter than they are because they enjoy the automatic benefits of scientific advancements. Few have any idea how it actually works. Without the electricity even your power tools are just heavy ornaments. And not very pretty ones. We're going to have to do this the hard way. – Ed)

Yes, the second book on the list is a textbook. But it's a crucial one.

If you're thinking of scientific advancement, you are thinking of physics. And if you know about the history of science (even now that it is, largely, history) you'll know those last few boom years before the whole thing went bust were productive.

Think of everything we understood about physics pre-Einstein. Not as much as we knew at the end, but an impressive body of knowledge. The Egyptian, Greek, Roman and British Empires all happened before Einstein. Maybe the 1250s, or 1360s, or 1480s, or 1510s, or 1890s look rather cushy right about now, compared to what we've been left with.

Well, this textbook contains all the pre-Einstein physics: kinematics, motion, energy, rotation, hydrodynamics, sound, temperature, electricity, magnetism, lenses ... you are going to need this stuff. The first three years will be a hungry time, and a busy one. Everything will centre around shelter and the production of food. But as soon as we manage a surplus, the geeks will stage their first comeback.

The information in this textbook is scientifically priceless. Every achievement of the ancient world (including catapults – you KNOW we're gonna need those), and every technological advancement pre-1950s, was made using the science stored in this book. You want it. And you want it now.

3. The Oxford Atlas of the World Published by Oxford University Press
(One of the few pleasures of living in the post-apocalyptic age is not having to listen to that sarcastic voice saying, 'Recalculating' as you ignore your phone's directions in early morning traffic. But now that the world is no longer viewed through a screen, you need a guide. A map is a good thing, but also limited. What happens if we have to go out of town. Migrate. Somewhere not covered – or not covered in sufficient detail, on our little fold-out? – Ed)

Right now, banish the word 'concise' from your consideration set. You want a big book here. One that covers as much of the world as possible with as much detail as possible. Not those ones with the summaries of the countries and their populations and currencies; those are useless now. You want something with maps. Big maps. Pages and pages of maps. The Oxford Atlas of The World will be the most accurate, even if half the roads and bridges were melted in that big blast thing. Back in the day it was updated yearly. Filled with maps of cities, towns, and uninhabited places – hundreds of them. And a very pretty 18-page section with satellite photos of the Earth's surface (for those nostalgic nights around the camp fire during harvest). The 23rd edition is highly recommended.

4. The Art of War by Sun Tzu
(I was thinking a good martial arts book would be needed. Maybe Stephen K. Hayes' step-by-step guide to armed and unarmed combat, skills and camouflage in the tradition of the Iga Ninja of Feudal Japan. Maybe the versatile guide to the Filipino martial arts by Dan Inosanto. But a black belt can only teach you a neat trick or two. To understand – and now that our safe spaces have all been blown to smithereens, it's about time – that warfare, like agriculture or science, has principles and needs to go beyond a single fight. For this, there is no better instructor. – Ed)

You know the old cliché, 'it's going to get worse before it gets better'? Well, it's true. Now that civilization has

ended, I guarantee you: it will get worse, and stay bad for a while, before it gets better. You can't complain to your representative, the police or the armed forces. There aren't any. It's now more like a kind of free-for-all, and you'll be amazed how swiftly we've adapted. Took to it like ducks to water. Those first few weeks were traumatic, but then we realised no one paid our neuroses the same attention they used to. And we cowboied up. Those of us who lived, anyway.

Sun Tzu's classic is not a how-to manual. It is at once more practical and more profound. It is the philosophy of effective war-making. It reads, suitably, like something ancient. Poetry, perhaps, or scripture. But make no mistake, in its pages the switched-on learner will find advice on avoiding, making and winning in conflict as useful today as it was in the 2020s, or when Sun Tzu first wrote it.

I know, you're a lover, not a fighter. I know, you just want to feed your family. I know, you're petite. I know, you never even had a violent thought. Even so, if you want to live, you need to read this book.

5. The Merck Manual

(I'm going to assume that, like me, you have zero medical training. If you are a doctor, then you'd better learn how to make paper and spread some of that know-how or, failing that, visit compounds 19 through 87 – I believe you are needed there. But assuming everyone made it through the first few years, we will very quickly need to get our knowledge of treating injury and illness back up to speed. – Ed)

The Merck Manual will invariably contain some information that is no longer useful. Like the medicines suggested, none of which can be manufactured anymore. We did grab some when we looted the city we came through, but at some point, medicines run out or expire. What will make the Merck Manual useful is that it is a catalogue of known diseases and disorders: from infections and parasites, through nutritional deficiencies, all the way to snake bites. It provides a description of the basics of each malady followed by a guide to diagnosis, prognosis and treatment. We might be able to manufacture the pharmaceuticals again, after the first two, three, maybe five hundred years. And we'd have to supplement some berries and leaves for penicillin for a while. But it is as complete as a book can get, and more knowledge is probably going to help speed up our redevelopment of medical technology. Until then, we're going to have to default to hippy. (By the way, it is true: the Wandering Jew plant does get rid of warts).

6. Crafts & Hobbies. Published by Reader's Digest

(Here's a big lesson, now that there is some clarity on priorities. No human being is wasted. No person is useless. In a world on the brink, everybody works all the time, and no human being goes unnoticed. The value of every person is recognised – we cannot afford to discard the productivity of anyone, old or young. – Ed)

So, we built a house, grew some food, found our way, secured our perimeter and cured that nasty outbreak. Clearly, we now have to decorate. It's functional, this decorating thing. Also good for bartering. Making things is the only way to get things, now that we've been brought down to earth. Knitted slipper socks or a vase, a nice blanket, or some beaded sandals are treasures of the most useful and valuable kind. I hope there are some older ladies in your compound ... they have skills of remarkable use to us all. And the young ones can keep themselves entertained as they make something beautiful or functional while not being beneath our feet as we plough the lands with the pigs. The Reader's Digest published a book aptly titled Crafts & Hobbies and it's the one I managed to save. Leatherwork, macramé, decoupage, candle making, stained glass, rug making, woodcarving, metalworking, mosaics ... even bookbinding. We all lost a part of our souls when the world ended. These skills are likely to be the beginning of us getting it back. I remember, as everyone will, the first time I saw something beautiful again. Years of mass production dulled my taste and senses. Something handmade. Something intricate. Something really and truly original. First, I wept. Then I laughed. For weeks.

7. The Oxford English Dictionary
(I'm biased. I like the English language. There might be books as fundamental in your language. And whatever language you speak, in just a few generations it will sound completely unfamiliar. But it's good to have a source for words and word making. Again, go for the big one. Those pocket things are kindling. – Ed)

Have you ever read a dictionary? Not cover to cover, the whole thing. Just opened the pages at random, somewhere in the middle. And looked at the words and what they mean. Discovering, perhaps, a new definition. Or an inspiring string of synonyms. Or even a story of etymology that fires up the imagination?

In the very clear and real world we now find ourselves in, we don't need words to communicate (a catapult with a green ribbon tells them all they need to know).

But it is not in the immediacy of words that their value resides. We were all traumatised out of our minds when the Fall went down. And we kept ourselves busy by securing our tribes and our crops. To preserve memory, instruct our kin, educate our young, express our values, decree our laws and deal with the aftermath, at some point we will have to tell stories. And stories need words like people need food and air.

The romantic among us might choose a classic play or novel to bring along. Preserving work, I suppose, is admirable. But we are compiling a list for restarting the world, not mourning it. All paradigms will change. The most eloquent of tales will soon lose potency, written, as they are, from the other side of cataclysm.

To restart, you're going to want to have what your next storytellers are going to need.
You need the biggest, thickest, most complete dictionary you can find.

8. Basic Math & Pre-Algebra for Dummies, by Mark Zegarelli, published by Wiley
(Smart people and experts always possess volumes of knowledge. We'll get it written down, provided our next batch of paper is successful. But it's always tricky, when learning new things, to know where to start. Those clear-cut and centrally planned national education systems everyone used to whine about? Well, you're going to wish you had something that good. But to teach the young (or the old) from scratch, you need a good introduction. In my early adulthood, in those pre-apocalyptic days, I studied many things for the first time. This often involved reading a For Dummies Guide as my first introduction. – Ed)

When there are no teachers around, you may not want the most classic book, the most seminal work, the most complete guide. You may want something accessible. Something that lays a foundation. You can always grab more advanced books when we go on our next raid. Until then, if you need to know the order of operations, how to do long division, get started with fractions or percentages, or work your way to the workings of the second book on this list, you could do worse than a For Dummies book.

And the numbers will be useful if we ever manage to get a currency going again. Or just counting how many chickens Jenna from down the road owes us. Or when planning how much to store to make it through winter.

9. Gardner's Art through the Ages by De La Croix & Tansey, published by HBJ
(Right about now, someone will lecture me about the thousands of useful books we should be picking instead. But without this book and what it contains, we might have to ask ourselves: what's the point of survival? – Ed)

This book is a tour of art – from the Upper Paleolithic Era, through Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, Greece,

Rome, the Middle Ages, Islamic Art; Gothic, Asian and Native American Art; the Rococo, the Renaissance and Baroque and more.

If a person with no interest or training were to suddenly gain an interest, this book opens doors in the mind and heart that can never be closed again.

More than anything, if we are going to be a civilization again, we will need those doors opened.

10. The scripture of your choice

(Given the circumstances, it can't hurt. – Ed)

There are many reasons to study psychology, philosophy, the plays of Shakespeare or poetry. And all those things are useful studies.

If we want to rebuild a civilization, however, we are going to need rules. The basis for a political system, a legal system and a charitable safety net, however, can only come from some religious input. True, unchecked religion can have devastating consequences on a society, especially if it is the wrong one. (Not yours, obviously – you managed to get the right one, entirely.) It's hard to tell how many of our ethical constructs have remained intact. We do not have the benefit of experience, as our assumptions about fairness and morality and kindness and why we are here were pretty much wiped out.

These systems might initially be flawed, they have served every culture in constructing themselves. And when just existing in a culture, as opposed to as a collection of feral survivors, is a good deal, I recommend we take it.

I have lamented the horribly oppressive conditions in I, for example. Yes, yes, a lot of excess and madness in all that. But let me level with you: if it's between being trapped in a stiff upper lip theocracy of puritans and fighting the wolf again for possession of the road kill, I'll climb in the stock myself and you can sow the scarlet letter to my forehead.

Religion endures, sometimes counterintuitively. It also enables people to endure. It may change over time, evolve, go through phases of waxing and waning.

I will have to admit that I'm not particularly concerned about the accuracy of religion. Mainly, my focus is its utility. If you managed to find the truth, I'm happy for you. I'm less worried about that; the truth is, if we don't rebuild a world with some order, we'll die.

Religion provides an order. Ready-made. It might not be where we end up, but it's a hell of a kickstart, if you'll pardon my patois.

So please, do feel free to take the scripture of your choice. Try to read it with some humility, with your nice hat on as opposed to your nasty one. Please. That's important. Very important.

But it will serve you well – and those in your tent and your tribe – in the many dark nights to come.