

### Chapter 3: Land Rover and the Practice of Self Sufficiency

My old Land Rover is a gym for developing self-assurance. Its presence suggests that if given a chance, it will go anywhere you point it with the qualification all its parts are working, and therein lies the challenge. Describing the Land Rover in automotive advertising terms such as “low miles”, “original paint”, or “dependable transportation for your college student” insults reality. In Land Rover circles, “clapped-out” and “knackered” are most often overheard when describing the current condition of the vehicle. When first produced in the late 1940s, the Land Rover was conceived as an all-purpose utility vehicle that could fulfill many roles on the farm while being easily maintained with simple tools and a basic understanding of how it worked. Having a worn-out Land Rover was and is a testament to hard work, a symbol of pride not unlike owning a soft-from-use leather jacket.

It was originally manufactured by the Rover Car Company of England after World War II as a stop-gap product which would carry the company to prosperity again. Intended for the landowner (hence *Land Rover*) it was hoped to be a popular vehicle in both Europe and England for agricultural duties. Bringing the vehicle in for a tune up or oil change would be impractical so engineers at Rover Car Company put simplicity at the center of design. The philosophy worked, and landowners soon learned to maintain and repair the plucky truck and keep it working rain or shine, a concept that would certainly fit the needs of today’s self-reliant individual.

The Land Rover then embodies a concept that is important to the message in this writing whereby our ability to take care of ourselves requires that the equipment needed to do so be capable of the task yet serviceable by us. That requirement greatly limits the choices, with equipment wholly dependent upon microchip components excluded from consideration, unless you have the skills necessary to repair such devices. Our discussion now has two bookends of consideration as it applies to sustainable self-sufficiency: Tasks we can accomplish by learning and doing; and tasks we cannot accomplish because we are unable to learn or do because they are very complex. The solution emerges as a compromise based on capabilities and the limitations imposed by complexity.

For those who learn for the sake of learning there is no boundary to the lessons. It provides us with a more comprehensive view of the world, sharpens our intellect, and hones our problem-solving skills. This exercise also gives us more confidence in being able to understand the unknown and solve the less complex problems found in repairing a broken window or leaking faucet. And as the simple problems arise, our understanding guides our hands in what has become a more tactile exercise, not unlike a surgeon repairing a torn muscle, but with less blood (let's hope.)

Such is the nature of an easy-to-maintain simple life. Our choices in how we live are esoteric to the extent the audience is limited to ourselves. A simple life does not reflect a lack of knowledge, the opposite is most likely true. Instead, making choices that allow us to be independent with skills that blend our knowledge and craftsmanship are akin to playing a musical instrument, making fine pottery, or photographic print making. We can certainly understand the principles of how the old Land Rover makes its spark plugs spark, but being able to apply that knowledge for a successful tune up is even more rewarding. And now that we've got that taken care of, we can have a cup of tea and read up on how the scientists at NASA solved the turbulence problem on the Saturn V engines.

Mastering the simple tasks and the use of tools shouldn't be underrated. Do you recall the flat tire episode in Christmas Story? Recall how the father approached the misfortune as an opportunity to exercise his skills at replacing the tire, and would judge his success by the time taken to do so? Doing things quickly can be rewarding with tasks that have limited aesthetic results, as would changing a tire. But the mindset to establish a reward in even the most mundane undertakings reflects a higher degree of understanding. As the cerebral requirements for a task are lowered, the opportunity for meditation rises and subsequently the time set aside for the task is devoted equally to the work at hand, as well as the serenity gained.

For me, this is the essence of a simple life, and is perhaps the single most difficult accommodation. Why repair when I can replace? Metal siding requires no repainting. Why trim the sides of the path shoveled through the snow? Because I gain more from repairing, painting, and snow sculpture. What makes it difficult is sustaining that relationship after living in a disposable culture which values new

and shiny as the attributes of desirable status symbols. This culture has been fueled by disposable income made available by premium employment or entrepreneurial opportunities which will be threatened by artificial intelligence and automation. As a result, the culture of reward made possible by the excesses of disposable income faces an uncertain future, along with its appurtenances. Is it easy, or even possible, to leave this lifestyle behind?

That choice may not be ours for many in the years ahead. At the same time, the loss of high-end salaries has a trickle-down effect with significant economic impacts throughout the income strata. We are starting to hear the pushback on artificial intelligence and automation from more than factory workers and truck drivers, as the voices of the wealthy and near-wealthy are seeing a potentially dramatic shift in fortunes. With a similar fate, our universities and other institutions of higher education will have to embrace the meta-university concept as envisioned by Charles Vest in his book “The American Research University from World War II to World Wide Web”. In it he describes how universities must transition to creating opportunity, but to whom and for what? The answer changes, and now it points to something other than what we have been accustomed to, such as professional engineering, accounting, law, and medical vocations; all shifting because of artificial intelligence.

I’m not certain of the outcomes, but I do believe we can best prepare for the future by simplifying our lives today. Perhaps the role of higher education will be to refine our critical thinking skills and apply them to everyday life. Judging by the spread of online learning and the ability to share it across the globe at little cost suggests a democratization of university education, a concept proposed by Charles Vest as well, but without the competition for prestigious diplomas in professions with limited membership. It’s not my desire to suggest a shift towards socialism, but it is hard to discern some other outcome that retains our current social stratification. Leaving aside any further speculation on that front, I believe that simplifying our lives can do no damage, and if the future remains the same as it is today, we can at least choose to live so with less stress and uncertainty.