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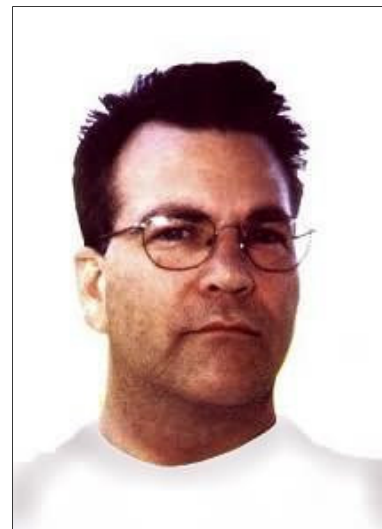
Civil Unrest

Growing up in Africa... by [Kelly McQuilliams](#)

We haven't seen any serious civil unrest here in North America - not in our lifetimes - not really. Probably, the racial equality riots in the 60's are as bad as anything we've seen. But even then in those cities, was there still some kind of civil control, did the water continue to run - did the power stay on and could you buy a gallon of gas? Kelly experienced a major civil war in Africa and knows exactly what can happen when 'things really break down.' I think you'll learn a lot from this story.

My father became an international banker. Because of this, my family moved to Africa and we traveled to many countries. When I was 8 years old, we moved from our small town in California to Lagos, the capital city of Nigeria. I lived in Nigeria and Kenya on and off until I was 16 years old. Nigeria is on the western coast of Africa, near the equator. Lagos, the capital, is actually an island among several that lie next to the mainland and is the largest natural port in Africa. Nigeria achieved its independence from British colonial rule in 1960. It was in 1965 that we moved there and the country had not yet established a stable government. Tribal rivalries caused many coup d'etat and ultimately, a terrible civil war.

The conflicts were mainly between the Nigerians; foreigners were not a target at that time. I did have to keep my wits about me though. Law and order, medical services and safety standards were not what we are accustomed to in the west. Workmen would leave large deep holes in sidewalks they were working on without caution barriers. With few street lamps at night, one could fall in and get seriously hurt. However, most of the danger to me from people might only come from being in the wrong place at the wrong time. As protection for our home, we had a night watchman. Every house had a night watchman to guard the house against thieves. Walking along the streets in the daytime was not dangerous though, except for unexpected holes in the street or dangerously driven autos. We were safe for the most part.



Kelly McQuilliams

There were 65 million Nigerians in the mid 60's. Because I'm white, I'm sure I stuck out. Yet there were no racial issues against white people in West Africa at that time, and there was no real threat to my person at any time. It was obvious that I was a foreigner, but I never found it to be uncomfortable or unusual. I was quite accepted. In fact, as a child I was adventurous and ran the place freely. My friends were from many different countries, including Nigeria. The first jolt of my new reality came at the tender age of 8. I had just made some new friends shortly after my arrival and about 5 of us were walking about. We set sights on a swamp to explore. Upon getting into the knee high muck we heard screaming behind us. We turned and saw a band of naked boys holding spears and running extremely fast at us yelling their war cry. My heart pounded and we ran for our lives!! Well it turned out the spears were really sticks and they were just having some fun with us. Ha Ha, but it was an experience that would fire my wits to learn to adjust to surviving life in a wild and dangerous place.

We moved to Port Harcourt in the eastern region of Nigeria in 1966. We lived in a large compound which housed many foreigners. These compounds were located all over Nigeria except in the capital Lagos. In some of the more remote areas, the compounds had electric fences for added protection. We lived in a duplex in Port Harcourt with no fence. That is until our night watchman got injured very badly by armed thieves one night. My father took him to the only hospital in the eastern region and he later recovered, thank goodness. We then put up a large and strong gate and fence.

court was a nice place to live, but my enjoyment was to be ended prematurely as apparent preparat
made by the local military
mostly by the Ibo tribe. A local military began to lead the people to separation. This attempt at su
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met with fierce opposition by the Federal Nigerian government and war ensued. It was a bloody war in which up to a million people died from violence, but mostly from starvation. My mother, sister and I were evacuated with one hour's notice. It was a sad and traumatizing day, that day we were evacuated. We left everything behind and made a hurried escape while seeing so much violence taking place all around us.

No doubt I had a much different life than I would have had in California. Living in a West African country was an adventure, but with lots of dangers. For example, we were never allowed to go outside without shoes on, because of the risk of getting hookworm. During my life in Nigeria, I contracted malaria, countless episodes of dysentery and was visited by a tumble-fly. This was a fly that landed on my back, burrowed inside, and intended to lay its eggs. It's mission was to use me as a host to nourish its young who would eventually eat their way out of my back, leaving behind a nasty crater. But my mom stopped it from proceeding by smothering it with Vaseline. It couldn't breathe and worked its way out before laying its eggs.

We also did not have the same conveniences as we would have enjoyed in America. The water would be turned off to replenish the depleting supply. It would usually last for a few hours to a few days. When they would inform us that the water was going to be shut off, my mother would fill up the tub to use it as a reservoir. Sometimes we were not told beforehand that the water was going to be shut off, and would just have to do the best we could. We did have a hot water tank that we could have used for a water supply if we needed to. In terms of bathing, sometimes we went without a bath. It was never off for as long as a week, but it was off quite regular and the water quality was not good.

When the water was running it was not pure enough to drink. All the drinking water that was consumed needed to be boiled and filtered. We had two drip filters set up on the counter, each holding three to four gallons. Those were always full. We would put the purified water in the refrigerator. There was always a couple of days drinking water on hand. My mother made sure of that. Wherever we went, we had to take our own water or risk getting a serious illness if we drank un-purified water.

Water was not the only thing that would get turned off. We had what were called brown outages. In a brown outage, we were out of electricity for several hours at a time: sometimes a full day or longer. We had to improvise to keep our household running. When the refrigerator went out, my mom had to go and find ice from the neighbors who might still have electricity. She would put the ice in a pan in the bottom of the refrigerator to keep it as cool as possible. I remember sleeping many nights without electricity, which meant no air conditioning or fan. It was always hot, humid, and uncomfortable. We would open the windows, but that let misquotes in so I had to sleep under misquote netting. We also had candles and kerosene lamps to give us light when the electricity failed. Luckily, our stove ran on propane. We usually did not run out of that.

We used all kinds of local vegetables and fruits to eat, paying special attention to soak all produce in tincture of iodine to kill micro-organisms. We also could purchase imports. Sometimes, however, ships would get delayed in bringing the food products. When this happened, the shelves in the shops would be nearly empty. Some families that worked for American oil companies or the American government had access to more imported goods than the typical foreigner. They enjoyed regular access to imported food supplies. We did not, however, and bought what was available in the markets. When any of those families would depart the country, we would buy their pantry, or they would give it to us. In this way we received a restock of things we couldn't get. Our walk-in pantry was usually well supplied. We always had at least two or three weeks of grocery supplies. We were prepared for the small disruptions we knew would occur.

My mother sewed us clothing to supplement what we could not buy locally. I remember when I was in Boy Scouts, there were no packs available to buy, so she made me one. It was made from green canvas, with straps and pads; the whole bit. I was actually proud to have a homemade backpack made by my mother. She is very talented and has many back-to-basics skills. She spent several years growing up on a farm in Colorado. She is from a generation where one learned many basic survival skills. She is a remarkable lady to have braved a challenging life in Africa; Her ingenuity and planning helped her family to be reasonably comfortable despite the hardships we faced.

Cars were expensive and slow to get, although there were plenty of them. In order to reduce automobile congestion, the government would implement odd and even license number driving days. This made getting around more challenging. Spare parts were hard to find. We had to wait for long periods of time to get them. As a result we and the local people, especially the merchants, learned a lot about how to improvise. In cultures where there are supply shortages, the people

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skilled at making parts last and rehabilitating them.

During coups there were many times when we would hear the radio say "heads up" from the American Embassy, my mom would stock up even more. Around the time we thought there might be a coup or we observed unusually quiet street activity, we would check the telephone. No dial tone was one way to tell a coup might be taking place. We would then listen to the local radio also and if it was jammed or produced no sound at all, it meant a greater chance the coup was taking place. Then, in a short time, there would be the announcement of a new military leader. It was very important to our safety to know what was going on in the country. For this reason, the people in the business community always kept good communications with each other to relay information. It was a good idea to be home when these coups took place.

The American Embassy had a list of all the Americans and alerted us when there was danger that they were aware of. They had intelligence officers, and state department officers who were in contact with the local government and business leaders directly. When problems were especially serious, we would get our information from U.S. sources who would often advise us on how we should react to certain things. We had an evacuation plan, should we ever need to leave the country in a hurry. As foreigners, we had a ticket out of there; if things ever got really bad, we could leave. We had evacuation plans both by air and by road, depending on what options were available at the time.

In May 1967, the Biafra war erupted, and we needed to use those evacuation plans. This civil war was so devastating that it was also known as The Bloody War. We were not a target, but we definitely could get injured in the crossfire, as we were in rebel territory. Within an hour of the phone call we were on a plane to Lagos, the capital. The Nigerian government and the rebels agreed to let the foreigners out. There had been massacres in neighboring villages and there was a lot of military tension. The evacuation happened two weeks after the declaration of independence by the region that wanted to become a separate country.

There was only one airplane shuttling back and forth to evacuate the women and children. My father stayed behind, finally fleeing the country several months later. The men stayed behind to try to shut down the operations of the companies they worked for. My Dad shut down the bank and put a few of our things in the bank vault hoping to protect them. He soon was arrested and accused of being a mercenary so it was evident the time had come to leave. Because there were no more planes or boats in service, he had to go by car. Many of the bridges were blown up, and he had to cross the Niger river in a dug out canoe. It was a very scary time for all of our family as we awaited his escape to safety. My mom and sister and I were back in California at this time waiting for him.

After his arrival we soon made plans to depart to Nairobi, Kenya where my Father would open a new bank. Kenya was quite stable by comparison to Nigeria, but still a vast land with wild animals though-out. We had already learned many ways to be prepared and enjoyed our year there. But then we returned to Lagos in 1969 while the civil war was still going on. We had even more shortages and witnessed many more acts of violence due the dangers of living in a war zone.

Growing up in Nigeria has held for me both the sadness in seeing the terrible things that happen when men cannot live in harmony, but also it has given me fantastic adventures that would fill a book. One thing that living in a country like Nigeria has instilled in me is to be prepared. Understand your environment and the risks involved. Then take steps to be supplied with knowledge and provisions to minimize being "left out in the cold." This way of thinking is helpful no matter what the possible hardship might be: natural calamities like earthquakes or extreme weather, civil or political breakdown; acts of terrorism or even the threat from our economic system now so dependent upon computers and communications.

We live in a country that has abundance. America has built up one of the largest, greatest infrastructures that man has ever seen. We have come to rely on it and do not expect to change our lifestyle. But, what would happen to us if that infrastructure was suddenly dysfunctional?

I guess the reason I'm telling my story is because I personally have become interested in the 2000 computer issue. After much reading on the matter I ascribe to the motto of, "Hope for the best, plan for the worst." In my view, it is better to be prepared with extra provisions and contingency plans but never need to use them, than to be one second late when your survival depended on them. My experiences in Africa have instilled in me a need to be more prepared. We cannot depend on everything being there when we want it. We have a great country, but we have also known times of hardship in the past. We cannot expect the government to do everything for us; We need to personally get involved in making our own preparations.

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to have money in the bank for retirement because they know they are going to need the money later wh
 to earn a living is hampered
 account? Of course, everyone knows that while money, food is perishable, it can't be stored for long
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If your food bank includes foods that you personally like to consume, you can develop a rotation system, and use these foods in everyday life. This way, your family will not have to radically change their diet should your food bank contain foods they are unaccustomed to. When you do build up your food bank, you are protecting yourself and your family from future disruptions to the food supply. It is really not that expensive to do. I cannot see how anyone could consider this an unwise move since all you are doing is building your pantry with foods that you certainly will eat. While some people choose to maintain a one year supply of food, some people feel that only several months are ok. The sad thing is that most people in America have less than 2 weeks supply on hand.

It can be a nice family activity to learn how to grow a garden and harvest your bounty together. Then learning how to best preserve and package your grown foods or purchased foods can be a fun family hobby. Learning about how to prepare food from scratch and then cook it in a solar oven, ensuring a clean and adequate water supply and keeping warm in the winter without electricity can be a good education for the whole family. Having an evacuation plan can be important in the event of a fire or flood. And everyone learning some first aid is useful.

Our generation has grown up with a lot of conveniences that we take for granted. Even if there are only mild disruptions caused by Y2K, it would be wise to take some precautions. If we will accept the notion that the goods and services we have come to rely on might not always be there, that banks might close for a week, will we know what to do and will we be prepared? There are plenty of incidents in history to look back on as examples of what can happen when people are not prepared to support themselves. I don't see any reason for people who are now unprepared to panic. There are many companies that can provide you with long-term packaged foods that can protect you should the year 2000 turn out to have some serious impact on society. You can also do a great deal to prepare simply by purchasing locally. And there are many web sites containing information about learning self-reliance skills.

I urge everyone to look at getting prepared as a change in lifestyle. Irrespective of the year 2000 issue, the future is always unknown and there are many possibilities of calamity that can occur. Learn as much you can about becoming prepared. There are measures you can take even if you live in an apartment or there is not a lot of space in your home. Improvise and you will impress yourself. If everyone took some little measures to be extra prepared for year 2000 or other possible calamities, then if they did happen, perhaps they would be only small bumps in the road.

There are many self-reliant skills that my mom knows and now I give thanks to her. Our ancestors that founded this country had no one to rely upon except themselves. They grew food and canned it and knew how to get through the winter without electricity or natural gas heat. They knew how to live off the land. It is imperative that we know some of these survival skills, for our own peace of mind and for our safety, even if we do not need to use them for the year 2000.

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