

## Conveniences

The early ones arrived at 4:00 a.m. and the lineup began. They were bundled tight with gloves, caps and warm coffee. Still, the November morning rain brought random shivers. By opening time, the usual 10:00 a.m., the line was well over 100 strong.

Within 15 minutes police had been called in for crowd control. People were knocked down and scuffles broke out. Large bulk containers of water were the first to go and shortly after that any drinkable fluid was stripped from the shelves and hoarded into carts. By 10:30 staff brought out whatever fluid was available. This was all because one day earlier, authorities in metropolitan Vancouver had issued a boil-water advisory on tap water.

I was at a conference in Florida when they predicted that a hurricane would hit a nearby town. The TV showed people running through grocery stores filling carts at random, as if they were contestants in a game show. Every station featured live updates across the bottom of the screen, giving speed, force and proximity of the coming hurricane. By the third day the prediction shifted 200 miles up the coast and eventually the hurricane hit South Carolina.

In the late 1990s, I flew to Malaysia. At that time smoke from forest fires in Indonesia caused a regional shortage of face masks. I brought along two of my own, a basic drywaller's mask and an elaborate woodworker's dust mask with large filters on each side. That week, visibility was down to 500 feet and locals wore masks in the streets.

A few years later the SARS epidemic caused a worldwide shortage of face masks. At one store, online orders jumped from two a week to 1,000. Another reported orders in the millions and only being able to supply 10,000. Governments stockpiled what they could; the black market price for masks in Taiwan grew five-fold; people wore bras on their faces.

Some of us will remember the Great Gasoline Shortage of the early 1970s, featuring long lineups, rationing and the occasional fist fight.

We are willing, on an individual and national level, to hoard and fight to get what we need. Perhaps even more than we need. How large is this circle of items that we "need"?

It appears to me that we are a few conveniences removed from anarchy and survival of the fittest. It's easy to seem cultured and enlightened when we have all we need and most of what we want. There is a sense of power in being understanding, accepting and charitable. But the cracks are showing. Take away our access to fresh water or fuel or electricity and the words urban jungle take on a whole new meaning.

How will we react when faced with even a perceived threat to our survival? Are we for one planet or for one person? Singer songwriter Mark Heard asks, "What kind of friends do friends become/When the musical chairs get down to one?" I don't fear the threat of chaos ahead as much as I fear our response to it, mine included.

As denials of convenience continue, we will see our true allegiances and discover what tribes we will form. Will my cul de sac or apartment building band together for survival? How strong is my connection at the Rotary Club? Will my company look after employees? Perhaps a family reunion will become a permanent organization. I also wonder if the community of faith will die. Maybe it will rise to the occasion and live out Jesus's imperative to love our neighbor as ourselves, especially in times ahead when we may feel quite desperate.