WHY LEAVE POWER LINES IN HARM'S WAY?

Seven days without electrical power!

Aside from the obvious disruption, delayed schools, annoyance and wasted food, the recent outage was a blessing in disguise for regional culture. It has helped me appreciate other kinds of power, fostered better neighborhood connections, promoted reading, helped kids relearn the meaning of outdoor play, rubbed our noses in our dependence and pointed out the urgent need to get our cables underground.

Biologically, to be without electrical power is to be dead. Consciousness arises from a weak electrical field in our brains. Thankfully, every member of my family kept that kind of power online.

Technologically, to be without electrical power is to have no batteries, cellphones, crank devices or household generators. I had most of these all week. We have engineers, manufacturers and merchants to thank for that.

Socially, to be without electrical power is to have no access from empowered friends, neighbors, community refuge stations and workplaces. I had all of these all week long, thanks to the good planning of others.

Electricity is one of my favorite inventions. And I greatly appreciate its versatility. But unfortunately, our culture routinely wastes electricity the way family restaurants waste food and gas stations waste light: by serving more than we need. Laundry still dries indoors on breezy, blue-sky days. Football programs, even in high school, expect bright Friday night lights. Homes have multiple high-definition televisions and computers switched on for hours. And in spite of their stylishness, plug-in autos still suckle power like piglets on an electric sow.

A week off the grid gave me plenty of time to think about the true cost of electricity and its reliability.

Throughout the weeklong outage, I often heard five or six household generators in my neighborhood. Like my lawn mower, which I use only occasionally, they burn fossil fuels, exhaust fumes and make noise for hours on end. Before the outage, these nuisances had been externalized to somewhere "Not In My Backyard;" some unseen and unheard generator at the end of a much longer wire.

My favorite example of externalizing such nuisance is a massive, 700,000-kilowatt, coal-burning power plant in Center, N.D. It's in the proverbial middle of nowhere above a thick and seemingly endless seam of lignite (a type of coal), constantly puffing carbon into the air. In Connecticut, the externalized nuisance mainly involves the darker side of nuclear power.

As I sat in the dark night after night, my thoughts flipped back and forth between three places. First was my son's apartment in Manhattan, situated just west of Irene's eye. He never lost power because the grid is safely underground.

The second place is Harvard Forest, a vast woodland tract in north-central Massachusetts. There, field ecologists have painstakingly documented the long-term, millennial-scale history of the forest. One obvious result is that the largest individual trees are usually the oldest, and therefore the ones expected to die and blow down the soonest. Less obvious is the compelling evidence that patches of forest the size of neighborhoods sprout, grow and blow down together as part of a natural cycle repeated every few centuries.
The third place is the mangled tangle of dead wires and tree limbs that was eastern Connecticut last week. There, we had threaded the weaker, straighter lines of our suburban electric umbilicals either through or against the limbs of multi-ton trees, expecting they would behave like boulders. The utility companies don't expect such compliant behavior for their important transmission lines, which is why they clear-cut the path.

How silly it is for us to brush off the nuisance costs of generating electrical power (such as fossil fuel emissions and nuclear waste) until we experience them in our own backyards. Even sillier to think that we can deliver that electricity reliably to our homes through the powerful chaos of forest ecology in a world where storms are becoming stronger.

The time has come to cut electric demand and cut trenches for our wires.