

Keeping Warm

Few improvements in life happen by accident. Destruction itself could be defined as imposing randomness on a structured situation. In order to improve your life, you are going to have to make specific improvements happen, rather than to allow the situations around you to push you in any direction they happen to be blowing. The default path is generally to "just shut up and pay," and the default thinking is "you really have no choice".

In most parts of the country, the largest portion of our utility bill goes toward heating the home, and it is our good fortune that this is the easiest portion to do something about. The most cost effective actions revolve around conservation.

There is no point in considering alternative forms of energy if they are just going to be wasted like the conventional forms you are presently using.

Begin by tracking down drafts, and weaknesses in your insulation. Depending upon your particular balance of aesthetic and economic preferences, get storm windows or plastic over all your windows.

The next step would be to evaluate the importance of heating certain rooms in your home. If you have a bedroom that is not used during the day for instance, shut off the heating register and close the door during the day. In the case of a bedroom, you might even be willing to forgo heat altogether if you have enough blankets. One avenue of conservation frequently overlooked is increasing the insulation on forced-air heating ducts. Also make sure that return air ducts are also insulated; in many installations they are not.

An entire category of heat transfer that is often overlooked is thermal radiation. Longer-wave infrared radiation passes through wood, insulation, and even masonry. Think about it: We've all seen movies where people within structures were made visible through thermal imaging. This is because of heat escaping through radiation.

In hot climates savvy homeowners line the inside of their roofs with an aluminized bubble-pack material to provide protection from solar thermal radiation. A space blanket provides comfort by reflecting body heat. Close your eyes and hold a shiny piece of aluminum foil close to your face, and you will be able to feel the reflected heat.

When you are satisfied that your losses have been minimized, it is time to consider some form of alternative energy. I view solar as the only realistic long-term alternative, but we cannot allow preferences to woo us back into the "shut-up-and-pay" mentality.

In my own case, our well-insulated 2000 square foot Victorian home was heated only by fire wood and solar for three years, and we enjoyed not paying hundreds of dollars per month during the winter to heat it. The fact that I was not a slave to that portion of the utility bill was almost as important to me as the money saved.

Another way of looking at it is that I had effectively increased my monthly income by hundreds of dollars, without it costing me a dime in taxes.