The Amateur in You, Part 1

What have you been pondering?

Ham radio realities



Many people have gotten into ham radio because of the promises they've heard on social media, by word-of-mouth, and even official amateur radio websites. Some see groups that advertise ***When all else fails*** and believe that, no matter what, ham radio will stay up and remain running. But the reality is that, just like any other human invention, amateur radio has its limitations.

Usually, I enjoy talking about ham radio possibilities and explain to crowds what a knowledgeable operator can do under adverse circumstances, even when the internet, or electricity itself becomes unavailable. I prefer to talk about things in a positive light. But the song by the Rolling Stones "You Can't Always Get What You Want" occasionally gets stuck in my head, reminding me that, while versatile and powerful, our wonderful craft isn't perfect.

For example, say you got into ham radio to keep in contact with your daughter in the next state, should the power go out. Is that possible? Of course it is. But ***possible*** doesn't always mean *easy* or *cheap*. Your daughter will need to be licensed. You might insist that she won't need one during an emergency, but will she know how to use a ham radio if she never trained on one (which training requires a license)? And if she has her license, is she near a repeater that's linked (by EchoLink or IRLP or a digital mode) to one near you, that supports her particular linking mode?

Ok, so you two can turn to communication on HF by skywave (the bouncing of your ham radio signals off the ionosphere), but that will require both of you to hold General Class licenses, especially if you happen to be in the sunspot cycle when 10-meter operation is unfavorable. Even so, how far apart are you two? If you're only a hundred miles from each other, that'll typically require a different kind of antenna from one that's designed to communicate across the country. You can save a lot of money by building your own antennas, but do you know how, and which kind(s) are best for you two? Google can be your good friend, but beware of widely adopted misinformation and self-proclaimed field experts.

Then, once you two get your licenses and station hardware in gear, you might still be at the mercy of band conditions if you depend on skywave HF. Those can be the result of solar, space, geomagnetic, and atmospheric effects, much of which come and go almost at random.

And where will you two get your power? Once commercial power becomes unavailable, a generator is only as good as long as you have fuel, which might be enough. If you need something longer, you might need to turn to a solar solution, which can keep your batteries charged during the day. But how much battery and solar power will you need?

Finally, how much is all of this upgrading going to cost? As you can see, doing the *When all else fails* is certainly possible, but it's likely going to cost more than the $29 you spent on your entry-level radio.

Ok, I apologize that I'm being such a Negative Norman (all due respect to you Normans out there!). While amateur radio does offer possibilities that many other services and operations cannot, I felt that I owe it to you, to at least make you aware of its realities as well.

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