



## Better Off

By Eric Brende  
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### Introduction

As a graduate student at MIT, **Eric Brende** found himself increasingly at odds with the notion that technological progress automatically leads to the betterment of society. Much to the chagrin of some faculty members, he even wondered out loud if modern labor-saving devices create more labor than they save. To find out the answer, he set out on a real-life experiment, which formed the basis of his Master's degree, and with his wife Mary, Brende moved to a small community "deep in America's heartland," rumored to live in a manner even the Amish had long since discarded. Brende leaves certain details of this community (which he dubs the "Minimites" in keeping with their minimalist stance on technology) deliberately vague to protect their privacy, but the results of their experiment are delightfully chronicled in **Better Off: Flipping the Switch on Technology**.

Leaving behind electricity, plumbing, running water, and cash, with "not even enough to pay the rent for eighteen months," the educated and cosmopolitan Brendes brace themselves for hard labor, patience, and deprivation. However, with the help and advice of his Minimize neighbors, Eric soon finds himself reveling in the physical accomplishment of using a manually powered push mower and beaming with fatherly pride at his first pumpkin, while Mary, a take-out eating number-cruncher in her former life, whips up pumpkin pies that taste "more like chiffon." They wash clothes by hand, preserve food by canning, pump water from a cistern, and read by the light of kerosene lanterns. They learn to milk cows, farm, and drive horses, buggies, and cultipackers. They watch their waistlines shrink, muscles firm, appetites expand, and stress levels plummet as they regain "the skills of daily living that technology has taken away from us."

With keen powers of observation and disarming honesty, Brende never fails to describe the less-than-idyllic aspects of his pastoral experiment, as the summer months find him threshing wheat in excruciatingly hot weather, and selling canned sorghum molasses outside a local strip mall to make ends meet. His wife's pregnancy adds another complication, as does dissension within the community. Although the Brendes do return to the wired world after their self-imposed eighteen-month limit expires, the experiment continues to shape their new lives in St. Louis. Eric is now a soap maker and rickshaw driver, and Mary home schools their three children. They shun television, limit computer use to the local library, and walk or bike to perform most daily errands. Brende concludes that when you live life simply "by speeding through life with technology, you reduce what any given moment can hold. By slowing down, you expand it."

### Questions for discussion

1. When seeking a community to join, Brende decides that "going motorless was critical," and that going without cars was "the premier example, the choice on which the others in some way depended" -- why?
2. Limited to the slower pace of buggies, bicycles, or his own two feet, what does Brende realize about a car's effect on "neighborly stability, mutual aid, and everyday face-to-face interaction," not to mention stress levels, finances, and the environment? In adapting to the slower pace of life among the Minimites, what did Brende gain?
3. In the early days of his experiment, Brende thinks that living without modern technology "might well be easier. And more fun." What incidents and problems eventually temper his enthusiasm? What are some examples he provides of too little technology?
4. Galassenheit, or self-surrender, is "held chief among the Christian attitudes" by the Minimites. How does Brende observe this spiritual concept at church when he notes that, "what the singers remembered was no less important than what they forgot: themselves?"
5. Driving to the Minimize settlement, Brende realizes that he knows very little about them and imagines, "bent-over figures laboring in the muck...warding off modernity with hexes and chanting." In revealing the individual faces and motivations behind a generally misunderstood and caricatured group of people, has Brende dispelled any stereotypical notions you may have held? Do you agree with Brende's assertion that the community represents "a generous slice of American diversity," or do you find the group fairly homogenous?
6. What does Brende mean when he says, "By speeding through life with technology, you reduce what any given moment can hold. By slowing down, you expand it?" How do you interpret the paradox at the heart of his conclusion -- that our conveniences complicate our lives? What about the paradox of modern technology -- that "the likeliest reason for bankruptcy -- in short, the heaviest drain on the farmer's time -- is the timesaving equipment itself?"
7. Mary notes that her mother's visit resulted in, "more time than I've spent alone with my mother my whole life." How has paring back created more time? Given the anecdotal evidence Brende provides, do you think it's possible that when "things that technology had separated were reunited" that individual, familial, and social stability increases?
8. Brende frequently remarks on the "innocence of Minimize youth," who are focused, self-possessed, and unfailingly polite, and he observes children working industriously and skillfully beside their parents. Do you think granting children responsibilities and eliminating distractions has a beneficial effect, or are the children treated too severely?
9. How do you think the women in this society are regarded? Is the division of labor fair? What happened when little Hans was born?
10. Do you think the Minimize way of life -- a return to an agrarian society -- would be feasible for our modern economy?
11. How does the Brende family navigate its post-experiment life in a technology-littered landscape? What are the three reasons Brende explicitly provides in favor of minimization? What are the three areas in which he acknowledges the value of technological help?
12. What conclusions does Brende eventually draw from his research experiment in technology-free living? Are there any aspects to his daily life with the Minimites that Brende leaves unanswered?
13. After reading **Better Off**, do you find yourself evaluating every item you use and wondering if it could be replaced with a lower-tech one? Or do you feel more grateful for the comforts of modern appliances and technology?

### About the Author

Eric Brende has degrees from Yale, Washburn University, and MIT, has received a Citation of Excellence from the National Science Foundation, and has a graduate fellowship from the Mellon Foundation in the Humanities. At the insistence of his editor, he now has an e-mail account at the local library but continues to minimize modern technology for himself and his family. Eric and Mary Brende have recently relocated to an old-town section in St. Louis, where Eric makes his living as a rickshaw driver and a soap maker.