# The *Whole Earth Catalog*:

# A Guide to Direct Individual Action

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In 1968, the incisive and energetic young organizer Stewart Brand conceived of a prototype for a new manner of disseminating information—The *Whole Earth Catalog*. This large tabloid-sized *Catalog* has made clear its primary function on the inside cover over of every issue since its inception: "The WHOLE EARTH CATALOG functions as an evaluation and access device. With it, the user should know better what is worth getting and where and how to do the getting."[1] Specifically, the *Catalog* concerned itself with tools and skills that encouraged self-sufficiency and holism, the latter being best achieved through reading about big ideas and a willingness to put them into practice. The *Catalog* grew accumulatively from 1968 until its planned cessation in 1972, offering an intelligently culled collection of tools and books with pithy reviews as a service to its readership. Many of these reviews came from readers; other came from Stewart Brand's own exhaustive winnowing of current published works and the lists contained in Bowker's *Books in Print*.[2] All reviews were written as if they were a note to a friend, rather than to a potential customer. Names, addresses, and phone numbers acted as signposts directing folks to where they needed to go, be it a further inquiry into a research opportunity at the South Pole or a great contact for learning more about raising sheep. What sort of tools found themselves sprawled across the pages of the *Catalog*? Portable microfiche readers, Sioux Indian saddles, reliable tape recorders, "future-proofed" power meters, soil test kits—all tools for a decidedly do-it-yourself readership. There was a wide variety of literature represented over the years, including: *The Character of Physical Law* by physicist Richard Feynman; *The Sciences of the Artificial*; *On Growth and Form*; *The Hallucinogens*; *Goat Husbandry*; *The Japanese House; The Elements of Style* by E.B. White; *Rules for Radicals*; *The Natural Way to Draw*. No subject was too esoteric. In fact, it was eclecticism that allowed the *Catalog* to adapt over time and encourage creative thinking, rather than particular *ways* of thinking during a time of rapid cultural change. Technologies changed over the years and new books came out, but the *Catalog*'s main sections stuck:

*Whole Systems*, *Land Use*, *Shelter*, *Industry*, *Craft*, *Community*, *Nomadics*, *Communications*, and *Learning*. In addition, essays and poems from contributors were commonly featured on the 11x14 inch pages. Essays, poems, and letters snuck in a sharp political voice of the 1960s and 1970s among the *Catalog*'s pages. Environmentalism, anti-war sentiments, civil rights, back-to-the-land ethics, and the proliferation of communes were discussed by members of the growing intellectual community attached to the *Catalog*. The project that Brand and his talented cohort all worked tirelessly to bring to fruition was much more than a publication: the *Catalog* was a roaming "truck store," a brick-and-mortar storefront in Menlo Park, California, and, most fascinatingly, a source of social experiments that would guide the birth, development, and departure of Brand's punchy periodical. The typical week-long events sponsored and organized by the *Catalog* were reported on with comic flair by a visionary who never failed to probe the depths of human psychology, social dynamics, and the effectiveness of various organizational methods themselves.

Brand's pre-*Catalog* days were rich: his rigorous foundations in biology gained during his undergraduate years at Stanford, his formative years as a second lieutenant tasked with infantry training in the Army, his time spent mingling with Native Americans of the West, and his open experimentation with psychedelic drugs all prepared him to exert great influence on the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s.[3] More broadly, the *Whole Earth Catalog* tells the story of experimentation with and reasoning about the importance of individual action and grassroots politics as well as the general exploration of different types of communities during the 1960s. The many iterations of the *Catalog* throughout its run, culminating in cumulative "send-off" productions such as *The Last Whole Earth Catalog* and a trickle of editions after 1972, provide insight into the changing attitudes of the environmental movement as well as the bigger issues of individualism, community, and moral unease in the political milieu accompanying the rise of The New Left. Other more

comprehensive historical analyses of this "Bible" of pragmatic environmentalism will point to the *Catalog* as a beacon of light amidst the turmoil of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy's assassination, the Democratic National Convention happenings, and the general unrest over the war efforts in Vietnam.[4] It is the use of narrative, the pattern of incorporating feedback, and the style of writing employed by Brand that we should analyze in order to answer the following question: How did the *Whole Earth Catalog* explore new ways of reasoning about social movements and the importance of individual action during the late 1960s and early 1970s? The notion of individual action that became central to the *Catalog*'s evolving stance on environmentalism was dramatically explored in one of Brand's first major organized *Catalog* events, which came to be known as Liferaft Earth.

Biologist Paul Ehrlich had Stewart Brand as a student during the rapid rise of ecological studies and whole-systems thinking that professors were beginning to teach in the late 1950s. Many students internalized the doomsday predictions of human behavior's effect on the environment and took up the argument that "overpopulation places undue strain on ecosystems, ultimately leading to environmental crisis."[5] The young Brand, however, avoided romanticizing the untouched and protected wilderness. He would instead seek to join human ingenuity and technological innovation with a growing population as a strategy for sustainable living. Years later, in 1968, Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* predicted mass starvation from the 1970s onward. An excerpt from a review of his book appearing in *The Last Whole Earth Catalog* said, "Nothing could be more misleading to our children than our present affluent society. They will inherit a totally different world, a world in which the standards, politics, and economics of the 1960's are dead."[6] Over the course of three days spent alone on a train "with excellent hash and Paul Ehrlich's *Population Bomb*," Brand read the treatise and wondered about his connections to its author, his belief in the book's message, and the limits of his own knowledge of hunger, let alone the complex social

dynamics that might accompany overpopulation. A public "Hunger Show" took shape in his mind, born out of curiosity and his humble nature that made individual action and experimentation paramount.[7]

On Saturday, October 11, 1969, a mixed crew of volunteers—readers, *Catalog* employees, and folks who heard of it through the grapevine—joined one another for a week-long campout in a Hayward, California parking lot. The main event: not eating for seven days. The site included a flimsy inflated plastic tube surrounding the media-exposed participants; fully-inflated, it resembled a life raft. In Brand's own words, "it was pure vulnerability—you could fall over it or cut through it easy as pie. We were contained by will and barely anything else."[8] 52 people survived the event out of the original 100 or so to turn out. Those 52 broke their fast together in a house in the mountains after rain and police forced the event to migrate several times throughout the week. Participants "died" for more reasons than the obvious growing hunger felt by all. Some became weary of the constant noise pollution, where the conversations and radio playing in one corner of the enclosure could hardly be tuned out. Others simply left when the show was no longer "interesting," despite the fact that it was up to them to make it interesting. Brand made a point of conserving himself and largely avoiding any intervention or interviews with the ever-present press, noted that many Liferafters departed without attempting to voice their dissatisfaction with their temporary environment over the open microphone. Those who left the raft without a word of protest had chosen the impossibility of *quitting* in the real-world scenario the event was simulating.[9] Leaving planet Earth is hardly an option, and breaking a hunger vow is not on the table when there is not enough food to put on the table.

The event, as it is recounted in the 448 pages of *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*, sets the stage for an editorial discourse on the balance between the political and the spiritual aspects of individual action. There is, as with all the grassroots movements that had come in

the preceding century, an abstract statement of the problem at hand, such as civil rights, unlivable wages, women's suffrage, or an unpopular war abroad. Overpopulation was perceived to be a new abstract problem, and the narrative of Liferaft Earth offered a chance to make this particular problem more concrete—more personal. The reportage found in *The Last Whole Earth Catalog* of 1971 appears as it did 2 years prior. It is a mix of frequent contributor Rick Fields's own account and Tari Reim's mid-week observations, the latter appearing in the underground newspaper, *Berkeley Tribe*.[10] Brand's own editorial quips ride alongside the bold-typed story in their own small-typed textboxes. The image of Brand as the tireless editor is maintained; his informal commentary reflects the way those associated with the *Catalog* bounced ideas off of one another and valued the inputs of many in the process of reportage, reviewing, and teaching. While Fields provides the overarching narrative of the week, Brand steps in to engage Fields's story and make use of his own power of introspection to guide his readers through the true meaning of the event. Brand expresses the tremendous sense of community felt in performing yoga breathing exercises with his starving companions, highlights the wasting effect hunger had on him, states his frustration with newspaper reporters who falsely conjured news, and admits to being deeply moved during a ceremony during which participants passed around the microphone and expressed their reasons for coming to the Liferaft to starve. Fields exposes the heart of the event's message, saying, "Fasting to get high, to purify, to understand the root fear of infant helplessness when the breast did not come on time; did not cancel out fasting to know hunger, to call human attention to present and future starvation of food and space and silence."[11] Brand had conceived of Liferaft Earth as a way to do what the dire words of Paul Ehrlich and the rich set of graphs and statistics found in other featured books could not: entreat other curious individuals to more intimately engage with a social problem. Elaine from Cave Junction, Oregon wrote in to the editors to express her own distress at hearing the horror stories of

"300 million children in the world today [who are] so undernourished that they are suffering permanent brain damage." [12] Elaine did not want to worry about things that were beyond her control, but she came to realize that this particular problem—hungry children—could be solved by her own hands. Rather than intercede through prayer on the children's behalf, she realized her capacity to travel to those in need in order to donate her time and money. That she wrote her letter six days after beginning her own fast in the spirit of Liferaft Earth is particularly telling. She closed her letter by adding, "I don't know where to go from here. It feels like I am climbing aboard the Liferaft, a year late."[13] The call for individual action emanating from the *Catalog*'s oversized pages was heard and acted upon by many.

To appreciate the *Catalog's* focus on individual action as it applies to social movements in general, we must consider the essays and poems that found their place among the product reviews and illustrations. Liferaft Earth was one of many *Catalog*-sponsored social experiments that served to complement and expand upon the pragmatic environmentalism served by the featured books and tools. The inclusion of essays was another way for the *Whole Earth Catalog* to reinforce its purpose, which explicitly acknowledges "the power of the individual to conduct his own education, find his own inspiration shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested."[14] Wendell Berry's "Think Little" first appeared as an Earth Day speech, and was previously published in the Kentucky underground newspaper, *blue-tail fly*. His essay calls attention to the tendency for causes, such as civil rights, the anti-war movement, and environmentalism, to remain abstract and command too little personal involvement.[15] Furthermore, Berry cites our collective failure to recognize our own private responsibility in any perceived public crisis as a significant barrier to change that must be overcome. He unifies the problems of racial abuses, "the tyranny of the military draft", and the destruction of the environment under one cause: "the mentality of greed and exploitation."[16] Berry's essay reinforces the

*Catalog's* theme of pragmatic environmentalism as an application of direct individual action. He states, "A crowd whose discontent has risen no higher than the level of slogans is *only* [*sic*] a crowd." Considering this essay was first published in 1971, we must imagine readers experiencing its call to action in the wake of the general protests of government and academic institutions during the 1960s. The majority of participation on college campuses took the form of angry shouts, proudly worn buttons, and signs held high above the crowd. Mario Savio's "bodies upon the gears" speech delivered at The University of California, Berkeley in 1964 is just the sort of rhetorical performance that Berry urges readers to move beyond.[17] This is the sharp voice that worked its way into the pages of the *Catalog*, and it always served to champion direct individual action. Berry does the very opposite of what many student activists during the protests of the 1960s did: he avoids simplification and implores us to think *hard* about the fundamentals of our private life. He condemns the activity of merely pointing figures at the government and shouting at corporations who "will never be bound to the land by the sense of birthright and continuity, or by the love which enforces care."[18] He invokes the *Whole Earth Catalog's* core message by prescribing a detailed "think little" approach to solving complex problems: doing your own part to improve your health, attitude, and relationships; working to reign in the control over your food, clothing, and entertainment that you have outsourced; and avoiding the trap of attempting to understand and fix the system as a whole. The crisis that Wendell Berry discuses in "Think Little" is not one of any particular social movement previously mentioned—not even the environmental movement. The crisis that Berry is concerned with is same problem that Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* appears to address: the 1960s saw a fragmented society lacking the impetus and information needed get going and start building communities around direct individual action, rather than grassroots activism.

As Steve Jobs explained in his 2005 Stanford commencement speech, "the Catalog was akin to Google 35 years before the search engine would be invented."[19] We can certainly see the Catalog as an analog of the internet when its reviews and tools are examined alone. However, the *Catalog* did not simply present the reader with the resources necessary to go out and procure tools and books as they might suit his needs and interests. Brand's role as the sole editor of nearly every edition of the periodical was to thread a narrative of inspiration and context throughout each edition that would not just teach the reader new things, but teach the reader how to learn. Most importantly, Brand manages to constantly remind the reader that he, too, is learning along with them. Brand's ability to reach out to talented folks like Wendell Berry and Peter Warshall (*Whole Earth Review* editor) helped ensure that readers received a constant flow of ideas that could confirm their own understanding of the environmental movement, changing opinions of the government and institutions, and the various communities available to them for alternative lifestyles or the acquisition of new skills.[20]

Lastly, Brand's unique style of highly descriptive, staccato sentences that create a snapshot-like manner of storytelling permeates nearly all of the pages found in the *Catalog*. More interested in exposing readers to a multitude of ideas than preaching a narrow set of concepts, Brand summarized events like PERADAM and ALLOY, two remote gatherings of outlaw designers and technologists, by placing small blocks of overheard quotes in a mosaic across the *Catalog*'s pages.[21] He makes participation in such events attractive and the conversations to join in irresistible. "We gave everybody a spoon and the rule was you couldn't feed yourself".[22] "We want to change ourselves to make things different."[23] "Magic is the manipulation of matter by unseen forces. You can see unseen forces if you want to take the time. How many people here could build a car… refine gas… take care of yourself on the lowest, simplest level? Before we go solving the world's problems I think it's important to

know right where we are on this ground."[24] *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*'s "History" afterword tells the story of how the *Catalog*'s beginnings and displays the tendency towards the poetic that marked the *Catalog* throughout its run. Bringing *The Last Whole Earth Catalog* to a close, Brand captures the positive, useful nature of fame as well as the negative, insulating effect of great success as he experienced it in a few sentences: "The voices that you need to hear, whisper, slowly and infrequently. The only way to hear them is listen. Gaze at something until it's nothing. And then at nothing until it's something."

The *Whole Earth Catalog* was a timely, mind-expanding project that launched a host of other related publications and foundations and served to shepherd a generation of young, creative individuals towards causes that excited them. Many published think pieces looked to traditional western craftsmanship and agrarian societies for inspiration. This is evident in the published letters to the editor and the accounts of enthusiastic attendees of programmed events. The *Catalog* managed to capture readers' imaginations by giving them access to tools and literature as well as narratives that inspired direct individual action and invited immediate participation. The dramatic rode alongside the pragmatic, with Gurney Norman's original folk-tale novel, "Divine Right's Trip," serialized throughout the pages of the *Last Whole Earth Catalog*. Such elements of fiction in the *Catalog* helped introduce enough fantasy to cause existing tools, skills, and traditions to be fully examined. The experience of reading the catalog cover-to-cover is a personal adventure, as is the process of expanding one's book shelves with the *Catalog*'s book titles or hopping on a bus to attend a *Catalog*-sponsored gathering in New Mexico. It is clear that for many, laying one's hands on a copy of *Whole Earth Catalog* was a life-changing first step towards taking individual action to shape their own lives and communities.

[1] Brand, Stewart, ed. *The Last Whole Earth Catalog* (San Francisco: Portola Institute & Random House, 1971), Title page.
[2] Ibid., 436.
[3] Kirk, Andrew G. *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism* (University Press of Kansas, 2007), 36.
[4] Ibid., 3.
[5] Ibid., 35-37.
[6] Brand, Stewart, ed. *The Last Whole Earth Catalog* (San Francisco: Portola Institute & Random House, 1971), 34.
[7] Ibid., 35-37.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 39.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., Title page.
[15] Berry Wendell, "Think Little". The Last Whole Earth Catalog (San Francisco: Portola Institute & Random House, 1971), 24-25.
[16] Ibid.
[17] *Berkeley in the 1960s*. Directed by Mark Kitchell. 1990.
[18] Berry Wendell, "Think Little". *The Last Whole Earth Catalog* (San Francisco: Portola Institute & Random House, 1971), 24-25.
[19] "Steve Jobs Stanford Commencement Speech 2005," YouTube video, 14:33, posted by "The Apple History Channel," March 6, 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1R-jKKp3NA&t=12m45s
[20] Kirk, Andrew G. *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism* (University Press of Kansas, 2007), 33.
[21] Brand, Stewart, ed. "PERADAM". The Last Whole Earth Catalog (San Francisco: Portola Institute & Random House, 1971), 403.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Brand, Stewart, ed. "ALLOY". The Last Whole Earth Catalog (San Francisco: Portola Institute & Random House, 1971), 112.
[24] Ibid., 116.