

## ...rant

by Jude Stewart

## The Green Leading the Blind

*It's not easy loving  
compact fluorescent  
lightbulbs.*

I write this from a dreamscape bathed in pure white light. I'm leaning back in a dentist's chair just down the street from Santa's workshop. It's achingly bright here on the permafrost, but my headache is eased by the slow dripping of ice caps and the faint symphony of drills. When I look up, squinting, rainbow visions crowd the horizon like the northern lights, awash in the same cold glow. I see the waiting room at the DMV. Interrogation cells. Endless shining aisles of big-box stores.

Welcome to the future, my pretties: It's fluorescent, and it's awful. For months now, the hegemony of old-style incandescent lightbulbs has been flickering, and it looks like they will soon be entirely extinguished. Both the U.S. Senate and the House are legislating a more efficient lightbulb into predominance, while Australia, Canada, and much of the EU are banning future sales of incandescent bulbs altogether. Wal-Mart and Home Depot have joined the charge, driving distribution up and prices down on the only currently viable alternative: compact fluorescent lightbulbs. Ready to fit in conventional sockets, CFLs consume up to 75 percent less energy than incandescents, last up to 12 times longer, and save about \$35 in energy costs over each bulb's lifetime—not to mention billions of tons of coal and natural gas.

I want to hop on the CFL bandwagon, I really do. Releasing my tree from its perpetual bear hug, I bought scads of CFLs and replaced every bulb in our house in a flood of good works. Then the misery set in. I began screwing out the curly bulbs one by one, my spirits rising and my virtue dimming with every correction. Now I stomach

the cold CFL glare only in closets; usually I save even more energy by rummaging for stuff in the dark. I'm sour about this for a gallingly simple reason: The light—after all, a lightbulb's chief reason for being—is just teeth-grittingly awful. CFLs are an easy-to-hate solution that even committed greenies like myself cannot wholeheartedly back.

Cue the boosters: Things are improving fast! CFLs now come in a wider range of whites, better approximating daylight. (Never mind the dead-end nature of this innovation: Adding extra phosphors to the coating inside a CFL fills out the color spectrum and gives whites more nuance, but every additional phosphor drives the bulb's efficiency down and the cost up.) CFLs light up immediately now; they don't buzz or waver oddly anymore. But the bulbs still use mercury to emit light, requiring careful recycling and professional cleanup if one should break, say, on the wall-to-wall carpeting in your toddler's bedroom. And that sickening, alien light. Tell me you're ready to look like Dick Cheney in bronzer.

So, what's the defense cooking up? Venture capital money is gushing into alternative technologies, like light-emitting diodes and

silicon-based solutions for the retail market. LEDs can power everything from TV screens to traffic lights by efficiently moving electrons on a semiconductor to emit a particular color of light. If we could finagle a precipitous price drop in semiconductors, silicon, or both, CFLs could get their rightful spanking soon with an affordable alternative.

But greenies! "Soon" is just not soon enough. The opportunity to switch gears is now, and we're futzing it up royally. Changing to energy-efficient lightbulbs is the ideal first step toward environmentally responsible living, but we're kidding ourselves that people will willingly dwell in a pallid blue glow, like droopy goldfish in a Chinese restaurant. It's inarguably a big plus to improve energy efficiency to more than 10 times the current standard, but after 125 years of same-old, same-old, with pent-up consumer demand and an unparalleled opportunity to go green in a big way, couldn't we design something not just bright but brilliant?

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