

This paper is one of a series of individual essays written within the conceptual constraints provided by "Forms for a Future." The collection of essays will become the individual episodes of the audio/video podcast.

'... Forums for A Future...'

Part 7: Contemporary Social Issues
Podcast (#23) The Psychology of the Millennial Self

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Prelude

I am Ed Renner. Welcome to my Podcast, "Forums for a Future."

Forums for a Future is based on a university honors course I taught at the University of South Florida in 2007-2008. Three textbooks provide background reading for the individual episodes. They are:

- Thomas Friedman's The World is Flat
- Jarred Diamond's Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed
- Gwynne Dyer's Future: Tense. The Coming World Order

The syllabus for the podcast series, text copies of all of the individual podcasts, and directions for subscribing to the series, either directly or through iTunes, are available on my web site at: kerenner.com, that is: www.k-e-r-e-n-n-e-r.com.

The first 16 episodes are in audio format. They provide an academic conceptual foundation for the series. After having taken nearly a one-year break to teach "Forums for the Future," I am now ready to continue the series, but this time in both audio and video formats. As a way to get started on the continuation, I have created a three-part transition. Episodes 17, 18 and 19 provide a brief introduction of the conceptual foundation for those new to the series, and a quick review for the original subscribers. Starting with Podcast #20, the continuation of the podcast is an open-ended series of positive approaches for addressing the many specific contemporary economic, social and political issues that challenge our capacity for making the necessary changes for having a future in the 21st Century.

The Key Concept

In today's podcast, number 23 in the series, the key concept is that if we are successful in flattening the world, nature cannot sustain us, or us nature. The two – us and nature – are one and the same.

The Fourth Pillar

Least we forget, almost of all of the big challenges we will face in the Post-Modern Era are human made, and thus the responsibility for fixing them are human.

This brings us full circle – from the economic, political and social – to the psychological: to the capacity for human beings to adapt; to some how get our own thoughts – our core beliefs and values – in order for a new era.

Of the four pillars, the psychological is the largest challenge simply because it is reflective: We are both the subjects and the director of the great human experiment. Progress requires letting go of the very beliefs and values that, in the present, are also the basis of our sense of certainty. However, when old assumptions start to fail us, the challenge is to embrace new perspectives rather than persist in holding on to the past. It is now time to re-visit our discussion from Podcast # 5 of how to handle this humanistic dilemma, because, for the Millennials, they have become the agents for the change we have all been waiting for.

The just completed Modern Era has made its contribution to the evolution of human progress. It has given us the information we need to have in order to make the decisions required for 6 plus billion people, and still counting, to live sustainable on this planet. Scientifically and technically we know the basic of what we need to know – it is only the persistence of our own core beliefs and values that are in our way.

These core beliefs and values are the fundamental assumptions on which we build our belief system. They are what give us our sense of self and a coherent sense of self-direction. These assumptions are what I have previously called “basic conceptual units” (Note 1). They are the articles of faith upon which all else rests; perhaps, the most fundamental of which are the beliefs we hold about ourselves, as self-conscious human beings, about the meaning of life, and the beginning of life.

In the Beginning

In the beginning, only Animals, the Four-Legged, Birds, the Wing-Flappers and Fish People inhabited the surface of the Earth. When Creator made Humans He first placed them under the surface of Earth.

Earth Mother called a big meeting of the Four-Legged and Wing-Flappers and told them of Creator’s intention to release the so-called Humans onto the surface of the planet to mingle with all the other creatures that already lived there.

“What do we need them for? We’re doing just fine on our own. What are these Humans anyway?”

Earth Mother scolded, “Creator tells me He has made these Humans in his own image, and they are to be respected by all you other creatures. The Humans have been given the

ability to acquire more knowledge than anything He has made before. It will be interesting to see if they use it wisely.”

Earth Mother brought... the Human People up to the surface of the planet. (Note 2)

Thus, according to a Native American Legend, began the great human experiment on earth. I have always preferred this version of the beginning, in part because it is no less reasonable than the Western biblical version, but mostly because it is so clearly allegorical. The meaning of life is ultimately the capacity of human intelligence to reconcile the human footprint on the planet through the acceptance of the Earth as the Mother of all life.

Indeed, it has been an interesting experiment.

The Medicine Wheel

The Native American oneness with nature is captured by the Medicine Wheel – a symbol of creation – in the shape of a circle with the Creator as the center and with four quadrants. The quadrants represent the four directions, the four seasons, the four elements, the four races, the four stages of life (childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age), and the four aspects of our nature (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual). All of us travel the wheel at our own speed to manifest our needs, and to remember who we are, what is to come, and why we are here.

The Flat World

The Native American spiritual view, in which the human purpose is to live in harmony with nature, reflects one ideal of the perfection and purpose of the great human experiment. But, as we are well aware, this is not where the human experiment has, in fact, taken us. Mankind has plundered and stripped the planet at an ever-increasing rate, through a dramatic increase in numbers, and through a greater impact per person, as the trademark of the Modern Era. The accelerated pace of economic growth as the engine for the present and for continued human progress has been graphically described as “flattening the world.” The flat world is in contrast to a circular sphere where mankind does not flatten nature, nor nature mankind. In a flat world we believe that the gift of human intelligence is to be able to dominate nature. In his account of how to survive in the new technology dominated flat world, Thomas Friedman has written about economic globalization:

“...(there is) no reason to believe (wages will settle at a newer, lower equilibrium)...as long as the global pie keeps growing (p. 227).”

“...as lower-end service jobs move out...the global pie not only grows larger – because more people have more income to spend – it also grows more complex, as more new jobs...are created (p. 228).”

“...the pie keeps growing because things that look like wants today are needs tomorrow (p. 232).”

“...if you believe human wants and needs are infinite...then there are infinite industries to be created...and the only limiting factor is human imagination (p. 231).”

“...the virtuous cycle of more education, more health, more capitalism, more rule of law, more wealth...(p. 379).”

The Sustainable World

In contrast, Jared Diamond makes the counter argument that growth without limits is the path to collapse. It is the argument that if humankind pushes nature too far, that nature, in the end, will trump humankind. If we, as humans, expand the over-consumption of sustainable resources beyond the tipping point, the great human experiment will come to a crashing end – this time not for an isolated society buffered from others by continents and time, but in the new flat world for the planet itself. In the stark barren Mad Max remains of collapse, the current version of the great human experiment will end. The Creator will have his answer, and in a World Without Us (Note 3), the planet will heal itself, and the cycle of the Medicine Wheel will begin again.

Both Friedman and Diamond cannot be correct.

The End of “Faith”

For centuries, much of the fate of the human condition needed to be taken as a matter of faith. This is no longer so. Very little has to be left to faith. We have the capacity through the gift of intelligence, and through the accumulated knowledge as the gift of the Modern Era, to choose whether we go into the 21st century following the path of economic growth (which was the engine of the Modern Era) as the way into the future, or whether we will choose sustainability as the new conceptual foundation and engine for the Post-Modern Era.

It is no small matter. But, this time, the choice we, the living, make will be ours to bear, not a legacy for those as yet unborn to inherit and to modify as they see fit.

It is embarrassing to know that we in the US are presently building museums of creation through faith in the concepts of intelligent design and divine conception, when we have used our intelligence to gain sufficient understanding of the universe and the physical laws of nature to make scientific, knowledge-based decisions about the consequences of these two alternate paths to the future. The great human experiment has reached, perhaps, its first ultimate choice point. The simple Native American spiritual metaphor is the only faith we need to have. It is a variation of the belief in the power of balance -- the necessity for humankind and nature to balance and sustain each other -- rather than one or the other winning the balance power. (This is one of the three principles on which the Forums for a Future Podcast is based, and was the topic of Podcast #13).

Wearing “It”

The choice point before us, for determining the outcome of the great human experiment, does not deny that there will be other similar choice points in the future; we should expect there will be.

This is simply the first one where the choice is ours to live or die with; it is not for some other generation to discover, like those on Easter Island, who figured out too late that their distant forbearers had cut down too many trees, for no good end, after the tipping point had past. It is a choice that is global in nature and will require world citizenship, not just citizenships of the world. (This is one of the three principles on which the Forums for a Future Podcast is based, and was the topic of Podcast #12).

We are the change we have all been waiting for. It is the Age of the Millennials.

The Millennial Person

Faith used to provide people with their sense of certainty. It gave purpose, meaning and direction to life. The time for that kind of sense of certainty is now over. All that is certain is that change will be constant. No world-view will last a lifetime. The Modern Era, through the biological, physical and behavioral sciences had given us the tools for intelligent life on this planet in the Post-Modern Era. This is a time for personal reckoning: to abandon blind religious faith – whether radical Islam or Christian – and become both the experimenter and the subject in the great human experiment.

The most essential choice we have, today, is to establish and enhance knowledge as public domain, not to become the new commodity for financial gain. If the creation of the accumulation of knowledge is allowed to become the new form of “capital” for the continued creation of growing and greater disparities of wealth and power, this century will not be an inflection point, but the continuation of an older world-view whose time has surely come.

The Millennial person, who may be the first through the door of a new era, may also be the last out, if the creation and accumulation of knowledge -- the gift of intelligence -- becomes a commodity for the greater accumulation wealth. (This is one of the three principles on which the Forums for a Future Podcast is based, and was the topic of Podcast #14).

What an exciting time to be alive.

Notes

1. These concepts were developed and explored in greater detail in Podcast #5, “Living in the Future Tense.” This material is the foundation for the fourth pillar – the psychological – to supplement the economic, political and social elements.
2. John James Stewart. Dream Catchers: A journey Into Native American Spiriktuallity, 1999: Premium Press America.
3. Alan Weisman. The World Without Us, 2007: Picador.