

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 podcast.

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

Podcast (#4) The End of the Modern Era
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Prelude

Although each podcast can stand alone as an independent piece, each one is also part of a sequential series. Part I of the series contained a brief 2-minute promotional and a conceptual foundation for thinking about change as the convergence of the four key concepts of an: economic, political, social and personal perspectives. Part II is a series of four podcasts that provides a philosophy for the 21st century. In Podcast #3 the key concept of an inflection point was introduced. Today, in Podcast # 4, I will discuss the key concept that we are now at the End of the Modern Era.

Introduction

To be at the end of the Modern Era is to be at an inflection point in history. The Modern Era began with the Industrial Revolution and progressed through the transformations in agricultural, manufacturing and communications that followed. It has led us to the beginnings of Globalization and the Post Modern Era. Things are different now.

- We are at a time when what used to be true is no longer true.
- We are at a time when our core beliefs and values need to change if we are to successfully adapt to new circumstances.

A Lifetime

What is a lifetime? What are its dimensions?

My grandfather was born in 1881 and he died at the age of 93 in 1974. As a child, his transportation was by horse, light by kerosene, heat by coal, and news by hand typeset newspapers. As a young man he witnessed the introduction of the automobile, the first manned flight by the Wright brothers, the introduction of the telephone, the radio, and electrification. Later he witnessed the introduction of TV and with Apallo 11, in 1969, man walked on the moon a full 5 years before his death. What a lifetime!

When I was a child, I would often ask him to talk to me about what life was like when the streets of our home town were mud and where the automobile was not welcome. I was always amazed at the grace with which he lived in the present given the changes to which he had to adjust over his lifetime. When I was in my early 20s, he in his 70s, I bought him a subscription to U.S. News and World Report, as a long-shot Christmas present, since he already had drawers full of as yet unworn socks and shirts from previous Christmases. He loved the subscription. I continued it for many years, until I figured he must too old for that. He immediately renewed it for himself, and I (with my youthful stereotype of what it means to be old) had just blown the only present he really looked forward to. He was still reading it when he died; his mind was always in the present and looking forward.

My fascination with his answers to my “Can you remember when?” questions was driven by my own curiosity over what scope of change my life would cover, given that the rate of change is getting faster and faster. After all, the life someone born two generations before my grandfather, in the 1830s, was not much different than the life he was born into in the 1880s. But, the life I was born into two generations later in the 1930s was already drastically different than the life he was born into in 1881, and yet much more was to come.

When I think back, I, of course, have some overlap with my grandfather. I can remember the iceman who used to deliver blocks of ice for the iceboxes many people, including my grandparents, had in their houses. I can remember when they bought their first refrigerator and the delivery men took away the icebox that used to be in the corner. I can remember the coalman who would shovel coal onto a metal slide that would fit through our basement window, and watching our coal bin filling to the top. As a kid, my job was to use the wheelbarrow to take the ashes two doors down to the vacant lot and to dump the ashes over the bank, like all the other neighbors did. And, no, I did not live on a farm. I lived in Altoona, PA, the heart of the Pennsylvania Railroad, and I watch long trains, of nothing but coal cars, carrying the coal from Pennsylvania mining towns to other places across the country.

What I did not realize then, was that by that time, the industrial revolution was for all practical purposes complete. All that remained were the finishing touches, in terms of achieving greater efficiency, better supply and distribution channels, and constantly increasing consumer demands to fuel growth. This refinement over the last half of the 20th Century was no small accomplishment, including space travel, but it was a logical extension of what went before. It was incremental progress that was quantitatively, not qualitatively, different.

I can also remember when grocery stores sold raw food, which someone would cook at home. The milkman would deliver milk in glass bottles to your door. By contrast, today, no one is at home to cook or to take in the milk. Old style TV dinners have been replaced by frozen gourmet food, and time has become a commodity. The efficiency engine has pushed people close to the limit of what is possible within the constraints of modern life as we have known it.

But, as the Industrial Revolution in US was running its course, and the Modern Era was winding down, the beginnings of the next era were taking shape. Many did not see the changes coming because they were not yet intrusive – they were in their early stages of creativity and innovation. They were like Ben Franklin flying his kite in a thunderstorm to learn about electricity; but,

unlike electrification that took 100 years to come after the discovery. In contrast, the digital age and cyberspace has taken far less than half the time to make its effect felt.

2000 as an Inflection Point

As an illustration, when I was a graduate student all the data generated by research had to be calculated manually, with the aid of a mechanical device – a calculator. All of the written papers had to be manually typed – on a typewriter. Now, I can process thousands of numbers on my personal computer in a few seconds. As I speak, my computer transcribes my words into the document I am writing.

Although, as a person, I am still a bit of a throw-back: I still bake my own bread and, cook my meals from raw food, and I understand mechanics. When my garage door opener failed to turn the light out after the door closed, I assumed (based on the past mechanics of the Modern Era) that a relay needed to be replaced. However, I could not find one, so I went to my “Genie” dealer and asked. The “Genie” just smiled: “There is no relay; it is the Mother Board. They don’t make replacements for that model any more.” So, too, it was with my washing machine. When it would not turn on, I looked for a switch. The repairman just smiled: “Mother Board” he said. In both cases it cost the same to pay someone to replace the Mother Board as to simply buy a new one. One result is the need for more and more landfill than we could ever imagine.

We have gone from mechanical to logical, and with it we have gone from local to global. From gears and switches to strings of zeros and ones. From manual processes which have a physical existence, to invisible process that cannot be seen, smelled or touched, like work and production could be in the Modern Era. What was close and personal is now cyber and impersonal, and we have crossed the point of no return.

With the new technology it only takes one master painter to paint an automobile. The computer will track his every motion, the program will instruct the robot to do a perfect replication. The engineer will mathematically define the principles, and the computer will generate the next creation without the need of the one, last remaining master painter. If someone in Thailand can farm your shrimp cheaper than the Gulf coast fisherman can catch them, and he can, the shrimp boats in Fort Myers, Florida will stay at the dock, as they do. This is the flat world that Thomas Friedman writes about. The digital world, built around communication and distribution, is inter-dependent and inter-connected. No person can escape its effects.

I went to China in 2002, and it was like being back in Altoona 50 years ago. Coal barges, and new industrialization was everywhere, all with tall smoke stacks bellowing black smoke. It was a familiar sight, I had seen all before, in 1956. China is not going to turn back; it can’t. Our manufacturing base is gone, we are buying their goods because they are cheaper while their emissions stoke global warming, while we go deeper in debt to China to pay for a war to try to protect our access to oil, rather than to develop alternative energy sources necessary to reverse global warming. This is the collapse that Diamond warns about – a progression crosses a tipping point because people cannot change some core beliefs and values, and they continue on a course that in the end will result in them being the author of their own misfortune. We have no other

place to go. We must sustain the planet; it is now full of people and growing. But, food, water and energy are becoming scarce, just like they did on Ester Island just two hundred years ago.

In addition, there is the political element. The unilateral exercise of military force to preserve the American way of life, as we have known it from the past, is destabilizing the world at the very time we need international cooperation to confront the challenges of globalization, as Dyer so clearly documents in his book, Future: Tense.

But, this is only part of the story of the end of an era. We are the people who are alive today. It will be us that needs to figure out what we need to know and what choices we need to make to rise to the occasion of leaving one era and entering another. Either we will be successful or we will fail.

Welcome to the Post-Modern Era

One does not have to go back very far in time, when a man (or woman) could put his or her hand on his son's (or daughter's) shoulder and say "When I was your age..." and the message would be meaningful because the parent's reality at that age would not have been appreciably different than the son's or daughter's reality at the time.

This is no longer true. No parent can do this in a meaningful way. Too much is different now. The parent's reality as a child is no longer the reality of his own child. This has never happened before in the history of human kind. This is new ground. Human kind has not been here before.

What an exciting time to be alive.

What more could you ask for? Tradition is no longer a good enough answer. Today is a time that requires thoughtful cross-generational participation. There is no place to hide. Each of us, and our children, are in this together. It is time for a partnership about our collective future.

For the adults, this means that what ever our core beliefs and values are, the chances are that they will not be valid for rest of our life. This is hard, because it is our beliefs and values that give us our faith, and our sense of coherent self-direction. Yet, we now need to ask whether the beliefs and values that got us to where we are today, will get us, and our children, where we need to be tomorrow.

This is the personal pillar. It is the personal aspect of why we are at an inflection point in history. This is the person aspect of the end of the Modern Era.

The next podcast, #5, will deal with the "psychology of self" for making a successful transition from one era to another.

Thank you for the day.