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Innovator and writer looks ahead - with caution

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This does not look like a Whole Earth kind of meal.

Stewart Brand walks into his neighborhood diner in Sausalito and his waiter already knows the order: burger with bleu cheese, milk shake, chips and guacamole. The lone vegetable is a helpless-looking portion of red onion. Brand attacks most of the above with a salt shaker, as if the sodium can't shower down on his plate fast enough.

"There was one angry person in Portland, a shouter," Brand says, recalling a recent book-tour stop. "'Do you eat meat?' she said. 'Yes,' I told her. 'At every possible opportunity!'"

The founder of the Whole Earth Catalog, co-founder of the Global Business Network and associate of the late Ken Kesey has always been more of an ecological thinker than an eco-warrior. The tugboat that he lives on has a shrubbery on top and solar panels in front of the steering wheel. And yet, as his friend Peter Schwartz confirms, "he eats like a truck driver," with no apologies to the cow he just washed down with a frosty cup of milk, ice cream and vanilla extract.

Brand's new book, "Whole Earth Discipline," thrusts him in the middle of the global climate debate, and not in an easily digestible way. Calling himself an "eco-pragmatist," Brand sees bad times ahead; his suggestions to avoid an all-out climate cataclysm include more nuclear power, and food growing in skyscrapers as well as farms. He believes environmentalists must radically change their thinking.

The book, arguably Brand's most important and certainly his most urgent, comes as the futurist is about to turn 71. He's a spry septuagenarian, still showing the passion that fueled his 1960s campaign for NASA to release a photo of the Earth from outer space. (The iconic image, which graced the Whole Earth Catalog, is on the cover of his book.) If anything, Brand's mind may be racing faster than ever before.

Dry docked

Brand's office in Sausalito looks like the cataclysm already hit.

The work space he rents includes an unremarkable building filled with books, next to a very remarkable fishing boat, the Mary Heartline, which has been on dry land for a generation. The deteriorating white hull is covered with bougainvillea. In this battle between technology and nature, nature is winning.

"I try to keep the leaks at bay and the raccoons at bay," Brand explains. "(The boat) will fall down in one of these earthquakes, but it won't fall down very far."

Trying to list all of Brand's projects over the years is almost futile. A sampling: After graduating from Stanford, spending two years active duty as an infantry officer and tripping with the Merry Pranksters, Brand in 1968 published his first Whole Earth Catalog - a compendium of handy products meant for commune dwellers. The catalog became a phenomenon and a cultural touchstone; Steve Jobs described it in his 2005 Stanford University commencement address as "sort of like Google in paperback form, 35 years before Google came along."

Forming corporate strategy

Other resume builders: founded the CoEvolution Quarterly, served as adviser to then-Gov. Jerry Brown and co-founded the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (the WELL), one of the first online communities. Brand also co-founded the corporate strategy firm Global Business Network, and the Long Now Foundation, based in San Francisco, a group that promotes long-range thinking. Among other things, Long Now endeavors to put a clock in Nevada that will tick once a year for 10,000 years.

Hanging out with Brand can be intimidating. Less than an hour into our first meeting, this reporter tried to dazzle Brand with some trivia: The oft-used term "drinking the Kool-Aid" is wrong, because Jim Jones gave his Jonestown followers Flavor Aid during their mass suicide in Guyana.

"I think 'drinking the Kool-Aid' predates Jim Jones to Ken Kesey - 'Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test' and all that," Brand politely corrects. "Drinking Kool-Aid actually had a very different meaning then. It meant 'Are you on the bus or off the bus? Are you in or are you out?' All it meant is are you trusting Neal Cassady. And why would you do that?"

He should know. He was there. Tom Wolfe wrote about Brand in "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test," and thanked him in the author's note.

Brand is lanky, looking much taller from a distance than his 6 feet, and has a bright-eyed nerdiness that comes from a lifetime of picking function over fashion. He can seem awkward but laughs very easily - a full-body laugh that makes it impossible to doubt his sincerity.

He talks fondly about his friends, and speaks frequently of his wife of more than two decades, Ryan Phelen. (Brand has an ex-wife, and his 31-year-old son Noah is a writer.) Unlike many writers of his intellect, Brand admits enjoying almost everything about his fame.

"There's almost no downside being well-known for a long time," Brand says. "Nobody is going to steal my identity. Old friends lead to new friends and one recycles people into new functions over time."

Phelen tells the story of Brand's 70th birthday last December. What kind of gift do you get a man who hates big parties and gets the latest gadget before everyone else? Phelen set up a Web site and filled it with passionate discussions from his closest friends. "I gave him words. Words and thoughtful conversation," she says.

Brand was thrilled.

The Whole Earth Catalog hasn't published in a decade, but Brand is still a well-researched consumer.

Hiking in marin

He aggressively hikes the back country of Marin County, brewing his own coffee in the middle of nowhere. When asked how this is possible, he bounds to the next room and emerges with two cool tools - a newer gadget with a propane tank and a much older one that uses a small fan to turn a hockey puck-size titanium pot into a blast furnace. Brand's uniform is the 5.11 "tactical shirt," with its pen holder in the shoulder and pouches in its pouches. He has 10 of them, in different colors.

But nothing reflects Brand's personality like his second boat, the Mirene, a nearly century-old tugboat bought in the 1980s. Brand and Phelen spent either six figures (his estimate) or seven figures (hers) to turn the boat into their main living space. He proudly points out each design innovation - windows that slide sideways into the wall, a kitchen counter that collapses on a piano hinge.

"Oh God, this was such a joy. We had a zero bank account for years there," Brand says, as if the poverty was part of the fun. "We'd get a little bit of salary and it would go into the tugboat."

It's hard to describe the Global Business Network without using words like "scenario planning" and "strategic tools." So just call it the league of extraordinary futurists.

Heavyweight thinkers including Brand and author/consultant Schwartz founded the organization, whose clients include the U.S. government and some of the world's larger corporations. Members have included science fiction author William Gibson and musician Peter Gabriel.

At GBN, Schwartz says Brand is distinguished by his capacity to ask the right questions.

"In all the kinds of work that we do, figuring out the right question is the hardest part. He makes me very uncomfortable all the time and that's his job," Schwartz says. "It goes all the way back to the question, 'Why haven't we seen a picture of the whole Earth yet?' It really is about getting the questions right, and he makes sure that we avoid easy answers. And that's what I think he did with his book."

Stirring vigorous debate

"Whole Earth Discipline" is filled with influences from GBN. Among other observations, he worries that some climatologists aren't telling everything they know about the seriousness of our future. He also admits that some of his old ideas were wrong.

"There was some sense of urgency," Brand says. "This book (reflects) that I had veered far enough off from the environmental mainstream that I had something to say in that regard."

"Whole Earth Discipline" seems designed to stir aggressive debate.

Dire scenarios - the Earth slimming to a population of 1.5 billion is one of the *less* chilling possibilities - are followed by bold solutions, including a chapter on geo-engineering: a sort of hotwiring of the planet, where mankind does things like shooting sulfur particles into the stratosphere to cool the climate. Darkly dry humor runs throughout the book. An ecosystem engineering chapter is called "It's All Gardening."

Sierra Club Executive Director Carl Pope hasn't yet read the book, which contradicts the club's position that nuclear power isn't ready for worldwide use. But even though Brand challenges environmentalists, Pope is glad he has a platform.

"I think (Brand) provides a very important ingredient to the public dialogue," Pope says. "And I'm thrilled he's still out there doing it."

Brand doesn't have an optimistic outlook about the planet's future. But he talks at length about mankind's capacity to respond heroically to crises and thinks this one could bring out our best. Brand uses World War II as an example, where death tolls were high, but many who survived say the period was the time of their lives.

"It was the time when everyone was pointed in the same direction, doing amazing and impossible things with astonishing stories being told," Brand says, before the humor surfaces again.

"Everybody got laid all the time."

To read Stewart Brand's essay about the Loma Prieta earthquake, which originally ran in The Chronicle, go to links.sfgate.com/ZEUZ. Brand's Web site is web.me.com/stewartbrand.

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