

CONCORD MONITOR

Published on the *Concord Monitor* (<http://www.concordmonitor.com>)

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Ralph Jimenez: Multifaceted Stewart Brand wants to alter our perception of time and the universe

By

For the Monitor

Thursday, March 19, 2015

(Published in print: Thursday, March 19, 2015)

We were looking no further into the future than our next cup of coffee, but just as we approached what passes for the door into the cafe of Readers Bookstore, it locked. The store on San Francisco Bay is run by the friends of that city's public library. It's in one of the restored military barracks at Fort Mason, the base from which much of the materiel to fight World War II was shipped.

A staff member suggested we try a bar and coffee shop a few barracks down. We entered and grew wide-eyed. What manner of space-age place was this? Books lined one short wall next to a spiral staircase that led to closed stacks of books behind a Plexiglas barrier.

On one wall, a long robot hand wrote a message in lines that formed a perfect circle. A gleaming orrery, a mechanical model of the universe, let us know where we were in the cosmos. Laboratory beakers of clear and colored liquids hung from racks on the ceiling. A stuffed passenger pigeon, one of the last to survive, stared out from a glass case.

We sat at a long, glass-topped table beneath which was an exquisitely machined piece of stainless steel gearworks.

Atop the table was a pamphlet that let us know that we were in the Interval Cafe, home of the Long Now Foundation, creator of the Millennium Clock. The 200-foot-tall clock, which will be installed inside a hollowed-out chamber in Nevada's Mount Washington, is designed to run for 10,000 years. It will tick once per year. Every 1,000 years, a cuckoo will pop out and call. Only in California, I thought.

I was flipping through the pamphlet, which explained that the foundation was founded by Stewart Brand – a futurist, biologist, environmentalist and the creator, some 40 years ago, of the Whole Earth Catalog.

The foundation's goal is to foster long-term thinking in a Twitter culture. Brand believes that it was a cultural lack of foresight that led to the extinction of the passenger pigeon and other creatures, and brought us to the brink of environmental collapse.

Brand was a Merry Prankster, along with author Ken Kesey and philosopher Wavy Gravy, who never stopped provoking thought. He led the public campaign to convince NASA to release the first photo taken of Earth from space and used it as the cover of his catalog. He went on to publish CoEvolution Quarterly, a journal of science, technology and ideas that published some of society's most forward thinkers, among them Kevin Kelly, future editor of Wired, and the late Donella Meadows, a Dartmouth professor and columnist for the Monitor.

My wife poked my elbow, pointed to a photo in the pamphlet and then to Brand, a tall, thin, silver-haired fellow standing next to the spiral staircase. I introduced myself and thanked Brand for his lifelong effort to challenge assumed wisdom. He was gracious, as one would expect of someone who opened the Interval Cafe to introduce the public to his ideas.

We have, I agreed, become a short-term culture. Our buildings are built to last scores of years not scores of centuries. Our products and, sadly, our environment are expendable. We pay lip service to coming generations, but diminish the world they will inherit and saddle them with debt. We do need help learning to think long term.

One of the foundation's goals is to save what's left in the most permanent way. It has, with the aid of the Silicon Valley technocrats who are among its major funders, created microscopically etched nickel Rosetta Disks recording 1,500 of the world's languages. Each disk can hold 350,000 pages of information and last from two to 10 millennia. The foundation's library, a work in progress, is a manual of sorts, the 3,000 or so books needed to restart civilization. The books will be kept in both physical and digital form.

Through its Revive and Restore project, the foundation is working with scientists to use remnant DNA and genetic engineering to bring back extinct species, starting with the woolly mammoth, the passenger pigeon and the heath hen, a tasty, flightless bird that once helped early New England settlers avoid starvation.

A few years ago, I wrote about Brand and his decision to break with most environmentalists by advocating for nuclear power as a means to stem climate change. Technology can no longer be seen as the enemy by environmentalists, it must be seen as part of the solution, a way to save a planet we've wounded deeply, Brand says. And he's right.

Information on the foundation and its projects can be found at longnow.org.

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