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The Long Now

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The Ulm Minster church in Ulm, Germany, is a monumental feat of coordination across generations, taking 513 years to complete. – photo via Wikimedia Commons, Tilman2007, re-darkened by Ulamm (talk) 23:47, 23 January 2018 (UTC)/CC BY-SA

Every seed braided
into the crown of messengers
before uncertain passages
a love note to future generations
a grain of hope
somewhere somehow
there would be soil

— Naima Penniman, excerpt from the poem “A Love Letter to Future Generations”

Near the banks of the Danube River in Ulm, Germany, a honey-colored Gothic stone structure — the Ulm Minster church — soars 530 feet above the ground. While its size is impressive (it is currently the world’s tallest church), what is more remarkable is the tenacity and long-term vision required to complete it. Its first foundation stone was laid in 1377 and the final steeple stone in 1890 — an astonishing 513 years after work had begun — a feat that required coordination across many generations.

As we put together this issue, I was struck by how our relationship to time has fundamentally shifted. When we consider time on a geological scale, all human civilization is a mere blip on the radar. Until very recently, people lived by the natural rhythms of the day and seasons, and many traditional indigenous cultures still do today. Time was measured in much broader strokes through cycles of birth and death, the changing of the seasons, and the rise and fall of monarchies or dynasties. In the Middle Ages, when Ulm Minster was built, life was not considerably different from one generation to the next, and thus the idea of “now” extended much further into the future.

But life has changed radically since the Industrial Revolution, and we are now plagued by pathologically short-term thinking. Productivity and efficiency are touted as a moral good. Businesses are beholden to the next quarterly report, and decision-making is largely fueled by attempts to increase short-term shareholder value. Members of Congress spend more time campaigning for the next election cycle than they do on legislation. Fortunes are made in our financial markets through micro-fluctuations of millisecond-speed algorithms. With a lifespan of 18 minutes, a tweet ages faster than milk, served up on a platform that was recently referred to by Tesla CEO and billionaire Elon Musk as the “de facto public town square.” Is it any wonder that we’re struggling to find traction for meaningful change and civil discourse?

We are at, what is considered by many, to be the most pivotal point in human history to date. We are flirting with multiple existential crises: extreme climate events, an ongoing pandemic, political divisiveness, social instability, rocky financial markets, a war that has led to catastrophic loss of human life as well as global fuel and food insecurity, a widening wealth gap, labor shortages, and dopamine-fueled addictions to the technologies that were supposed to set us free, to name a few. Until we reclaim a broader understanding of “now,” any meaningful action toward a sustainable future will remain theoretical.

In *The Well-Tuned Brain*, neuroscientist Peter Dinkow writes: “The propensity for overconsumption is the relic of a time when individual survival depended on fierce competition for resources.... The ancient brain that drives us – evolved in scarcity, habit-driven, and focused on short-term survival – is poorly matched to the frenzied affluence of contemporary material culture.”

But time has blessed us with a brain that is also able to anticipate and imagine unknown futures. Specifically, the frontal lobe (especially the part of it known as the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex) enables us to envision alternative scenarios and map out complex plans and processes. Interestingly, it developed in the last two million years – coinciding with the development of most of the dirt that is on our planet now. Our aptitude for long-term thinking is quite literally as old as dirt itself!

In his book “*Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*,” environmental historian Jared Diamond outlines two determining factors in tipping a society to success: long-term planning and the willingness to reconsider core values. While our short-term brains encourage immediate gratification, our long-term brains enable us to plan and execute monumental projects like Ulm Minster. We already have the most important tool we need to dig ourselves out of this metaphorical hole: our imaginations. While hope for collective action across generations may seem absurdly naïve, the reality is we’ve done it before, and we can do it again. In fact, numerous examples are available to guide us if we can muster the humility to allow them to do so.

The Haudenosaunee (formerly called the Iroquois Confederacy by the French and the League of Five Nations by the English) adhere to the Seventh Generation principle: the idea of making decisions for the well-being of people for seven generations to come. They believe it is the duty of leadership as “Caretakers of the Peace” to promote stability and security for their community – a community comprised not only of those presently living but that also extends through time to past and future generations. In Europe, the Svalbard Global Seed Vault on the Norwegian island of Spitsbergen has preserved over one million seed samples in the event of “mismanagement, accident, equipment failures, funding cuts, war, sabotage, disease, and natural disasters,” with a goal of keeping them secure for at least one thousand years. Another organization, the Long Now Foundation, is a nonprofit in California dedicated to supporting projects that foster long-term thinking across 10,000 years – the scale of human civilization – what they refer to as “the long now.”

As we imagine a vision of hope for future generations, we must reconsider our relationship with time – in our lives, in our practices, and in our organizations and businesses. It is only by reframing this abstract chronology as a complex web of natural cycles to which we are all beholden, rather than mechanical ticks of a clock speeding us into the future at break-neck speed, that we can free ourselves from the tyranny of the present and once again reclaim “the long now.”

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