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10,000-Year Clock Is Already Ticking

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* Speaker says we must plan beyond several generations into the future

Some consider thinking ahead a gift, but Stewart Brand thinks it's not only a necessity, but a responsibility.

And he is not talking about looking a week down the road, or even a quarter century in advance. Instead, Brand asks us to consider what the world will be like multiple generations from now, as far as 10,000 years into the future.

"The way the problem gets presented to society these days is that technology is moving very rapidly, so there is no point in trying to plan or think long term, because whatever you try to do will probably be wrong, so don't do anything," Brand says. "This is probably the wrong way to run a civilization."

People need to take "the long term seriously," he says, which "is more beneficial than first meets the eye." If people are prepared for multiple possible outcomes, they and their institutions can be adaptable.

But, says Brand, "the future is seriously unknowable." The farther ahead a prognosticator attempts to look, the more cloudy the future becomes, because over time unknown factors accumulate and compound, frustrating attempts to know what lies ahead.

"And yet we have to make plans," Brand says, "so what do you do?"

By using all the known information from the present, Brand says it's possible to build alternative future scenarios to prepare businesses, individuals and civilizations for most possible outcomes and prevent surprise or failure.

But getting individuals, let alone societies, to think beyond the reach of their noses, or the noses of their great-grandchildren for that matter, hasn't been easy.

"Right now we are very early on in the process and it is hard to get anybody to think even ten years ahead," Brand says.

In 1996, Brand, along with several other forward thinkers, co-founded the Long Now Foundation, an organization devoted to fostering responsible, long-term thinking something he says grew out of a group he co-founded called the Global Business Network, which helps mega-companies such as Ford, Bechtel, Hewlett-Packard and Dupont integrate adaptability for future contingencies.

Brand, who is on the board of trustees for the Santa Fe Institute, will talk about different ways to prepare for the

future on Wednesday as part of the institute's public lecture series.

"Science has gotten good enough so we can think very seriously and knowledgeably about what may happen in the future," Brand says. So, we then have the responsibility to think about the stuff that we do, and what impacts we may have tens of centuries into the future, Brand says.

Changing the future

Long-term thinking has become ever more important as societies and civilizations develop technologies with legacy wastes, such as radioactive materials, that linger for millennia to change slow-moving natural cycles in the way many scientists think man-produced carbon dioxide will change global climate.

But to what degree will Earth's climate change if humans continue to burn fossil fuels at ever-increasing rates? Brand says numbers with such specificity may not be as important as developing adaptive policy based on long-term thinking.

"In terms of telling the story for how things are going to play out, numbers distract," Brand says. In the case of global warming, he says "if you wait on policy until you get those numbers you aren't going to be able to do anything."

To get people to adopt this new time frame, Brand's Long Now Foundation is working on a 10,000-year clock to serve as an icon for thinking on a geologic scale.

While the final clock, which is expected to stand about 60 feet tall and sit within the core of a mountain in Nevada, hasn't been completed yet, a nine-foot prototype has already been built and sits in the London Science Museum.

Brand said 10,000 years was the target life of the clock because that is the scale of human civilization, when the last Ice Age retreated and allowed modern agriculture-based societies to spring forth.

"It will be ticking away in that mountain long after many things are gone and other things have arrived, the climate has changed and that gives you a frame of reference to think about the long, slow stuff," Brand says.

If you go

WHAT: "Discounting, Karma, and Finessing the Future" by Stewart Brand, co-founder of the Global Business Network and the Long Now Foundation, as part of the Santa Fe Institute's public lecture series

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday

WHERE: St. Francis Auditorium at the Museum of Fine Arts, 107 West Palace Ave.

HOW MUCH: Free and open to the public

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BRAND: "The future is seriously unknowable"

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