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Some time's a great notion



The creator of the *Whole Earth Catalog* shows us how to view the world from the distance of time

In 1968 Stewart Brand presented readers with a startling view of the world: the whole earth, as in the *Whole Earth Catalog*. For the cover of his book, he chose a shot of earth he had lobbied NASA for—the world as seen from the perspective of space, the world as ecosystem. It was about more than distance: it was about time.

Stewart Brand of the Long Now Foundation

Stewart—inventor, designer, biologist—is one of the far-thinking founders of The Long Now Foundation, whose mission in part is to foster long-term responsibility for our planet. Not just for a mere millennia. Think *really* long term, as in ten millennia.

Or even further, as in the number of years it takes for one rotation of our galaxy (220 million).

"By and large, all predictions are wrong. I don't think we would much care for a world so rigidly ordered that predictions would regularly prove true."

It is the difference between time as the Greek *kairos* (of the moment) and *chronos* (ongoing). "Kairos is the time of cleverness," Stewart explains, "chronos the time of wisdom."

We glimpse such a long view when we see the earth from the perspective of its outer space. But how to get a real sense of the long term?

Tick tock goes the giant clock.

'From prime time to primal time'

Together with computer designer Danny Hillis and other foundation members, Stewart is creating the Clock of the Long Now, a 65-foot-high mechanical clock that will keep accurate time from its home in a

Nevada mountain for the next

"The future will hold what we preserve of our past, and libraries have for centuries been the keepers of much of this knowledge."

10,000 years. So mark your calendar for the year 12005. (Stewart and his colleagues are already allowing for that extra digit in the calendar, and thus we are currently in the year 02005.)

Stewart alternately refers to this clock as "an abiding charismatic artifact" and "a patience machine" that shifts our thinking "from prime time to primal time."

The 5¼-inch-high bronze replica of the clock's [time cam](#) that Levenger has created is a way for people to literally get their hands around the concept—to hold 10,000 years of time in their hand.



Whole Earth Catalog
original cover, Fall 1969

Just what will that future hold?

"By and large, all predictions are wrong," Stewart cautions. "I don't think we would much care for a world so rigidly ordered that predictions would regularly prove true."



Even the foundation's own plans for the Great Tick Tock are not as originally proposed. "The schemes, dreams and fantasies for the mountain clock keep evolving," Stewart says. "The idea of a library in the mountain was an early one, since discarded, but it might come back." Meantime, the foundation has decided to collect all 4,000 of the world's languages in one repository, appropriately named www.rosettaproject.org.

Of time and the reader

Clock of the Long Now and its time equation cam

But the traditional library still has great import. In part, the future will hold what we preserve of our past, and libraries have for centuries been the keepers of much of this knowledge. All the more reason to grieve for those that have been willfully destroyed.

"I mourn two the most," Stewart says. "Certainly Alexandria, where the ancient Greek legacy was collected and refined. Only ten percent of that crucial legacy survived the library's multiple burnings. The other was the deliberate burning of the extensive Mayan literature by pious Spaniards. Only tiny scraps of a whole sophisticated world survived that *auto-da-fé*."

"Libraries are the pillars of civilization. We weaken them at our peril."

Today most of the losses are far less catastrophic but nevertheless insidious, as when library budgets are cut or a community's library closed. "In my view, libraries are the pillars of civilization," Stewart says. "We weaken them at our peril."

Who knows how people will read in the next 100 or 1,000 years—will there still be printed books, or will we tuck a microchip behind our ear and see the book in our mind? The better question: what does it matter how? As long as people read the way Stewart foresees: avidly.

Two things to hold dear

Perhaps what we need to help us take the long view is the reverse of an Antiques Roadshow—a program that treasures the future as if it were the past.

Stewart's assessment: "Few things can be treasured about the future, but they're important to hold dear. One is continuity, another is options. Continuity of the things that are important to keep moving at a slow and steady, and steadying, pace, such as natural systems and cultural practices. And options to preserve and, indeed, increase freedom of action for future people."

Mark your calendar. The time to begin treasuring them is right now.

Clock photos by Rolfe Horn. Courtesy of the Long Now Foundation.



Working model of the clock

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