



Murphy: The Long Now: A few reflections on time

Posted: January 12, 2014 - 12:18am | Updated: January 29, 2014 - 11:58am

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By [Mark E. Murphy](#)

On Sept. 5, 1977, I was a young lad of 15, just beginning my sophomore year in high school. Jimmy Carter was president. That year, the Apple II computer came out.

Led Zeppelin gave its final concert. Elvis Presley died. The original “Star Wars” movie was released and became the highest-grossing film of all time. Ted Turner skippered the yacht *Courageous* to win the America’s Cup. David Berkowitz, the infamous “Son of Sam” killer, was captured in New York. And I was head over heels in love with this gorgeous, dark-haired girl in my homeroom class named Daphne. She didn’t know it, but I had already told her mother that I would marry her someday.

Eight years later, I did exactly that.

Daphne and I have been through a lot together — the premature deaths of two of our parents, the protracted grind of medical school and residency, Daphne’s two bouts with cancer, and the trials and tribulations that go along with raising two young men in a world where the ethical and social values that we both grew up valuing seem to have been dispensed with by society. We’ve seen our share of angst — but, overall, it’s still been great. I feel very blessed indeed. And the time has simply flown by.

So what’s the big deal about Sept. 5, 1977?

That’s the date the Voyager 1 spacecraft was launched.

A 1,600-pound robotic space probe that looks like an overgrown satellite dish (which, to some degree, it is), Voyager 1 has now left our solar system and is hurtling through interstellar space. It is, without question, the furthest man-made object from Earth. Amazingly, it still sends and receives messages from NASA, even though it is nearly 12 billion miles away from us.

Voyager will continue to do so for about 12 more years until its power cells fail. Then, it will fall silent at last, although it will continue to hurtle through the vastness of space for all eternity. In about 40,000 years, Voyager 1 will be closer to another star (a red dwarf star somewhat unromantically named AC +79 3888) than to our own.

It’s difficult for most of us to even comprehend a span of 40,000 years. And yet in a galactic sense, 40,000 years is the blink of an eye. Consider this: It was about 40,000 years back that the oldest known cave paintings were made. Our ancestors, Cro-Magnon man, began colonizing what is now Europe around the same time. The last of the Neanderthals died out about 29,000 years ago.

Shortly after that, the first men reached North America. The last Ice Age ended approximately 10,000 years ago, which roughly coincides with the creation of the first pottery by humans. The city of Jericho was founded around the same time. The invention of writing in Sumer 5,500 years ago triggered the beginnings of human history. And from there, human civilization simply exploded.

Virtually everything we know as human culture has occurred over the last 7,500 years. Disconnected nomadic bands of men and women underwent a cultural shift that transformed them into mankind during that brief span — and, in so doing, changed the entire world.

10,000-year clock

So what constitutes mankind today — and where are we, as a civilization, headed? A few visionary individuals are building a device inside a mountain in the west Texas desert that seeks to answer that very question.

The device in question is a clock — but it’s like no other clock in history. The clock, which is currently under construction, was designed by engineer Danny Hillis to run for 10,000 years with minimal maintenance and intervention. It will stand 200 feet tall, track the sun, the moon and the six visible planets, and will cost millions of dollars to complete. But this is no pie-in-the-sky dream. Indeed, the project has the backing of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos (who has contributed some \$46 million

to this project), Whole Earth founder Stewart Brand, British composer Brian Eno, and the founders of Sun Microsystems and Priceline.com. The individuals involved with the 10,000-year clock have named this monumental device the Clock of the Long Now.

Think about this for a moment.

Depictions of the future of mankind are typically dire. From literature, we get “The Road” by Cormac McCarthy, where a post-apocalyptic society is populated by mutants and cannibals. Cinematic offerings include “Blade Runner” and “Planet of the Apes,” which show us future worlds that are either corrupted versions of the present (the former) or are illustrative of the complete collapse of human society (the latter). Typically, we look into the future and see only impenetrable darkness — a planet destroyed by nuclear holocaust, global warming, viral pandemic or the devastating impact of a blazing meteor as it slams mercilessly into the earth.

As a father of two young men starting out their lives, that’s troubling to me.

I want my sons to have a future. Heck, I want humanity to have a future. To me, the idea that the world as we know it will cease to exist is simply not acceptable.

Which is why the concept of the Clock of the Long Now is comforting.

I think it’s high time someone started thinking about the next 10,000 years. We tend to get so wrapped up in the day-to-day trivialities that we sometimes lose sight of the big picture. In the millennial time scale, the things we all worry about every day end up amounting to a big pile of nothing.

Ten millennia ago, humans were painting on cave walls and hunting with spears. Five thousand years ago, we started writing things down and building the pyramids. And then came the parade of great thinkers who have changed our world and our lives, from Herodotus, Aristotle and Confucius to Michelangelo, da Vinci and Newton — and even on to folks like Jefferson, Edison, Einstein and Jobs.

Human beings have been supremely blessed with ingenuity. We have solved many seemingly insurmountable problems over our short time on this planet. So why can’t we envision a future, 10,000 years hence, when we can provide enough food for everyone — when disease has been eradicated, our precious environment has been preserved, and when we can resolve our conflicts in a manner that does not involve killing one another?

Make our stand

Now, I’ll admit this much: I’m an optimist. I’ve always been a glass-half-full kind of guy. But if you’re a parent, I think you have to be an optimist, at least to some degree. Otherwise, why would you bring children into a world with no future?

Which takes me back to Voyager 1.

In 1990, the little spacecraft beamed back an image of our planet from 3.7 billion miles away. In the photo, our planet was a tiny blue dot on an image of the solar system — occupying a single pixel. The late astronomer Carl Sagan, pontificating on that image, said, “the Earth is the only world known, so far, to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species can migrate. Like it or not, the Earth is where we make our stand. The distant image of our tiny blue world ... underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we’ve ever known.”

Which is why I’m betting heavily on the Clock of the Long Now. As, indeed, we all should. We owe that bet to ourselves.

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