

Futurist offers peek into society's crystal ball



Photo by John Widder

Futurist Burke Raymond says society is leaving the industrial age and entering the information age, which will spell decreased emphasis on organizations and increased importance on individuals.

By Michael Doke
Of the Emerald

Looking into the future is no longer a trick of gypsies and crystal balls, but a real concern for society, said Burke Raymond, a Portland futurist consultant, Monday at the Valley River Inn.

Future decisions must not be based on past trends, Raymond said. Society is moving away from the hierarchical industrial age toward the "information age," a period of more open communication.

"It is our option, and duty, to choose the future we want," said Raymond, a consultant with the firm of Burke, Roth and Associates.

"Choices we do not have the courage to make could spell the end of human history.

"World institutions, like governments, are frozen," Raymond told officials at an annual meeting of the Oregon Public Health Association and the Conference of Local Health.

"We cannot rely on governments for control. We, the people,

must rely on ourselves to create society," he said.

Individuals are more important than organizations in the new age. Therefore, the need for expression becomes much more evident, he said.

The new age will stress entrepreneurship, and the accumulation of capital will lose its prominence, he said.

Knowledge will become the new raw material of the information era. It is the single most important development individuals can have, Raymond said. In an age where information comes quickly, shared knowledge will benefit everyone.

Conventional social structure will disband along with decentralization, Raymond said. Organizations based on the hierarchy model cannot survive this transition.

Movement into the new era will affect society's driving forces, including values, learning, health, economics, governance and technology, he said.

The overriding concern of the future, Raymond said, is the "very real prospect of a nuclear war." Arms buildup is a holdover from the industrial age, he said.

Raymond called the peace movement the most important cause today because people are taking charge of their own destiny, thereby strengthening society.

The women's movement is another strong sociological force that is changing values, Raymond said.

Learning becomes more important in the information age, too, he said. Instead of a time-frame structure where learning ends at a set age, education becomes a lifelong pursuit.

Raymond noted that the average age of college students is increasing. More professional people are heading back to the classroom. And given the chance to participate in the system more, high school students become more active with studies.

Health concerns are moving from repair-oriented service to preventative medicine. Physical fitness' increasing popularity is one sign of this, Raymond said.

"However, an increase in physical awareness has grave consequences for the established medical institutions," he said. A trend toward higher drug dependency continues.

Economics and working attitudes are changing as well, Raymond said. Full consumption means full employment but dwindling resources. Again, Raymond cited knowledge as the "infinite solution."

Governments will have a smaller role in the information age and soon it will be "absurd" for leaders to think they can make decisions without consulting the public, Raymond said.

"We will have information just as fast as they will. This will mean real democracy," he said.

Finally, technological advances will affect society profoundly, Raymond said. Computers and robots are the issues of the 1980s, while genetic engineering will be the concern of the 1990s.

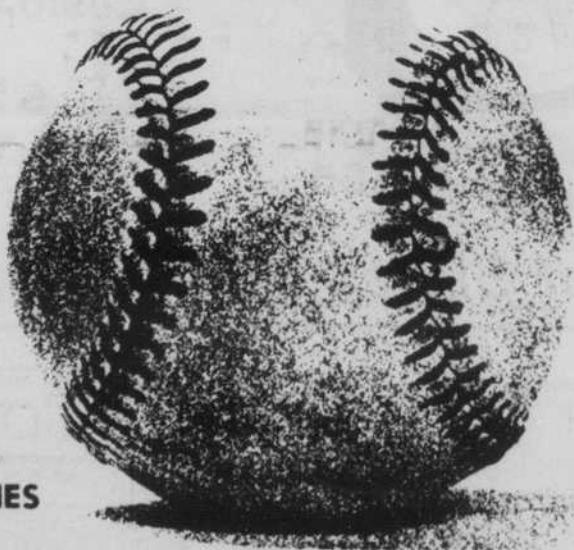
"The ability to make changes in DNA will be a reality. Birth defects will be curbed. Real decisions will have to be made on sex and race quotas," he said.

By moving toward education and medical research, Oregon's economy would benefit, Raymond said. High-technology soon will be passe.

"The choices of the future are not clear. The ground continues to move. But we do control our own destiny and we must not be passive."

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