

# APPROACHING THE MILLENNIUM

"Things are more like they are now than they have ever been before."  
 — Bathroom graffiti,  
 Uniontown Cafe, Astoria, Ore.

The year 2000 looms like a large strange planet over our horizon and as it irresistibly approaches we cannot decipher the characteristics of its surface. We look toward the millennium in fearful anticipation, numb from too much change too quickly. Modern life is too complicated and threatening and every life, rich and poor, is a Gordian knot. We are afraid of the future, not only because of our grim perception that we have seriously injured our home planet, we have also seen most of the familiar guideposts continually ripped away and we are perplexed about what is next.

A millennium is an awesome thought. It hints at worlds that are foreign and people we do not recognize, in particular ourselves seen opaquely, moving through an unrecognizable environment. A millennium invokes old prophecies; we imagine it as a separate dimension, an unexplored rim of consciousness — yet we will cross into it as if it is the next moment, which in ten years it will be.

Our major fear is that we will destroy ourselves with our nuclear weapons. The world was scheduled to end at the first millennium of our era and we approach 2000 with an identical apocalyptic script, with the exception that we have developed the means to accomplish what the ancient prophecy continues to incite.

A paradox that underlies history is that the eras of greatest creativity and discovery are also the most dangerous. The forty-five years since the end of World War II are unparalleled in the advances of knowledge and productivity, comparable to the entirety of the previous ten millennia, and we have consequently structured technologies that are destroying us even as our civilization owes its existence to them. Seers from government and industry patronize us with visions of increasing affluence and certain, virtually painless technological solutions to deadly problems caused by technology. The assumption is that the haves will have more and be able to amuse themselves to death. It is our irony that in a world in which half of its human population is threatened with death each day because it has hardly enough with which to survive, the portion that has much more than it should is strangling on the wastes of its affluence.

The 1980s were years of intellectual reversion, of savage descent to public ignorance and intolerance, which are generally present but not always given the forum or respect of recent years. We pay serious, almost morbid attention to the pathological pieties and simplicities of religious zealots, racial supremacists and far-right ideologues who act at the extreme edge of our anxieties and reduce the national dialogue to a medieval level. Underneath the meanness and bellicosity that signify our cultural regression is a plea to slow down the lunge of technological disruption, a refusal of the nihilistic vision of the future that the popular culture visually and noisily embraces. The feeling is that the culture has moved off the track of its history, that it moves too quickly for anything to have much significance; the majority carreen along as if nothing will stick to them or be affected by them.

The mechanization of culture while alleviating the dependence on muscle has underestimated and disregarded the aspirations and emotions of biological beings who do not wish to be defined as economic or utilitarian units. The mass upsurge in religion and subsequent lateral involvement in personal salvation is a defense against a world that overpowers and humiliates the individual person.

It takes a long time to throw off obsolescent philosophies and ways of viewing the world. The salvation of our bodies and souls does not lie in elegant mythological solutions nor is ascension to the clouds the reward of a life spent on one's knees. We are at a point in our evolution in which we ought to realize that everything is continually in transition, that ideas and institutions change and wear away with the same consistency as mountain ranges. Space exploration has significantly altered perceptions of Earth and has begun changes within its civilizations that are remaking society and drawing the majority of us reluctantly from personal pasts we wish to burrow into like comfortable sofas. The computer redesigns society rapidly and incompletely. Gene-splitting, recombinant DNA, invented and patented life-forms — these human tamperings with the secrets of life frighten the majority more than ideological evolution.

Though we are inclined to measure progress through technical achievement it should be at least as important to concentrate on the contradictory evolution of political freedom and the slow development



FRANCISCO GOYA, "COLOSSUS"

of a world civilization. Marx anticipated such a civilization in the last century, the two world wars made it almost impossible to resist in this century. The great contradiction lies with the rights of individuals and minorities, and with former colonies and subject nations that have finally thrown off foreign dominance and wish to reassert their sense of nationalism as separate and independent peoples.

Nuclear power, which is the fortress of nationalism, has rendered it obsolete. Nationalism, capitalism, democracy and communism are no more than parts of a process of human political development; passing fashions that are evolving into something else. Ideals, which are usually expressions of concern people have about the welfare of others, develop into ideologies that separate them as enemies. Ideologies do not translate well into realities. Governments generally violate their charters, and no matter how they wish to be considered, are most often oppressive to their populations and aggressive with their neighbors. Political rights or liberties won by one generation are usually eroded by successors who take them for granted without realizing how rare and necessary they are. Calculated fears of enemies leads to abrogation of civil liberties. Dialogue succumbs to what is safe to say or think. Demagogues thrive in atmospheres of fear and despair: without the cooperation of the populations they oppress they would have no power.

As we warp into the 21st century we should remember that at the center of the century we are departing, at its very heart, is the war that even in an era of secular modernism and passive morality exposed the true evil of humanity's ambiguity. Propelled by increasing capacity for intellectual ferment and rapid, bewildering social and technological change, a reaction of violence and murder on an unprecedented scale tore apart the modern psyche, which has not recovered. At the core of our century are the death camps: those horrible names that will always cause a shudder in history. Auschwitz. Belsen-Belsen. Triblinka.

We must begin to pay attention to consequences, to remember now and then that the morning cup of coffee perpetuates the economic slavery of a continent, that the excess food we waste contributes to the starvation of millions, and a charitable scrap or two thrown to the hungry does not relieve the causes of their hunger. We cannot afford any longer to blur truth or approach hard realities obliquely. We must change our definitions: tyranny is tyranny, left or right, murder and terrorism have no other definitions whether initiated by huge war machines or small groups of amateurs. We must accept responsibility for the ravaging of our planet and for the enormous contradictions between equality and wealth. We should learn that our aggression and carelessness will probably obliterate us and remove our species from a history we are only beginning to comprehend. We should not allow our anxieties about that comprehension destroy us.

We should listen to quieter voices we seldom hear over the uproar, friendly voices that guarantee difficult times ahead and warn us that we need each other to get there from here. We are alone together in the dark and each of us will inescapably die.

We imperil the future when we lose faith in it. We endanger our descendants when we try to hide our evasive lives in the vanished worlds of our ancestors. No single human can avoid death by retreating into a personal past and a society cannot survive through empty homage to a fancied simpler period or more glorious age. Romanticizing the past inhibits the insights that history provides and dissolves the strength of will necessary to converge with the future.

It really makes little sense to fear the future. It is where we will spend the rest of our lives. Every moment is new, like waves from an immense ocean, each second an uncertainty unexplored and doubtful and as instantly history, irretrievable except in memory and myth.

Arthur Rimbaud wrote, "At dawn, armed with burning patience, we shall enter the splendid cities." And Samuel Beckett: "You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."

— MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

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