

APPROACHING

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

"The evolutionary goal of our species is to escape the planet before the sun explodes."

~Jean-Francois Lyotard

Our age nears the orbit of the year 2000. We have come a long journey, not simply across a handful of centuries but nearly two millennia of an epoch. The Trillennium shines in front of us in glowing diffusion, only five years away.

The year 2000 looms like a large 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 evokes old prophecies; apocalyptic cults that believe the end of history is at hand flourish the closer we approach the Millennium. The idea of a Millennium has a powerful affect on the human mind. We sly calculators of time 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 five years it will be.

We are nearly finished with the 20th century. It lies behind our surge toward the next Millennium like a huge junkyard, strewn with rubble of momentary significance. Our collective angst in this last gasp of this bloodiest of centuries is world suicide brought on by the conflict of our parallel tendencies of comfort and murder. 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 ancient prophecy continues to incite.

The 20th century seems to end where it began, as if the intervening decades thwarted natural progression. The Balkans are in uproar, which 81 years ago precipitated the first of two world wars. Czarist Russia was in revolt in the early 1900s culminating in 74 years of historical and humanistic retrogression, final collapse and breakup into minor republics that post-Leninist/ Stalinist Russia violently attempts to dominate in the manner of the czars. China, after almost a century of civil war, invasion, revolution and communist repression is ready to reawaken. Japan is once more rising as a foremost world power, which was seriously set back when neo-samurai militarists forced the nation into war and absolute defeat assisted by the unleashing of atomic fission upon two of its cities that opened the Nuclear Age 50 years ago this summer. Immigration swelled to unimagined proportions in the United States in the years surrounding the change of centuries, then from the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, now after a long recess an endless stream from Asia, the Caribbean, Central America and Mexico. Women's rights scored significant progress at the beginning of this century, with the vote finally granted in 1920. As with immigration, women's struggle for equality sagged during the century's middle years but has resurged at *fin de siècle*. Sexual equality looms just offstage, revealed not by theatrical lightning bolts but by a lessening shadow as time lights our approach.

Our past grips the present grimly, wickedly. We are out of phase. We sense that we have either lost control or are out of control. It used to be said that Americans raced into the future at 90-mph while staring into a rearview mirror. Now we stare tremblingly ahead as our plunge into the next century increases its velocity. "The tangible rests precariously upon the untouched and the ungrasped," John Dewey wrote; but Brendan Gill knows that "We feel better when we find ourselves in the presence of the past, with its evidence of the mingled aspirations and disappointments of our ancestors." We resist change though it drags us along like a corpse. Change percolates chaos.

We are creatures of habit and inspiration, held in fluid balance on a perpetual edge of the present. Instants swarm at us like particles and protons; or like locusts, flailing against us, wearing us away. We bring to each instant a baggage of tradition and experience and a worry about death. We grasp the passing moment, impose our past upon it and reel into the next.



FRANCISCO GOYA, COLOSSUS

We are part of a progression moving into the past. "We are all tenants of time," Thomas Flanagan wrote, "and whatever it is that reminds us, that thing we will convict as a murderer, like the messenger bringing bad tidings."

Our fear is that we are being forcibly propelled into an unknown future in which we will not recognize ourselves. A future worldwide civilization of immense promise and terror is presented. Gene splitting, recombinant DNA, invented and patented lifeforms — these human tamperings with the secrets of life frighten the majority of us more than the continuing possibility of nuclear obliteration.

The glaciers are in retreat. The dinosaurs are dead. *Homo sapiens sapiens* is ascendant and covers the planet like flies on a peach. Our bodies are depicted as ugly and filled with the rot of lust and sin yet we entwine in secular frenzy, breeding so recklessly that we have overrun Earth in greater numbers than rats, ravaging and plundering until nothing much will be left for anything. We treat Earth like a junky slapping his mother around for drug money. We might have already fixed our date for extinction — or at least us as we recognize ourselves. The past half-century of the Nuclear Age has cooked radioactivity into our genes in excess to the ratio that propelled our rapid evolution. Perhaps we have fatally weakened the strain with the cumulative effects of radiation, pollution, pesticides and delayed childbirth. It might seem civilized to extend adolescence; however, humanity has been most fertile during its relatively short

presence on Earth during its teenaged years. We might be squandering essential genetic potency by socially mating beyond our prime. In other words, a pregnant unwed teenaged girl on welfare might produce a more vital child than yuppie parents who wait until their third decade to produce progeny.

The melting of the Cold War, the disintegration of Soviet Russia and its empire, the unification of Western Europe and the reunification of Germany create newer problems than those that have obsessed us the past 50 years. Or more to the point, they do not resolve the looming shadow of the world's runaway population. How to feed, house and educate several billions more; the rise of incredibly dense megacities in the third world in which most of the new populations will grow; the deforestation of most of the remaining forests of the world to feed and house them; the global migrations of the overcrowded poor from East to West; the resistance of wealthy nations to the floods of impoverished immigrants whose swarms across the planet are only beginning — if the principle powers cannot adequately integrate their resources to meet these problems then calamity must surely result. We have no other place to go than our home planet which we are rapidly making uninhabitable, sucking it dry and poisoning its capability of sustaining not only humanity but every other resource which sustains us.

French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard told students at the University of Minnesota in 1987 that the evolutionary goal of humanity was to get off Earth before the sun novas: Perhaps

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