

The Clock of the Long Now: Whatever Happened to the Future?

Rev. Dr. David Breeden, September 20, 2009

APOCALYPSE

The sounding of the shofar announces the “head of the year,” the Jewish celebration of the new year. Rosh Hashanah begins the high holy days that culminate in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which occurs next Sunday. The sounding of the shofar announces the judgment of God and foreshadows the Last Trump that will sound when the messiah comes. The sound of the shofar brought down the walls of Jericho, and, while mainstream Judaism now considers the Final Trump metaphorical, the tradition came into Christianity and Islam as the sound that will begin the end of the world.

All three of the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—teach that an end of the world will come. Though various sects exist with varied ideas about what The End will entail, the basic idea is that this world is a stage on which human history gets acted out, and that this human drama will come to an end in a grand sort of way. (All three Abrahamic faiths agree that it is the human that matters most in this End.)

I grew up in a religious tradition that believes the end is coming . . . and soon: “The End is near!” This tradition is more recent than many realize. It goes back to an Anglo-Irish preacher named John Nelson Darby, who preached that a “rapture” will occur, in which all believers will be taken into heaven. After this rapture, non-believers will be left to tough out a time called The Tribulation. This time will end in a conflagration

called Armageddon, in which the forces of good and evil will battle to the bitter end, good winning out. At that point Jesus will rule the earth for a thousand years, and then all will ascend into heaven.

I THINK I have that right. Various ideas have been added in the years since Darby came up with the idea. And, frankly, my church concentrated on the Rapture and the Tribulation that would follow, not the ensuing scenarios, because the point was to scare us into being ready for the Rapture, so we could get the heck out of Dodge before the terrible Time of Tribulation.

I hasten to add that not all Christian denominations teach this scenario. As a matter of fact, most do not. Most Christian theologians and scholars are convinced that the book of Revelations, the book in which most of the texts used to predict the End Times appears, is really about the fall of the Roman Empire, in a cosmic payback for its cruelty to the early Christian movement. John Darby and his minions, however, do not see it that way. They see the Book of Revelations as a prophecy for the future.

Or, a prophecy coming true right now—which creates problems. When I was young, End-of-Timers taught that the great enemy of Revelation—Gog and Magog—was the Soviet Union, and so any opposition to nuclear proliferation and the arms race was clearly un-Christian, because we had to be prepared to fight Armageddon. Such was the logic of the time. When I was young, sometimes the Russian leader was the Antichrist, and sometimes it was the Pope—according to the prejudices of the

preacher. Nowadays the great enemy is Islam, and so any atrocity is justified. (And perhaps you've heard that some Evangelicals believe that Obama is the Antichrist.)

(One problem with this theory is that in some Islamic traditions it is Jesus Himself who leads the forces of good, which clearly includes Muslims. Hmmm. Prophecy and prejudice get tricky. . .)

The dangerous side of this thinking is that there are fringe elements among Jews, Christians, and Muslims who believe that bringing on The End is a fine idea, even God's will. Sometimes I am baffled as to why anyone would believe that, until I remind myself that it is somehow comforting to believe that the time in which we live is significant and unique, and that we are locked in a cosmic battle with God on our side.

And so you see one kind of Apocalypse. The downside is what such beliefs do to the human future and to the future of our earth.

THE SCARY NUMBERS

There is another vision of Apocalypse: Deforestation, desertification, pollution, climate change. . .

The amount of water now used for irrigation on our planet exceeds the amount naturally replenished by nature. Hence, water tables are dropping rapidly. We have

now cut more than half of the post-Ice Age forests, most of that cutting having occurred since 1970. Some estimates indicate that the human population already exceeds the earth's carrying capacity by as much as forty percent.

<http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/121476.shtml>). If current trends in over-farming and deforestation continue, one third of the agricultural land on the African continent will become desert within forty years

<http://www.fao.org/desertification/default.asp?lang=en>). If that is the case, the situation in Darfur could become only the first in a series of genocides caused by dwindling natural resources.

Besides the lack of water, there's also the problem of rising water: Ten percent of the world's population currently live in areas that by the year 2100 will be under water <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/03/090310104742.htm>). And it's not just humans. At current rates, one-fifth of all living species will be gone within thirty years and half of all species now alive will be extinct in one hundred years

<http://www.well.com/~davidu/extinction.html>). I could go on. As you well know. To put it simply, the belief that current human good—in the form of resource use and jobs—outweighs the future good of humanity, or the future good of the planet, and that idea is destroying both people and planet.

This is another sort of Apocalypse. Not a grand one in which people fly into the sky while militaristic saviors lead shining armies to victory over the forces of darkness, but one foretelling a slow de-plenishment of the quality of our lives and our world until

humanity disappears—a species that “coulda been a contender” but instead were not so well suited for survival as the rats, roaches, and house flies.

I, however, happen to believe that this slow, heat-death vision of the Apocalypse is just as misguided as the first vision I described. I happen to believe that humanity is . . . smarter than we look.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE FUTURE?

We have become cynical about the future, and with good reason. The old Monsanto House of the Future, at Disneyland’s Tomorrow Land, is a good case in point. The future, according to the 1950s, was all about plastic and applied technology—microwaves, picture phones, and big screen TVs. Well, we have achieved that future, and it’s not pretty.

The 1939 World’s Fair promised a future called “Democracity,” but we now happen to know that soon after the World’s Fair opened the world got not “Democracity” but the utter brutality of the Second World War. We have seen the terrible price that so-called progress extracts. We know that attempts to modernize nations often lead only to mass genocide, as happened in the Soviet Union and in China. All of our utopian dreams, it appears, lead to dystopia. Jetpacks or personal helicopters just don’t have the “wow factor” they once did. As the saying goes, “The future just ain’t what it used to be.” It is considerably easier to think of Apocalypse than flourishing.

THE CLOCK

Inventor William Daniel Hillis began talking about building a clock that would last ten thousand years back in the 1980s. Hillis said,

When I was a child, people used to talk about what would happen by the year 2000. Now, thirty years later, they still talk about what will happen by the year 2000. The future has been shrinking by one year per year for my entire life.

Hillis went on to propose a

mechanical clock, powered by seasonal temperature changes. It ticks once a year, bongs once a century, and the cuckoo comes out every millennium.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W. Daniel Hillis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._Daniel_Hillis)

Hillis founded The Long Now Foundation which,

hopes to provide counterpoint to today's "faster/cheaper" mind set and promote "slower/better" thinking. We hope to creatively foster responsibility in the framework of the next 10,000 years.

Why 10,000 years? Because that is roughly the age of the oldest human artifacts. The website goes on to explain:

Civilization is revving itself into a pathologically short attention span. The trend might be coming from the acceleration of technology, the short-horizon perspective of market-driven economics, the next-election perspective of democracies, or the distractions of personal multi-tasking. All are on the increase. Some sort of balancing corrective to the short-sightedness is needed—some mechanism or myth which encourages the long view and the taking of long-term responsibility, where 'long-term' is measured at least in centuries. Long Now proposes both a mechanism and a myth.

I'm not a member of the Long Now Foundation. And I'm not sure that the Clock of the Long Now will ever actually be built. That's not the point, though. The point is to get us thinking in longer terms and seeking solutions to long-term problems, such as how to power a clock that will last 10,000 years—no, it can't be atomic, that is too inaccurate. And what do we make it out of? And where do we put it? The clock itself is not as important as the imagination needed to think about such a thing.

We know this conundrum from our own experience. Every time we buy a consumer good—from a house to a car to a head of lettuce—we are faced with a conundrum: Faster, cheaper or slower, better? "Slower, better" is considerably more expensive. "Organic" costs dollars. "Local" costs dollars. "Union made" costs dollars. "Green" costs dollars. And so all around us are the ugly heaps of cheaper, faster. And leaky and corroded and poisoned and unsustainable.

But where is the money for slower, better going to come from? Who has the time to think about such things?

But let's take the time: Our congregation has been in this community since 1966. Unitarian Universalism has been around since 1961. Universalism has been in this country since before the Revolution and Unitarianism has been around since the 1820s. No one is alive from then. But the IDEAS are alive, and they are ideas this community needs. And will need in a hundred years. And five hundred. . . What about a thousand? There are village churches in Europe that have been in continuous use for over a thousand years. What will THIS church look like in a thousand years? And five thousand years. And ten thousand.

The oldest church in our denomination also happens to be the oldest church in continuous operation in the United States—the Plymouth, Massachusetts First Parish Church founded by the Pilgrims in 1620. No, the congregants who went to that church this morning don't believe what our Pilgrim and Puritan forebears believed, and no, most UUs today are not even related to those original settlers, yet our ideas, especially when it comes to making covenantal agreements as to how to act in relation to one other, still informs our thinking and their belief in liberty of conscience, still informs our thinking today. That church in Plymouth is pushin' four hundred years old.

This fellowship is pushin' fifty. Those who were here in 1966 probably aren't feeling quite as spry today. (I know I don't feel as spry as I did in 1966!) But the IDEAS and the

spirit of Unitarian Universalism is MORE vital today than in 1966. –Think of the good done by this fellowship; think of the wrongs righted; the hurts healed; the spirits lifted; the witness to progressive thinking. This fellowship has added good to this community and to the world. That’s why having a five year plan is great, but we need a fifty year plan; and a five hundred; and a five thousand, and a ten thousand.

Because, IF humanity exists in ten thousand years, it will be partly because of the vision we have NOW.

Think about it: The ruins of Babylon are roughly five thousand years old. That’s about the age of the oldest of the pyramids, too. Before that, we humans had learned not only to survive but to thrive on the savannah of Africa. We learned to bury gourds filled with water, so that we could hunt far out into the desert. We learned to hunt animals that were stronger and faster than we were by cooperating and using language. We learned to domesticate animals and grains so that we could gather into cities and thus increase our thinking by sharing expertise with larger and larger numbers of people. Unfortunately, we also learned lessons such as nationalism and xenophobia and speciesism. Unfortunately, we learned the power of collective delusion. And we learned to hold on to old beliefs long after their usefulness had gone. Somehow we deluded ourselves into thinking that killing a human being is an act of evil punishable by law but destroying a river or a species is fine and dandy. All in a day’s work. This is the sort of learning that must be un-learned if we are to exist for another 10,000 years.

And we Unitarian Universalists are part of that human project. We are not the only religious group in this community that envisions another way of being, but we are leaders in the creation and dissemination of new thinking. If this community is here in a thousand years, and five thousand, and ten thousand, we will be partly responsible. Unitarian Universalism is here to insist that we human beings can think across gender, racial, economic, and political boundaries. And across centuries and even millennia. We are here to insist that we human beings CAN free ourselves of old prejudices and comforting but dangerous delusions.

We human beings have yet to hear the last trumpet. We have thought of the Clock of the Long Now. We can build it. We as a species can hear it bong over the centuries and watch the cuckoo coming out ten millennia from now. What it takes is getting down to it. . . NOW, which is the only time in the Long Now that there will ever be.

For Further Reflection

<http://www.longnow.org/about/>