

What is our place in the long term?

by Ralph C. Martin

When I was hospitalized for an injury as a teen aged farm boy and was forced to miss not only breakfast but also lunch, the long term was counted in plodding minutes until supper appeared. Now, with a tad more patience, I'm inclined to consider my lifetime, as a long term.

However, my indigenous friends talk about knowing our place within the perspective of seven generations before us and another seven generations, after we walk on Earth. I can look back to my ancestors, Maria and David Martin, who settled near Conestogo, Ontario, seven generations ago. Will I bequeath a small fraction of the enduring value they left our family, to my descendants, seven generations from now?

Geologists assess the long term in epochs and while the Holocene of the last 10,000 years was officially the most recent, some ecologists are re-evaluating. They argue that humans with our inordinate impact of the industrial revolution, in the last few centuries, have delineated the Anthropocene as the current epoch in the Quaternary period of the Cenozoic era.

The ultimate long term thinker, Thomas Berry, was in his sixties, when many retire, as he began telling the story of all stories, the Universe Story. As an eco-theologian he was also very aware of the scientific explanations for the evolution of stars and planets, and eventually, life on Earth.

In the context of 13 billion years, the arrival of humans about 5 million years ago is less than 0.04 percent of the storyline. "Nevertheless," Thomas would say while leaning forward, "we have the honour of consciously reflecting on the numinous beauty of our Universe, our Earth and our relations with all Creation." We are truly privileged to be able to reflect about what has happened and where we are now and how we may improve our relational being.

I vividly recall Thomas explaining how we can see ourselves at this time in the Universe Story. With arms outstretched he said "We are at a Y in the road and can choose to stay on the Technozoic path" while he nodded to one hand "or we could choose the Ecozoic path," with a look at his other hand. "Wait a minute" I remember thinking. "The last 200 years of industrialization or his Technozoic are far short of a geological era." It was then that he stressed the impact on Earth of the very brief Technozoic being similar to that of previous elongated geological eras.

We live and make decisions in the short term with respect to our place in the long term. The short term can seem excruciatingly long as we face life changing decisions within moments. However, big decisions apparently made on a dime are based on a lifetime of practiced values and awareness (or not) of our place in the span of time.

In the delightful movie, *The Hundred-Foot Journey*, Madame Mallory who expresses her total dedication to an exquisite life in her finely tuned, Michelin starred, French restaurant, asks her promising Indian trainee why he had momentarily added a few extra spices and changed a recipe that was 200 years old. Hassan with all the confidence of his ingrained heritage and precise alertness to his present situation, softly replied, “maybe 200 years is long enough.”

Our full presence is required, here and now, to appreciate where we are in the arch of history. Folks who act astutely in the short term, anticipate our real needs for the long term.

Ecological theory describes r-strategists and k-strategists. R-strategists colonize new niches rapidly and their population grows exponentially. When the population of r-strategists gets too high for available resources, it crashes. In contrast, k-strategists invest in stability and their population rises to a sustainable carrying capacity and then hovers around it. By adjusting to their resource carrying capacity more of them survive longer.

Are humans r-strategists or k-strategists? The human population did not reach 1 billion until 1830. Then it doubled relatively quickly within 100 years. The next doubling to 4 billion, by 1975, took only 45 years. Had the exponential growth trend continued our population would have broken through 8 billion, by 1997. However, it is just over 7 billion, indicating a slowing growth rate. Does this mean we can avoid the crash and achieve a sustainable population? Can we decrease consumption per person?

It is well known that when women of child bearing age have more education they tend to have fewer children. Furthermore, an increasing number of people are re-evaluating their quality of life and realizing that consumption and waste may not improve it, much less sustain it.

The challenge for each individual is to know short term distracting trends for what they are and to change practices and habits, as awareness sharpens. Such changes today can be significant in the context of the biosphere from which we emerged and on which we will continue to depend.

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