

Diabologic: Time Steps -- From Sundials to the Long Now

by Frank Dolinar

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." -- George Santayana

Tick... Tock... Tick... Tock...

As Autumn progresses, the days get shorter, sunlight comes later each morning – and, of course, the alarm clock seems to intrude that much earlier. We think of time and seasons, past and future.

Throughout history, each culture has had its own perception of time and history. Modern Western culture is an all-too-disposable society, a fleeting moment in which history is typically ignored or, if acknowledged, not generally thought to be relevant.

In the United States, many people have the perception that history began with Columbus. A trip to England some years ago pretty thoroughly disabused me of that notion. If centuries old cathedrals and two thousand year old Roman ruins weren't enough, Stonehenge certainly delivered a resounding argument.

Standing on Salisbury Plain in southern England, on a cold, windy, rainy day in 1989, I contemplated Stonehenge. I wondered how and why it had been built, marveling at its age and continued existence. The popular analysis that Stonehenge is a constructed calendar tied to the annual cycle of the positions of the sun's risings and settings is compelling. It forces us to recognize how perceptive those ancient people were and how well they built. Nearly 5000 years old, Stonehenge still stands, still performs its task, and still confounds the modern world.

The evolution of clocks has made it possible, today, to subdivide nanoseconds. Such precision is critical for navigation on land, sea, or in space. It makes the Global Positioning System possible.

I sometimes think that the way we conceptualize and measure time, and all the attendant social implications, has provided us with more shackles than freedoms. Cell phones and other wireless tech have made it progressively more difficult to leave the work behind when we leave the office. We seem to have lost track of the larger increments of time or the more important reasons for living our lives. We have lost an appreciation of history and seem unwilling to conceive a vision for the future.

The era of digital to store our records is also causing us to lose the permanence of written documents that tell us more than what is conveyed by the words and numbers inscribed upon them. The paper, ink, type font, and binding are all eloquent evidence of the time, place, and people who created the document.

Worse, as technology continues to provide us with its own cycles of new and different ways to store more data, and to do so in less physical space, we abandon not only the older mechanisms for recording the documents, but we abandon many of the documents themselves -- documents that are not transcribed to the new media.

Much of business today is concerned only with the immediate goal, at the least expense, and the most profit -- every quarter -- with concept of long-term planning little more than a rumor. Seldom do we see real quality in a product or service -- and when we do it's probably really expensive. But we all can identify examples of the breed. No one questions whether a Rolls-Royce, for example, is worth the price.

There is evidence, however, of some thinking which runs counter to this "more, more; faster, faster" trend. A particularly striking example is the Long Now Foundation.

"The Long Now Foundation (<http://www.longnow.org/>) was established in 01996* to develop the Clock and Library projects, as well as to become the seed of a very long term cultural institution. The Long Now Foundation 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." (From the Long Now Foundation website.) [* The Foundation uses 5 digits for the year. See the website for info.]

Here's a description of the two projects:

- The 'Long Clock' project is described in an article in the November 2005 issue of Discover magazine. The article states, "*..it is designed to do something no clock has ever been conceived to do – run with perfect accuracy for 10,000 years.*" Talk about long-term thinking.
- The 'Long Library' project is described (quoting from the Long Now Foundation's website) as:
"In a time of accelerating technology, accelerating history, and a dangerous shortening of civilization's attention span, the role of libraries becomes deeper than ever. Libraries need to be rethought in the new context and in the light of civilization's now-global and very long-term responsibilities. Some new initiatives need to be set in motion. According to Stewart Brand, co-chairman of the Long Now board, "We want to jump-start some serious, collaborative thinking about how to see information -- the real narrative of civilization -- in very long-term ways. We're talking in part about technology, but it goes much deeper, right to the root of why we are here, what we're doing, and what kind of legacy do we want to leave to our descendents and to their successors."

Perhaps the most important question is "How will the future remember us?"

It's a question with many facets.