A CHANGE OF BIBLICAL PROPORTIONS

BY

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I've begun to believe that modern technological development represents change of Biblical proportions. It's probably not as dramatic as the lion and the lamb laying together, but hyperbole gets attention.

Even those of us who can not quote Scripture are sure we remember Old Testament passages referring to long-lived prophets and patriarchs. Living hundreds of years, it's far fetched by most standards. It was, however, enough to set off many a search for the elixir that would provide such longevity. After all, Ponce de Leon didn't claim he'd found the Fountain of Wisdom. I think that technology, commencing with the industrial revolution but accelerating through the information revolution, has uncovered what Ponce did not: eternal youth.

Consider our forefathers and mothers living near the end of the 19th-century: they often lived without straying 20 miles from the place where they arrived on the planet. Then, sixty-odd years later, they departed from within that perimeter. Since then, we've added a few expected years to our term on this rock. Nothing to enhance a Bible though. If, however, we measure life not as *time served* but rather as *experience gained*, there is a much different story to be told.

Let's set 1901 or so as a baseline year on an experiential scale. The world is stable and the years pass like a martial parade. Seasons change, some are born, some die; life goes on. Sixty-some years pass with alarming regularity except that for the first third of the years strength, ability, knowledge, and interest arc upward followed by another 40 or so of slowly accelerating decline. Experience is primarily variations on a repeating theme.

Then came the automobile. Immediately the locus of geographic intimacy expanded dramatically. Radio and television came on, and air travel replaced the lumbering drudgery of ocean voyage, each bringing descriptions and visions of ways of life foreign to us into clear focus. These all shifted thinking further afield even more rapidly. Again the breadth of experience, albeit often vicarious, expanded for everyone—willingly or not. Even more than space exploration, it was personal computing and the information age it unleashed, taking everyone with a PC and access to the Internet for a tour of the world and cosmos, that geometrically expanded the range of sights, sounds, and experiences available to a broad swath of the modern world.

Aided by science and medicine, our living years have increased marginally in the past century, while relative experience has exploded. Against our *fin de siecle* experiential baseline, its probably fair to say that the magnitude of change and experience each person undergoes today—unwillingly, never mind ambitiously—is five or ten times greater. Engineers say that a ten-fold quantitative change, known as an order of magnitude, is a qualitative change. On that basis and scale, today we live lives of 300 to 700 years, making for a truly qualitative change to life. Now there's a lifetime of Biblical proportions.

Assuming importance on the half-life of computer technology, one question is how much faster and further can we go? I have no doubt that silicon will be replaced by something more conductive. So computers will make presently incomprehensible numbers of calculations per millisecond, opening the door to new and powerful applications of artificial intelligence. All of which will further ratchet up the speed at which we encounter and acquire unique experiences. An

experiential lifetime set against our 20th-century baseline could be a thousand years or more before 2020.

A next question is: despite the fact that the human mind makes calculations at a speed and in a way that artificial intelligence can not (yet) mimic, can we sustain the pace of these developments and magnitude of experience? Can a natural human being operate at an unnatural level? For how long? Our hardware has not evolved with the pace of work and experience: consider the number of stress- and travel-induced illnesses, coronary problems, and other assorted physical breakdowns that attack our fragile bodies. And, the software: what about the burnout, nervous breakdowns, and other habitual neurotic pathologies we develop to cope with the inescapable frenzy of our work and social environments?

Perhaps the pace and magnitude of experience is simple and Darwinian: the strong, as determined by ability to cope at higher operating speeds and greater rates of change, are being selected for the new information-based age. This would be like the development of the species (through the course of millions of years, mind you) from *Homo erectus* to *Homo sapiens*. Could we be at the cusp of an evolutionary change? Or are we simply setting ourselves up for another fall from Grace? Either way, it's change of Biblical proportions.

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