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Keeping Track Of Time -- Author Seeks To Create Clock/Library That Would Be Running And Usable In The Next 10,000 Years

By David Williams
Special To The Seattle Times

-------------------------------- "The Clock of the Long Now: Time and Responsibility, the Ideas Behind the World's Slowest Computer" Stewart Brand will discuss his book, "The Clock of the Long Now: Time and Responsibility, the Ideas Behind the World's Slowest Computer" at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Third Place Books, 17171 Bothell Way N.E., Lake Forest Park. Information: 206-366-3333. --------------------------------

We know that the last ice age ended roughly 10,000 years ago. The record of this climatic change has been preserved in ice cores, pack-rat middens and glacial debris. Over the past few decades, scientists have used this data like a library to assemble a picture of what our planet was like at the dawn of agriculture and civilization. We are fortunate that the information needed to put together a description of this time period was left in such indelible sources.

Will a civilization 10,000 years in the future be able to write a story about our society, when data that was produced on computers as recently as 1982 is no longer readable? Do we even care what these future generations will know about us when many people can barely think beyond their next paycheck? Why worry about the future when the present is moving so quickly? For that matter, why should we look to the past, since we cannot change it?

For Stewart Brand, the answer to all these questions revolves around deep time, which can be defined as taking a long-term view of the planet and realizing that we have a long-term responsibility to it. Brand believes that we need to move beyond thinking about "now" as consisting of this week and maybe last week. He writes: "The trick is learning how to treat the last ten thousand years as if it were last week, and the next ten thousand as if it were next week."

To meet this goal, Brand, who was founder and editor of the Whole Earth Catalog and founder of The WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), has teamed up with Daniel Hillis, who pioneered the concept of parallel computing used in most supercomputers, avant-garde musician Brian Eno, and Esther Dyson, creator and editor of Release 1.0, the premier computer industry newsletter, to create a Clock and Library that will be running and useable for the next 10,000 years. The group is organized under the aegis of The Long Now Foundation.

Although Brand's new book on the project is titled "The Clock of the Long Now: Time and Responsibility, the Ideas Behind the World's Slowest Computer" (Basic Books, $22), only a few chapters focus on the Clock/Library itself (the design of the clock is still under discussion). Most address the ideological and practical benefits to our culture of taking a long view of time, both forward and backward. Brand cites the burning of libraries as a particularly reprehensible example of trying to eliminate the past. He describes the failures of Hitler and of China's first emperor, Shih Huang-ti, both of whom burned books and planned for long-lived dynasties. Shih Huang-ti's dynasty lasted a mere 15 years, while Hitler's was even shorter.

On the other hand, a 10,000-year Clock/Library will collect the information that allows people to constantly learn from their past. In Brand's view, collecting the data also forces people to take responsibility for their future and ensures the long-lasting success of a project.

Brand sums up his thinking with the simple phrase that bad things happen fast - good things happen slow. We could and can solve many of the great problems of society, such as widespread hunger, ethnic conflict or loss of biodiversity, if we choose to think about them on a multigenerational time scale instead of trying a new fix with each change in fashion or popularity.

The book is unusual in that it encourages its readers to participate in the project. Brand realizes that an essential part of the Clock/Library is not its construction, but the dialogue fostered by those who are thinking in deep time. He encourages people to participate by going to the Foundation's Web site (www.longnow.org), where one can e-mail comments, read more about the founders, or even make a donation.

The book's essays don't add up to a complete ideological summation; instead, they are only Brand's contribution to the dialogue, which will certainly not end any time soon.