

Sip Coffee and Ponder the Year

10000

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Slow down. Ignore your phone. Drink something warm. Rescue Western civilization.

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The Interval (<http://theinterval.org/>), a bar, cafe, and museum located just outside Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, is the public access point for the Long Now Foundation, an organization dedicated to "providing a counterpoint to today's accelerating culture" by preserving and promoting sound human achievements, making long-term thinking "more common," and stretching the expected timeline of existence into the year 10000.

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The Interval is located in an area called Fort Mason (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Mason), a former military facility where warships docked; the piers served as a chief launching point for the Pacific fleet during World War II.

Now, like much of this part of San Francisco, it's a shopping and dining destination. There's a hostel, a park, a bike path, a good look at the wharves, and, across an open meadow, a sprawling vista of Bay Area life, one of the finest in a town rife with stunning views.



The Long Now is a military establishment of its own, a rallying place for a new kind of battle: the war against short-term thinking, against pillaging, consumption, destruction. Faulkner (http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1949/faulkner-speech.html) predicted man would survive and prevail because of the soul, “a spirit capable of compassion and

sacrifice and endurance.” Those three traits, listed loosely in the author’s Nobel acceptance speech, are in fact interlinked. The Interval’s mission is to widen the human aperture, to see the purpose of compassion and sacrifice: Our endurance depends upon it.

It is the most progressive of causes, signature Bay Area – and also, in a way, the city’s antithesis. Ever since the huge-and-getting-bigger tech world seized SF for a second time and didn’t let go, San Francisco seems preoccupied not just with the Near Now, the Right Now, but the Nano-Now. Tech’s (sales)forces are consumed by the desire to capitalize on the instant of search, the moment after a consumer realizes they want something and before they fulfill it.



Chief among the Long Now's tactics to reverse this trend is reimagining time itself, not as an illusion, but as a five digit number. That is, every date at the Long Now is measured out to the fifth digit. This year is 02015. The Interval's wifi password is Interval01996, to commemorate the foundation's first year.

On padded-leather stools, broken-in like the driver's seat in a Cali convertible, patrons of the Interval's cafe sit at a glass table rooted to an enormous chime (<http://blog.longnow.org/02014/03/06/chime-gen-table/>). Typical cafe sounds interrupt the quiet: grinding beans, tinkling glass, light conversation. Sigur Ros's untitled album (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXtmlO9hmKc>) constitutes today's soundtrack, lyrics in an alien future-tongue, a language yet to be christened.

Guests trickle in wearing lanyards from some nearby conference. Two female patrons compliment my choice of workspace. They've been strolling around, looking at the Interval's exhibits. We strike up a conversation about, what else, the weather, and before long, we're talking about the drought.

Drought. It's in the back of your mind, and right before your eyes, if you live in California. Every time you turn on a spigot, or take a shower longer than 20 seconds, you wreak environmental havoc. Five miles north or south of the city, on Highway 101, you see California's landscape degrade into something like Nevada.

"It's been going on my whole life," Heather, one of my companions, says of the disappearing water, the rise in temperatures.

"It's always been a problem in California," her friend Caroline adds. "Fresh water."

It might be the wrong time to bring it up, but I ask if either of

them think what the Long Now is trying to achieve, a 10,000-year calendar for mankind (beginning, of course, from the problematic date of 0, or 00000, AD), is possible.

“Will humankind last that long?”

“Of course not,” Caroline says. She’s a fit blonde with an indigo patch dyed into her snaking curls. “Emancipate Yourself” is tattooed on her inner wrist. Her and her friend are both photographers.

But, I say, what about the Mars colonization effort? Or the Moon? Further planets?

“The atmospheres are no good,” Heather says. “Breathing through a mask? That isn’t life.”

“And only the wealthy would survive,” Caroline finishes.

Is this what made Earth unique, worth not giving up on? That every man and woman, rich or poor, had the opportunity to achieve, versus some hand-picked set of winners? And is that now the case that the growing gulf between the two throws the purpose behind sustaining humankind into doubt—or, at least, into moral vexation?

Caroline says she’s been stopping by the Interval to see what’s on display for going on 10 years. “The inside has changed,” she says. The table we’re sitting at is a recent addition. “It used to be smaller, more like a museum. You’d see the clock, the exhibits, go to talks. Now it’s a place to consort. There’s a social aspect to it.”



They point out the passenger pigeons exhibit. Two pigeons, on loan from the Royal Ontario Museum, stand rigid in a glass case tucked under a spiral staircase that leads to the Long Now's offices.

Passenger pigeons, as you may know, are extinct. "But one of

the things this organization is doing,” Caroline says, “is Jurassic Park-ing those birds,” by which she means, taking the DNA from dead passenger pigeons and combining it with the gene pool of the existing carrier pigeon (<http://longnow.org/revive/de-extinction/2015/advances-in-avian-transgenics-a-follow-up-to-why-birds-are-a-challenge/>) to “de-extinct” the bird. Some day, maybe, a species will resuscitate us in similar fashion. Or maybe not.

We arrive now at the 10,000-year-clock (</article/6229-7-great-science-tourism-destinations-to-visit-while-you-still-can>). The Orrery, as it’s known, is another pinnacle image of the Foundation, an engineering marvel designed to tick for 7,000-and-change more years while humankind survives.



There have been three working prototypes. This one, currently in the Interval's main entrance, uses rotating planets to mark the time. There's only one problem: Unlike in a normal clock, you can't see time tick by. But that's the point: To remind the bearer that time moves slowly, that despite a culture and economy increasingly obsessed with (profits to be gained by

[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/21/business/a-huge-overnight-increase-in-a-drugs-price-raises-protests.html?](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/21/business/a-huge-overnight-increase-in-a-drugs-price-raises-protests.html?_r=0)

[_r=0](#)) the Nano-Now, it's crucial that we recalibrate, constantly, and remind ourselves that the Long Now is the one worth playing.

The challenge behind the 10,000-year-clock's original prototype was not merely to create something that would tick for 7,985 years, but to make it out of materials that wouldn't be attractive to would-be thieves in a distant future, should the world turn into something out of *Mad Max*.

That's the other line of thinking coming from the Long Now: Be Prepared, for the best as well as the worst. Suffuse the future with life; failing that, preserve humankind's best achievements.

That's where the bookshelves come in. Suspended 20 feet above the cafe are bookshelves full of books. You could browse, maybe, but you'd need a ladder, or maybe a hoverboard. Among them, I see about 20 copies of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. *Future Shock* by Alvin Toffler. *The Mayo Clinic Family Health Book*. Borges, Bocaccio, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Even *Player Piano*, by Kurt Vonnegut. I had to laugh like hell. It's a tactile backup of Western Civilization, a true paper copy of the library of humankind – in case the digital version fails. And it's suspended in the air as though to save it from an oncoming flood.

But are “slowing down” and “taking pride” overly beguiling ways to avoid the dire natural (and intellectual circumstances) in which we find ourselves? Perhaps. More importantly,

though, it's a way to decouple ourselves from the destructive behavior that got us into this mess, the short-sighted thinking that says pillage and burn, and leave the clean-up to the future. A sign on the wall from Jonas Salk asks, "Are we being good ancestors?"

Individually, the concept of five-digit time, or of de-extinction, etc., may sound absurd; collectively, it adds up to a movement. And it could begin today, the moment you write 02015 on the line of the check you send to your landlord. The Long Now is about stretching time, about making the now long. About lasting, if not forever, at least for 7,985 more years.



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