



The Clock of the Long Now

By Shari Cohen

The talk in the world of Silicon Valley is of revolution: according to the manifesto of Fast Company magazine, "A global revolution is changing business, and business is changing the world...a revolution as far-reaching as the Industrial Revolution." The talk in the computer world is big: the same manifesto talks about the creation of "new vocabulary" and "new legends and myths." The talk in the world of new information technology is fast: seven technological years to a single calendar year. Whether or not you believe this is hype, a cultural change of some sort is surely taking place. Something new, and potentially profound, is emerging.

Stewart Brand has created what I believe to be one of the first icons, or "myths" that attempts to address the human challenges of this fast, new world. Brand, the founder of the Whole Earth Catalogue, hacker guru and champion of grass roots power, was one of the first to understand the impact of the computer. In founding The WELL, the first on-line community, he was one of the first to think about the implications of the world wide web for the creation of community.

His newest project is the Clock of the Long Now, and is devoted to extending time horizons in a period of speed and short-term memory. The project revolves around the construction of a 10,000-year clock, to ring once every century. It will be installed in the Nevada desert and Brand hopes it will become a choice tourist destination into the very distant future. A library is being developed to go with the clock, which will be a place for storing information that would be useful over long periods of time - for example, extremely long-term scientific studies. The clock is intended as a symbol -- an icon to induce thinking about human power and responsibility: "We are not the culmination of history and we are not start over revolutionaries; we are in the middle of civilization's story," said Brand in his book, *The Clock of the Long Now*, written in conjunction with the project.

The preamble to the project says: "Civilization is revving itself into a pathologically short attention span. The trend might be coming from the acceleration of technology, the short-horizon perspective of market-driven economics, the next-election perspective of democracies, or the distractions of personal multi-tasking. All are on the increase. Some sort of balancing corrective to the short-sightedness is needed -- some mechanism or myth that encourages the long view and the taking of long-term responsibility, where "the long term" is measured at least in centuries."

Strangely enough, the very people who have created the "fast world" are the major financial supporters of this project to create a universal symbol of how we connect to generations far into the future. (And, indeed, it seems consonant with the Fast Company claim: "Smart people working in smart companies have the ability to create their own futures - and also hold the responsibility for the consequences.")

The clock is meant to function the way the picture of the earth from space functioned to raise environmental consciousness by making the notion of living on a limited and shared planet Earth graphic and real. "Such a clock, if sufficiently impressive and well engineered, would embody deep time for people...icons reframe the way people think," writes Brand.

Recently I had the privilege of meeting Brand. The first thing I asked him was whether any religious figures had been involved in developing the idea. He quickly expressed his relief that none had approached him. "The reason the thing works is because it is devoid of content. If it were associated with the Esalen Institute or something, it would be immediately discredited."

So what is the clock, if so clearly not connected with religion? Is it a new ideology? A new kind of belief system?

The clock is strikingly different from utopian future-oriented ideologies such as communism. Communism was compelling and disastrous because of the claim that communists understood the direction of history, which was proceeding according to a particular set of stages. Brand's focus on the "long now" is not an ideology; more important, it does not specify a particular future -- no dictatorship of the proletariat, no communist utopia. In fact, the idea is that we are in this together, but do not know where we are going. Neither God nor the inexorable forces of history are responsible - we are.

I was also struck by Brand's insistence that the icon be "devoid of content." With its minimal content, the clock offers an orientation that is universalist. It is profoundly democratic, leaving it up to individuals and societies to figure out how to collectively adjust to long-term thinking. Brand does not fill in the blanks telling people what they ought to do with this new perspective: the clock creates a context within which questions can be asked.

Might the clock offer a glimpse of a future in which contentless icons addressing universal human problems become the inspiration for meaning making? If so, how does this relate to specific traditions, like the Jewish one?

Brand's clock offers a challenge to Jews, to think about how and whether our tradition offers resources for mustering the collective will for taking the long view of the future, in a world that is desperately in need of long term thinking. Rabbi Irving Greenberg's idea of the covenant between God and humans might be a

start. For Greenberg, the human task of tikkun olam (repairing the world) must be accompanied by a sense of responsibility to future generations. While no generation is free to refrain from the task of tikkun olam, each generation must act with an awareness that no single generation can complete the task. (Arguably, the totalitarian nightmares of this century were the product of a failure to understand this principle.)

Perhaps, the Jewish tradition can also offer insights, and maybe even rituals, that will address the substance of the human issues that will emerge in the world of which Fast Company is a product. It is up to us to articulate and act upon those insights.

Websites referred to in this article: <http://www.longnow.org>,
<http://www.fastcompany.com>.

