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To Exit with Grace: New Directions for Futurists

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In the last few months, I have come to realize that at this stage of my life I should be planning my exit rather than trying to extend the future. What do I mean by this? Simply, instead of imagining the what ifs of several decades or centuries down the road, I should focus on living fully in the present moment. Of course I will continue to understand and appreciate the past. I will certainly continue to imagine the future. But my best preparation for the future is to live each day as if it were my last.

This view is generally in contrast to the in-vogue scenario of a future that assumes expansion of human life expectancy as a worthwhile goal. To some, it may seem un-American to talk about finite limits and endings, especially death. With advances in sanitation systems, preventive health care, and control of infectious diseases, people in post industrial nations, such as the U.S., laud news about senior power, golden years, spending our children's inheritance, and long term care insurance. They look to continued improvements in technology to manage chronic conditions and to compensate for poor diet and sedentary habits. There is an assumption of entitlement to more years of living and all the costs and benefits that accrue. I think we need to question this assumption.

The first set of events that has led me to this conclusion of 'enough already' and my personal demise is a series of authors' views of the present and near future. The authors are Richard Florida, Ben Wattenberg, Michael Crichton, and Frank Levy. I've just finished Richard Florida's book, *The Flight of the Creative Class*. It is a sequel to his *The Rise of the Creative Class*. In the earlier book, Florida identified that future productivity does not lie primarily in tangible commodities like land and massive companies as in the past, but instead in what he calls the 3 Ts of economic development – technology, talent and tolerance. While the U.S. and Western Europe primarily have been associated with creativity, other nations and regions are also beginning to nurture such creativity. In his latest book based on data from 45 countries, Florida argues that this creative class is beyond national borders and is in movement or in flight around the globe. Hence the migration of human capital and talent to areas receptive to creativity. Some of these other areas in 2005 include Sweden, Ireland, Australia, South Korea, Argentina, China, and India. Since the post world War II era, the United States now has viable competitors for human capital, especially intellectual and creative capital. What this says to me is that things are dynamic. Speculations about the future are subject to correctly identifying and understanding what is happening in the present, including the rise of creative classes outside the U.S.

Ben Wattenberg, who has studied population trends for decades, also suggests an alternate view of the present and subsequently the future. Based on empirical data showing decreasing fertility rates in developed and developing countries, Wattenberg posits in *Fewer: How the New Demography of Depopulation Will Shape Our Future*, that we may be heading to global population decline – not an increase as commonly assumed. This is in part due not only to negative fertility rates in post industrial nations but more recently to falling rates in the industrial and pre-industrial area which are approaching replacement rates. What do such data portend about sustainability?

One cold winter night, I listened to Michael Crichton at the National Press Club discuss global warming. Again, he posed an alternate view to the popular assumption that global warming is occurring and caused by mankind. Crichton reviewed data on global warming for several centuries and concluded that it was not possible to state from available data the extent to which increased global warming is manmade or related to other factors. Several members of the audience gasped when his last presentation slide was of children of the world in poverty or stages of illness or death. His point was simply that attempts to solve global warming were secondary and intellectual, if today's children were not healthy and cared for by a global village. What is the point of debating and packaging longer term issues if we are not attending to today's children and youth so that they can become the next generation of *homo sapiens*?

Frank Levy of MIT introduces another variable for consideration in his book, *The New Division of Labor*. Levy and his colleagues have examined to what extent computers (including robots) can do work traditionally done by a human workforce. They confirmed that machines are capable of doing routine, repetitive work with a finite set of rules and decisions. However, in terms of work that appears as primarily manual labor, such as driving a vehicle, machines were no match for human beings. Faced with non-routine and unexpected events, such as accidents, smart machines could not recognize anomalies and then adapt and correct them. Human beings did so almost intrinsically. What these findings suggest is that the assumption that machines can do manual work that requires a dynamic integration of physical and mental skills is dubious. That is, the resilience, ability to adapt, and creativity that define human beings inherently are not in manmade machines.

The common theme I heard among these global thinkers is that the future is now. What their varied research demonstrates is that many possible outcomes are articulated but actual outcomes are beyond human projection or even prudent speculation. One is due to the limited ability of human beings to know, let alone articulate, the salient factors of changes upfront. Second, human beings and their relationships to each other and to the world are volatile and oftentimes unpredictable. Another is that everything – facts, events, knowledge, perceptions, beliefs, behaviors – are in dynamic state. Last but not least is serendipity.

If we look back at events in the 20th century which shaped the future, they were not expected let alone foreshadowed. These include the 1920's Harlem Renaissance, the Class of 1940 at the Census Bureau, and the mid 20th century Civil Rights Movement. The Harlem Renaissance brought forth new art forms in American music – jazz – and literature and spawned a creative period. The Class of 1940 at the Census Bureau developed UNIVAC and survey methodology. The Civil Rights Movement demonstrated that Americans could move from separate but equal to united and equal. The common denominator is that these leaders of change and creators of the future were not wedded to the status quo. As important, these creators of the future were young people. Certainly in the Civil Rights Movement with Brown v. the Board of Education they were literally children in elementary and high school.

The second set of events that lead to my exit conclusion is watching my Generation X Silicon Valley nieces and nephews and my Millennial Generation sons become adults. They are connected to their cousins, friends, and colleagues not just in the U.S. but all over the world in real time via cell phones

and instant messaging. They and their friends have gone to school, traveled, and now even live and work in other countries on every continent. Due to programs like community service credits for high school graduation, they are also found in the inner cities and rural communities of the United States. They are even moving inland to revitalize mid-size urban areas. They cook in soup kitchens and clean up local streams and rivers. They were born in a post-computer world and grew up on multiple-mode and high speed communications. They grew up learning to solve multidimensional problems in multicultural, and even multilingual teams, using all available resources. They envision and create worlds and futures that are foreign to me. This is not surprising. The future is created by those who have the greatest stake in it. The future is created by those who see beyond conventional wisdom and popular assumptions of the gatekeepers of the status quo.

Thus, I think my plan to exit gracefully is a sensible choice. I'm going to take a back seat and let the children drive us to their future. The multidimensional and interrelated factors relevant to major institutional and social change are coalescing, and it will be the younger generations who will be in the forefront of understanding and managing them. Thus, I exit, hopefully with grace, to work on what only I can control and change today – me.

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POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

Here's a cross-cutting article, so pick your favorite issue!

- *What will be the impact of increased longevity on working and living patterns? On healthcare and education? On an "earned entitlement" mindset?*
- *What will productivity be in the future, and what will wealth be?*
- *Why is human capital migrating to other parts of the world – Europe, Australia, Asia, and South America – attractive options in these other parts or dissatisfaction at home? Will this trend continue or reverse?*
- *Another point of interest – will a "global village" such as that described by Michael Crichton lead to a monolithic world, or will cultural diversity be maintained?*
- *How attractive will community service be among youth of the future, relative to instant gratification and the pursuit of status and material gain?*
- *What are the implications of the new connectivity among Generation X and Millennium Generation people – in which they have friends all over the world and yet barely know their neighbors?*
- *Finally, to what extent do youth inherently make better futurists, given that they see beyond (and are less "contaminated" by) the conventional wisdom and popular assumptions?*