

# A world of CHANGE

... for better or for worse?



**W**hat a fast-changing world we live in! It is instructive to stop and think from time to time of some of the changes that have occurred in just the past few years.

Taking a look at the recent past is a bit like looking in the rear-view mirror of a fast-moving car: you don't want to take your eyes off the road ahead for too long for fear of crashing! And when things move as fast as they do these days, it can be disconcerting to see things in the rear-view mirror that you never even saw up ahead.

A longer look backward tells us that it took from 4 BC to 1900 AD for the world's body of knowledge to double; then until only 1950 for it to double again; just 10 years for another doubling; only five for the next; and since 1965 it has doubled every three years. Current theory is that our body of knowledge now actually doubles at least every 18 months.

Let's look briefly at three major areas of change in our world in the past few years. These are not the only areas of change, but they are significant and they have affected

everyone, particularly in the western world. For better and for worse.

## *Science and technology*

It's hard to imagine what life would be like without computers, television, ultrasound, e-mail, or satellites. Never before have human beings enjoyed so much technological support, assistance and convenience.

### **For better...**

- \* We're able to heal illnesses that once scourged whole populations.
- \* We're able to see our world (via television images) as never before.
- \* The quality of life of people with disabilities has been improved.
- \* We know more about our universe, our earth and history.

### **For worse...**

- \* "Every technological invention has had unintended consequences," said Jacques Ellul.
- \* Computers were supposed to eliminate paper; machines were going to do all our work for us; the 70s visionaries said we wouldn't know what to do with all our leisure

time. So now we're drowning in paper, constantly learning new technologies, and working longer and harder than ever.

- \* We can become unrealistic and demanding in our relationships, expecting people to perform as quickly, unquestioningly and accurately (well, usually!) as computers do.

### **For reflection...**

For many people, science has replaced religion, although as Stephen Jay Gould pointed out in *Time* magazine, "no factual discovery of science (statements about how nature 'is') can, in principle, lead us to ethical conclusions (how we 'ought' to behave) or to conclusions about intrinsic meaning (the 'purpose' of our lives)".<sup>1</sup>

"The means by which we live have outdistanced the ends for which we live," said Martin Luther King way back in the 1960s. "Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men."

# If only they could change what they said...

***"Everything that can be invented has been invented"***

-The commissioner of the US Office of Patents, 1899.

***"Computers in the future may weigh no more than 1.5 tons"***

-Popular Mechanics magazine, 1949.

***"I have travelled the length and breadth of this country and talked with the best people, and I can assure you that data processing is a fad that won't last out the year"***

-Editor in charge of business books for Prentice Hall, 1957.

***"But what is it good for?"***

-Engineer at the Advanced Computing Systems division of IBM in 1968, commenting on the microchip.

Human beings don't do well in a vacuum of spiritual nourishment. Or when we live on spiritual junk food.

## ***The self***

"The dominant theories in psychology shifted focus in the late 1960s from the power of the environment to individual expectation, preference, choice, decision, control, and helplessness," writes Martin Seligman in his book *Learned Optimism*. "For the first time in history--because of technology and mass production and distribution, and for other reasons--large numbers of people are able to have a significant measure of choice and therefore of personal control

over their lives. Not the least of these choices concerns our own habits of thinking."<sup>2</sup>

Look in any bookstore and you'll see the shelves sagging under the weight of books and tapes about self-improvement. Self-help, self-actualisation, self-determination, self-identity, self-fulfilment. Will the early 21st century become known as "the selfish age"? Everyone is familiar with "the Me Generation", which became the greedy generation, which has become the disillusioned generation.

## **For better...**

\* Our societies are healthier when they acknowledge and respect the

rights of each individual, when they support the right to choose, the freedom of expression, and the value of each individual. The gender revolution and respect for indigenous and minority groups reflect positive aspects of a focus on individuals rather than dominant groups, institutions or nations. There's richness in the diversity individualism offers.

## **For worse...**

\* "Thirty years on, the Me Generation are in their forties and early fifties, and they are experiencing a full-blown mid-life crisis," said social researcher Hugh Mackay in his book, *Reinventing Australia*. "The Me Generation are

beginning to acknowledge that the process of a value-shedding through the sixties and seventies has left them with a vague sense of emptiness--a feeling that life lacks some of the meaning and some of the sense of purpose (and even some of the simple pleasure) which they observed in their own much-maligned parents and grandparents."<sup>3</sup>

\* Despite an apparently greater freedom for self-expression, there's an awful sameness about our society, as if the self has become a packaged commercial property: we even wear the same labels!

**"One change leaves the way open for the introduction of others"**  
— Niccolo Machiavelli

## For reflection...

Human beings don't have a great record when we're left to set our own standards of morality, when we look to ourselves for meaning, or when we try to pretend that anyone's moral standards are as good as anyone else's. The sad truth is that we haven't found fulfilment within ourselves.

## Information

There's no doubt ours is, if nothing else, an information age. We're wired, connected, cabled, and hooked. Literally. Never before have populations had access to so much information. But so what?

## For better...

\* The worldwide web brings to our fingertips instant information on almost everything.

\* E-mail access has sped up the way we do things and given us international networks.

\* The "tyranny of distance" now only operates when your modem drops out.

\* We can see what's happening anywhere in the world, so long as there's a video camera there.

## For worse...

\* "Information overload" is a daily reality.

\* More information does not mean better information.

\* Data does not equal information; information does not equal knowledge; knowledge does not equal wisdom.

\* The "entertainment culture" provides quantity rather than quality.

\* Commercialisation and materialism rule.

## For reflection...

"We may seem to be united by the Internet, but sharing information is not the same as having a real relationship," writes Michael Yapko in his book, *Hand me down blues*. "While our range of knowledge and our access to information has increased dramatically in the past fifty years, so has the rate of depression."<sup>4</sup>

Useful, informative, relevant, helpful information is one thing, but too much of what bombards us every day is simply useless at best, damaging at worst.

## Living with change

The massive changes and the rate of change in our world are realities we can't escape. We simply have to learn to deal with it.

If we're to successfully cope with continued change into the future, it helps to have a frame of reference, a foundation, something upon which to base our lives that can provide us with, if not certainty then at least perspective.

"Even change has changed," the theorists tell us. No longer is change incremental or "Newtonian" (one thing leading to another), it's discontinuous, abrupt and chaotic (as in "chaos theory").

Of course, some things have not changed: the "war to end all wars" spawned a successor within two decades, and a series of other major regional conflicts. People still get killed, but progress means that it can now be done from 10,000 metres in

the air and the world can watch it happen "live" (an ironic word to use to describe war coverage) on CNN.

Perhaps more than ever we need to rediscover some basics like community, truth and meaning.

**"Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men."**  
— Martin Luther King

Living in a "global village" is fun, but it doesn't replace the neighbourhood, the sense of belonging, and the shared history and meaning, that genuine community offers. Maybe those needs explain the quest for simplicity (the "back to basics" movement) in the midst of such rapid technological advancement. Perhaps it's not a retreat from progress, but an instinctive resistance to the overrunning of something central to the human experience.

"If we're finally learning how to cope with the instability of life in a kaleidoscope, why aren't we more optimistic, more buoyant, more confident of our future?" asks Hugh Mackay. "The curious feeling that 'something is missing' is more than conventional disillusionment with governments. It is reflected in an uneasy sense of trouble at a deeper level. We need something to believe in, yet faith lies beyond our sceptical grasp and inspiration seems in short supply... Could one explanation for all this be that, like a child raised on a diet of flummery, we are simply lacking sufficient intellectual and spiritual nourishment?"<sup>5</sup>

It's a good question. One that challenges us in a world where information has replaced knowledge, technology has overtaken relationship, and the self has superseded the community.

## Notes

1. Gould, Stephen Jay, *Dorothy, it's really Oz*. *Time* magazine, 23 August, 1999.

2. Seligman, Martin, *Learned optimism*. Random House Australia, 1992, pp. 9-10.

3. Mackay, Hugh, *Reinventing Australia*. Angus & Robertson, 1993, p. 236.

4. Yapko, Michael D., *Hand me down blues*. Golden Books, 1999, p. 27.

(5) Mackay, Hugh, *Good times fail to roll on*. Sydney Morning Herald, 7 Feb., 1999.