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# Musings on the Millennium

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## **Musings on the Millennium**

Matriculation Address

September 23, 1999

This one made the rounds on the internet a few weeks back, about an employee responding to a request from a supervisor. He/she writes: "I hope I haven't misunderstood your instructions because, to be honest, none of this Y to K problem made much sense to me. At any rate, I have finished the conversion with the following new months:

Januark

Februark

Mak, and

Julk

I also changed all the days of the week to:

Sundak

Mondak

Tuesdak

Wednesdak

Thursdak

Fridak, and

Saturdak

We are now Y to K compliant."

All kidding aside, it seems that not a week has gone by in the last year or so when I did not receive some missive or other relating to the Y2K problem, when computers will read the 00 digits in 2000 to mean 1900 and either crash or create all sorts of mischief. For the most part, I shipped these along to Professor James Evans, who is our Millennium Bug Czar, not because he necessarily would learn something he did not already know about this matter, but because I certainly have no clue about it. The college has been asked to certify to a number of federal, state, and association agencies that we are compliant, and has been urged to be sure that the various vendors we use are also. As for the former, Lawrence seems to be in good shape. As for the latter, well, a few folks have yet to reply to our inquiries. So we'll see.

All of us have heard or read apocalyptic tales of the coming crisis. Senators Robert Bennett and Christopher Dodd, who head up the U.S. Senate Special Committee on the Year 2000 Technological Problems, have characterized the Y2K glitch as “diabolical,” a phrase sure to reverberate with those who believe that the millennial bug is a harbinger of the end times. Two weeks ago today, in fact, there was a minor buzz surrounding the date 9-9-99, with some speculating that computers would crash then. Others, diligent readers of The Book of Revelation, noted that the numerical designation of this month and year—9-9-99—when viewed upside down, reads 666, which, of course, is a designation of Satan, leading to all sorts of predictions about his imminent arrival.

Indeed, Y2K has proved not only to be rich fodder for a whole sub-industry within the computer field attempting to fix the problem, but also for an array of authors who have written volumes on the subject. A quick tour of bookstores turned up a whole slew of titles, ranging from such doomsday treatises as *The Millennium Bomb: Countdown to a \$400 Billion Catastrophe* and the presumed antidote *Beat the Millennium Crash: How to Profit from the Coming Financial Crisis* to more lyrical offerings like *Pooh and the Millennium* and—my favorite—*Puffy, Xena, Quentin, Uma: And 10,000 Other Names for your New Millennium Baby*. A more common genre is exemplified by this one: *50 Urgent Things You Need to Do Before the Millennium: Protect Yourself, Your Family, and Your Finances from the Upcoming Computer Crisis!*

Clearly, with exactly 100 days to go until the arrival of 2000, it is probably prudent to take some precautions as the calendar flips over on January 1. The Associated Colleges of the Midwest, for example, has determined that students will not fly to overseas programs on the first few days of the new year. The executives of British Airways, on the other hand, have announced that the senior staff of the airline will all be on scheduled flights on January 1 (though it will be interesting to find out their destinations; I'm not sure that Heathrow to Kennedy will count as a high risk venture). If you're nervous about travel in the new year, however, you can always purchase CSA-Y2K insurance from the Commercial Union Insurance Company, guaranteed to

“protect you against unforeseen travel-related problems caused by Y2K system failures, including trip cancellation or interruption, travel delay and air flight accident.” The policy also includes an emergency hotline to assist you with any problems you may encounter while traveling in the year 2000. Where there’s a buck to be made, an American company will be there to make it.

On another level, folks are getting equipped and stacking up provisions just in case. A fellow named Paul Milne, a former commodities trader from New York, is now holed up on a 10-acre farm near Lynchburg, Virginia where he and his family are learning to butcher cattle and grind their own flour. In Elliot City, Maryland, Clark’s Hardware Store—after experiencing a run on gas and wood stoves last September—figured it was on to something good and now features a Y2K section, replete with flashlights, solar-powered ovens, water storage containers, and the like. So far, sales on these kinds of items are up 25 percent and climbing. John Deere & Co., which manufactures gas-powered generators, has added two assembly lines, both running round the clock to meet demand. An outfit that distributes Katadyn water filters is running two months behind schedule; the company used sell between 100 and 200 a month; they’re now back ordered by 9,000. Last summer, a company called Cheaper Than Dirt, which specializes in meals-ready-to-eat, sold about 300 cases a month; the company now sells 700 cases a day. One can only assume that the shelves of supermarket chains and local mom and pop groceries will soon be depleted of dried and canned goods.

In case you're a little bewildered about just how to get ready for the turn of the century, Eric Utne has recently issued a 360,000 copy printing of his Utne Reader "Y2K Citizen's Action Guide," a kind of Whole Earth Catalog for the millennium, filled with advice on how to become as self-sufficient as a Woodstock-era commune. "As we prepare for Y2K, something surprising and quite wonderful is going to happen," Mr. Utne predicts. "We're going to get to know our neighbors. Our communities will become safer, more intimate, more resilient, more neighborly places to live." According to him, "Y2K is the excuse we've been waiting for to stop making so many compromises in how we know we should, and want to, live our lives." Doc Childre and Bruce Cryer, who run an outfit called the Institute of HeartMath, see the prospects of surviving the coming disaster as an opportunity for personal self actualization through something called "intui-technology," by which one aligns the mind with the heart, thereby increasing intelligence, enhancing intuition, and finding creative solutions in balance with the needs of others. The vision here is not so much scary as soothing. After December 31, 1999, the calendar will wind back to 1900, before civilization became so dependent on the corporate superstructure.

Everyone, it seems, is preoccupied with the coming of the millennium. Professor George Saunders' preoccupation led him to devise a new anthropology course—only to be offered, he assured the faculty last spring, once every 1000 years—entitled Millennium and Apocalypse; the seminar calls for students to undertake independent projects, perhaps by crafting their own

version of the coming meltdown. Naturally, we might also wonder in this context how the approaching millennium played out in 999, and it turns out that the approach of the second millennium really did not cause much of a stir. For one thing, people in most of the world were not on the Anno Domini calendar, so the date held no special meaning for them and hence called forth no special sense of imminent promise or threat. In the West, most people were generally unaware of or indifferent to which year was which, tending to think only of the year they were born as a marker and using the years of a royal reign as a way of keeping track of the passing of time, so the same ignorance prevailed in those quarters as well. Among those who were paying heed to such things, there were some who saw the approaching millennium as a time of fulfillment of the Biblical prophesy of the coming of the anti-Christ, though Revelation's claim about the 1000 years after which this event would occur was interpreted by some to point to the year 1033, 1000 years after the crucifixion.

Indeed, it was not until the end of the thirteenth century that there is any record of a turn-of-the-century celebration—in this case the Papal Jubilee proclaimed by Pope Boniface the VIII—and it was not until the Reformation that the practice of naming centuries by their ordinal numbers took hold. By the end of the eighteenth century, it had become common to mark the turning to a new one and to bid the old farewell, and by the end of the nineteenth century, the preoccupation with the *fin de siècle* had become widespread.

In 1891, the *Atlantic Monthly* observed that “Everywhere we are treated to dissertations on fin-de-siècle literature, fin-de-siècle statesmanship, fin-de-siècle morality.” In many quarters, the end of the last century was characterized by a mixture of hedonism and fashionable pessimism, with articles in British journals, for example, lamenting the decline in “family life, warfare, mental health and religious faith, to say nothing of cricket, bookselling, knowledge of the classics and even canine fidelity.” As one writer put it: “The disposition of the times is curiously confused, a compound of feverish restlessness and blunted discouragement, of fearful presage and hang-dog renunciation. The prevalent feeling is one of imminent perdition and extinction.” To Henry Adams, whose autobiography was just named the number one work of non-fiction of the twentieth century, the arrival of 1900 brought to an end a continuity that had existed since the fifteenth century and suggested that the world as he had known it had been transformed by the appearance of “the new class of supersensual forces” which would only accelerate exponentially thereafter.

At the same time, there was—100 years ago—great excitement and anticipation regarding the arrival of the new century, a phrase that was used repeatedly in journals and books. It would, many thought, transform the debilitating worries of the old by providing exciting prospects for the new. So popular was the mania about the dawn of the twentieth century, in fact, that one writer noted that “the whole subject is in danger of becoming a deadly bore.”

That observation does not seem to have applied to Lawrence. The college of 100 years ago does not seem to have been preoccupied with the advent of a new century, but rather with the quotidian matters of academic work and social life. It looking at Lawrence 100 years ago, one is struck on the one hand with how much is in some sense familiar. Though this first observation may prove grist for some faculty mills, in 1900 Lawrence was on a three-term system—though of varying lengths of 14, 12, and 11 weeks. Then, the curriculum included courses in 18 of the 25 majors (leaving aside minors and interdisciplinary areas) still extant in the curriculum today: psychology, philosophy, religion, Latin, Greek, French, German, history, political science, economics, physics, chemistry, geology, biology, mathematics, English, music, and studio art. While the offerings in these areas were excessively modest by today’s standards, looking back, the list nonetheless suggests that Lawrence has been pretty faithful in sustaining and perpetuating the versions of liberal education in existence then into the present.

There were, of course, significant differences. Tuition and fees amounted to \$36 a year, plus assorted other charges. The faculty numbered 26, plus the president, only two of whom had a Ph.D. In addition to the classical and scientific courses of study, Lawrence also had a preparatory department and sponsored a commercial department, which offered courses in penmanship, book-keeping, commercial arithmetic, commercial law, typewriting, and stenography—interesting, perhaps, to those who find the contemporary liberal arts college increasingly and unfortunately vocational. And the college rules of the day revealed a kind of

high-handedness that is at stark odds with the due process mode in place now. The catalog stated, for example, that “students whose conduct proves them to be at variance with the method and spirit of the University, or who do not attain a satisfactory standing in their class, may, for the obvious good of the school, be dropped, even though no specific offense meriting expulsion or suspension be charged against them.” In addition, in an early version of long-distance learning, now all the rage, Lawrence in 1900, “desiring to be as helpful as possible in assisting all persons who seek a more extended education” offered “to undertake the guidance of students in absentia by the correspondence method.”

Finally, I have not been able to find any evidence that the turn of the century was a big deal among the undergraduates of that era; the only mention I could find comes from the January 1900 *Lawrentian*, which began by “extending its greeting to its readers at the beginning of this new year—we will not say new century lest we involve ourselves in controversy.” Clearly, then as now, there were disputes about whether ‘00 or ‘01 marked that beginning.

Now, 100 years later, while any student sentiment about the new century and millennium has yet to surface at Lawrence, there are evidences of mania on the topic abroad in the land and around the world, and I’m not just talking about Fergie’s expressed interest in being the one to drop the ball in Times Square on New Year’s Eve. From the relatively benign expressions of New Ageism or the enthusiasms surrounding the Age of Aquarius to the more sinister and bizarre

examples of the Branch Davidians and Heaven's Gate in the United States or of the Armageddon cult Aum Shinriko in Japan and the Order of the Solar Temple in Korea, the coincidence of such movements with the coming millennium is difficult to ignore. And recent hurricanes, typhoons, and earthquakes are sure to provoke among some the sense that these harbingers bode ill for the coming millennium.

I assure you that I am not among those whose vision of the millennium is informed by the apocalyptic. Nonetheless, I am aware of the fact that higher education has not been exempted from something akin to the millennial mania afflicting other sectors of society. A little over a year ago, a group of heavy thinkers gathered in Glion, Switzerland for a colloquium on the university in the new millennium and—predictably, I suppose—came up with something called The Glion Declaration; since then (and equally predictably), they've also published a book of the proceedings. The introductory paragraph of the declaration provides the worldview that governed the considerations of the conference: “The new millennium into which we move, and which our children will inherit, confronts us with a bewildering mixture of promise and threat. On the one hand, we glimpse the promise of revolutionary advances in biomedicine, communications, information technology, alternative energy sources, new materials, automation, and globalization; on the other hand, we contemplate the looming threats of balkanization, tribalism, terrorism, sectarianism, north-south inequalities, and hunger; the intricate balance among population, resources, and environment; the challenge of sustainable

development; and the relationship of all of these to the future of traditional nation-states.”

That’s a pretty daunting list. The only way to address effectively these manifold promises and threats, the authors assert, is by and through knowledge, which is, of course, the chief business of the university. And while the declaration and the eventual book speak mainly to the larger research-driven universities, the assumption is that all institutions of higher education need to be attentive and responsive to the challenges the new millennium will bring.

The year 2000 is not the sole provocation for these calls for institutional reinvention and transformation, but it is a powerful force in giving these issues a certain immediacy and urgency. For some years now, opinion has been building that higher education institutions in the United States in particular—though the Glion folks included other parts of the world in their analysis—need to change in order to accommodate the changing socio-political and technological contexts in which they exist and which they are presumptively intended to serve. Early this week, I received yet another notice on this topic, this one for a conference on “Transformation through Academic Restructuring,” a title that is indicative of the current fascination with these matters.

As I’ve noted at recent matriculation convocations, there is much sound and fury on this front abroad in the land. New institutions are being created—ranging from the for-profit Phoenix University to the cyberspace Western Governors University—and older and presumably more

established institutions are recreating themselves, casting about for market-niche identities, developing long-distance learning capabilities, and establishing satellite centers for a variety of educational and training programs.

Some of these initiatives, not to put too fine a point to it, are motivated in part by concerns for institutional survival or for assuring that the institution will be viable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Others are driven by the expectation that technological devices, computer-assisted instruction, and internet access will reduce costs and secure efficiencies in their educational programs. An illustration of the pressure on this score came home to me a few years ago at a conference of liberal arts college presidents, when a well-known educational journalist chastised us for our Luddite views. “The problem with you folks,” he said, “is that you think of putting computers *in* the classroom when the fact of the matter is that the computer *is* the classroom.”

To think that Lawrence exists in splendid solitude, isolated from these pre-millennial pressures, is to think wishfully. This college and conservatory must also attend to the opportunities and obligations to change in response to the needs of our society for educated citizens to participate in its governance and economy. But it would be mistaken to presume that our response will involve some cataclysmic alteration of course and purpose. Our response will be, as it has been in recent years—indeed, as it has been since the turn of the century—evolutionary, considered, and deliberate, a natural progression from and extension of the

educational mission we have long espoused and enacted.

The Glion Declaration speaks, among other things, of biomedicine, information technology, globalization, balkanization, tribalism, the environment, sustainable development, and the future of traditional nation-states. It would be folly to assume that Lawrence—or any other college or university, for that matter—will deal with each of these issues in full or so as to provide some comprehensive solution to them. But to the extent that these threats and promises shape the world of the millennium, a college that claims to prepare “students for lives of service, achievement, leadership, and personal fulfillment,” as we do in our mission statement, must pay heed to them in some form and fashion, because our students as our graduates will in fact live in that world.

And we can point to examples of how we are doing just that. Our investments in information technology, for example, have been extensive and ongoing; what I once thought a capital expense has now become an operating expense. Where the use of computers in the academic program once resided almost exclusively in the hard sciences, it is now ubiquitous; what might have been considered a wild idea a decade ago—namely, a computing laboratory for the humanities—is now on the agenda for creation. Where not too many years ago the library was a repository only for books and journals and other print documents, it now embraces a host of information technology and media resources of many kinds. While we may have once

considered a commitment to such resources as a bold and radical departure from time-honored ways of doing things, we now take that commitment for granted. Lawrence has certainly not been transformed by these moves, but its teaching and learning mission has most certainly been enhanced.

Likewise, the growing prominence of and emphasis on environmental science reflects our intellectual responsiveness to pressing regional, national, and global concerns. Spurred by the collective and collaborative interests of faculty in several departments and disciplines—chiefly geology and biology, but also philosophy, government, economics, and others—environmental science was approved last year as a minor and is slated to be proposed this year as a major. In addition, as a means of strengthening the range and reach of the program, Lawrence has recently joined two major environmental research centers—Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Massachusetts and Biosphere II in Arizona—to provide additional opportunities for Lawrence students to engage this diverse and burgeoning field in the company of leading scientific investigators. Again, what may have been considered a relatively modest area of inquiry a decade or more ago is becoming a more central ingredient of our educational program. And also again, that becoming flows naturally and appropriately from the interests and intentions that have long informed our curriculum.

If our nation and world face the threats of balkanization, tribalism, and north-south

inequities, legacies from this millennium that will be inherited full force by the next, our course of study needs to provide vehicles for understanding and assessing the dynamics of the different peoples and economic and political systems that contribute to those threats. We have long paid heed to many aspects of such matters, but in recent years and into this one, we are now paying greater heed. Courses in African history and African-American literature now complement longer-standing offerings in world history and culture, and faculty interest in designing an ethnic studies program and in revising the general education requirements provides yet more evidence of our readiness to incorporate new and important topics and perspectives into the course of study.

It would be stretching the point to make too much of these initiatives, but so too it would be missing the point not to recognize their significance. For they represent the kinds of enhancements and extensions of the academic program of the college that have long characterized our approach to change. Some might argue that the change is too gradual, too incremental, not sufficiently bold and striking; others may label it too abrupt. But Lawrence approaches new initiatives in this reasoned way because the faculty, trustees, and alumni of the college—albeit with some few and rare exceptions—share a basic conviction about the enduring viability, adaptability, and import of liberal learning. Millennial madness notwithstanding, we are not about to be swept up in the calls for radical reinvention, to be other than we are and have been.

Rather, we should participate in celebrating the millennium by a robust reaffirmation of the character and purposes that Lawrence has long possessed and espoused. Borrowing from the peroration of the Glion Declaration, we should approach the 21<sup>st</sup> century asserting that for Lawrence, “integrity is the requirement, excellence the standard, rationality the means, community the context, civility the attitude, openness the relationship, and responsibility the obligation upon which its own existence and knowledge itself depend.” Those attitudes and attributes will enable us to remain committed to historic purposes while prepared to execute them in new ways and forms. As we project Lawrence into the third millennium and the third century of its existence, we should do so with confidence, not trepidation, with optimism, not panic. Most of all, we should do so with a determination to become a better and stronger exemplar of a college of the liberal arts, sciences, and music that will serve its students and our society and world with intelligence, integrity, dignity, and hope.

The year 2000 will not be a year like any other. Too much has been foreshadowed and too much invested to expect otherwise. So let Y2K come, but let it come to those of in this college as an opportunity to realize the best of what we have been, of what we are, and of what we can become. Best wishes to you all for the new year.