

Perspectives

A CAUTIOUS WELCOME TO THE NEW MILLENNIUM

John Ohliger¹

Basic Choices

Abstract

This personal perspective takes a broad view of the impact of the millennium on adult education. It is based on many years of considering millennium issues in conjunction with a shared correspondence forum among adult educators, an extensive millennium bibliography, and development of The Millennium Survival Kit in 1990. Caution flows from ideas expressed by these adult educators, as well as ideas about utopia, and trends in society. Positive approaches include recognition that the millennium and time itself have a variety of meanings; understanding that the year 2000 is of interest to only a minority of the world's population; recognition that time moves in a variety of directions, coupled with the realization that time itself can be a great adult educator; and recognition that healthy movements toward a truly democratic society are expressed by those authors who write powerfully of their visions within different time vistas.

Résumé

Nous posons ici un large regard sur la pratique andragogique à l'aube du nouveau millénaire. Notre vision est alimentée par une réflexion s'étalant sur plusieurs années, par nos échanges au sein d'une tribune d'éducateurs d'adultes, ainsi que par une riche bibliographie et la création du Millennium Survival Kit en 1990. Il se dégage de ces échanges une mise en garde contre les notions d'utopie et de nouvelles tendances sociales, et on relève un appel à la prudence. Plus positivement, on reconnaît que le millénaire et la notion de temps elle-même véhiculent de multiples significations. D'abord, l'An 2000 ne présente d'intérêt que pour une minorité de gens à travers le monde. Puis, le passage du temps peut lui-même être perçu comme un important

¹ I gratefully acknowledge these colleagues who offered comments, criticisms, and suggestions on earlier drafts of this personal perspective: David Brightman, Vicki Carter, Webster Cotton, Richard Freeman, David Kast, Jim McCarthy, Helen Modra, Fritz Ohliger, Tonette Rocco, Kody Ryan, Michael Trend, Christina Wagner, Linda Warner, Harvey Wheeler, and David Yamada

facteur d'éducation des adultes. Enfin, on retrouve à travers toutes les époques des écrits visionnaires qui traduisent un élan vers la véritable démocratie.

Instead of the typical enthusiastic welcome to the millennium, I propose only a cautious one. Cautions flow from five sources: the concerns of 100 adult educators participating in a correspondence forum; an exploration of the adult education implications of Edward Bellamy's utopian classic *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* published in 1887, which envisioned a peaceful and economically equal society in 2000; a critical look at how the coming of the millennium generates both hopes and fears; examination of the implications of the "Y2K" problem; and the growing commercialized interests in society as illustrated in a variety of religious and higher education responses surrounding both the millennial year and the Y2K problem. To overcome this ominous potential of the coming millennium, I issue a call to see time as a series of landscapes, not just a linear progression. If this call is accepted there is the possibility of a wholehearted welcome during the new millennium for worthwhile social change.

A Cautious Welcome by Adult Educators Participating in a Correspondence Forum

In the 1950s, while engaged in graduate work, I began to believe that adult education is best seen not as a field, discipline, or profession (see Gratton, 1995), but simply as those activities of the chronologically mature where more than random learning is involved (Ohliger, 1975).

In the 1980s, when I began reading the hype about the coming millennium, I started encouraging exploration of related adult education questions. For three years I conducted a forum via shared correspondence, while giving speeches, preparing bibliographies, and writing articles on the issues (see Cunningham & Ohliger, 1989; Milfred, 1999; Ohliger, 1987a, 1987b, 1989, 1990b, 1999). Ultimately I published *The Millennium Survival Kit*, offering a wide range of divergent opinions (Ohliger, 1990c). In his books on the millennium, Schwartz (1990, 1996), Senior Fellow with the Millennium Institute, concluded that our efforts (the shared letters, the bibliographies, the *Kit*, etc.) "take to heart the ideal of a corresponding community of scholars" (p. 244; 126).

Adult education professor Von Pittman led off the correspondence forum in 1987 with the first sign that there should be at most only a cautious welcome to the millennium: "It is one of our old habits in continuing higher education to have conference themes like 'preparing for the challenge of the 80s' to start each decade. I shudder to think what it will be like at the turn of

the century. We will undoubtedly bring a new meaning to the word 'trite.' By 'we,' I mean our professional organizations."² Similarly Karen Wilson at the University of Victoria in British Columbia inferred this caution with her wording, "regarding the ominous approaching year of 2000."

The millennium begins in 2001, not 2000, several correspondents noted. Mark Rogness, with The Kindred Community in Des Moines, Iowa, added: "2001 is a better year to celebrate anyway. After all the media hoopla and sickeningly stilted millennium-in-review specials; alternative people can, from a lofty view, pick apart the predictions that fell flat and the common media views. I think I might be a hermit for a year." Kody Ryan, one of several respondents who were very helpful in thinking about millennial questions, contributed 15 letters. Ryan's views loosened up my thinking process. She helped me recognize that conventional definitions of controversial terms such as *antinomianism*, *anarchism*, and *nihilism* are skewed to leave out the positive aspects and to overemphasize the negative connotations. Gaining such understanding led me to a more tentative perspective on adult educational, political, and cultural issues. More important for the millennium, she introduced me to the "ageless tradition," the view that healthy social approaches to living can be timeless—that is, without being cemented to a particular century or culture.

Looking Backward

Many of the items in the bibliographies for the correspondence forum dealt with the educational impact of one book, Bellamy's (1888/1996) *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*. First published in 1888 and still in print, it is the most popular, controversial, and politically influential American utopia ever written. More predictions have been made about the year 2000 than any other time in history (The 2000 Group, 1998). Bellamy's book stands out among them all. In his novel Bellamy looks back from the year 2000, when the United States is a peaceful nation practicing equality.

But as 2000 arrives the United States is *not* a peaceful nation and does *not* practice the economic equality Bellamy envisioned (Barnes, 1996; Singer, 1999; Vidal, 1998). As the 19th century drew to a close, a significant number of utopian works dealt with the possibility of social fruition at the end of the 20th century (see Schwartz, 1990). Of these, only Bellamy's work survived. Furthermore, over 150 adult discussion groups met to further the goals of Bellamy's book. These groups lasted into the middle of the 20th century (2000 group, 1998; Sadler, 1944; Shurter, 1939). By the end of the

² All nonreferenced quotations in this paper are taken from unpublished contributions to the correspondence forum.

20th century, we North American adult educators are left without a popular "postmodern" vision comparable to Bellamy's utopia to help lead us into a better world in the 21st. As Jacoby (1999) points out in *The End of Utopia*,

In an era of political resignation and fatigue the utopian spirit remains more necessary than ever. It evokes neither prisons nor programs, but an idea of human solidarity and happiness. The effort to envision other possibilities of life and society remains urgent and constitutes the essential precondition for doing something. (p. 181)

In 1897 Bellamy published a sequel to *Looking Backward*, prophetically titled *Equality*. In a chapter called "Lifelong Education," (1897/1955) he wrote:

The graduation from the schools at the attainment of majority means merely that the graduate has reached an age at which he [*sic*] can be presumed to be competent, and has the right as an adult to carry on his further education without the guidance or compulsion of the state. Thanks to an economic system, which illustrates the highest ethical idea in all its workings, the youth going forth into the world finds it a practical school for all the moralities (pp. 124-125).

But, contrary to Bellamy's vision and to the basic principle of voluntary adult learning, North American society is entering the year 2000 with most adult education compelled by the state and by an economic system that lacks the "highest ethical idea." Such a sad state of affairs, brought about by the power of corporatism, is certainly an important reason to only cautiously welcome the millennium (Ohliger, 1994).

Millennial Hopes and Fears

Don Toppin is (or was) the chair of The Committee on Toronto/2000, initiated in 1980 by The Toronto Futurists Group in association with the Department of Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and the Planning Commission of the City of Toronto. In our forum Toppin maintained: "The Third Millennium AD can become The Great Millennium: one thousand years of peace and well being for all the inhabitants of the global village. Never before has a guiding image of this magnitude been viable. Now the vision is clear, realizable and urgent" (see Toppin & Laxer, 1989, p. 2)

Combine Toppin's hopeful views with Pittman "shuddering to think what it will be like at the turn of the century" and Wilson viewing the approaching year 2000 as ominous. A similiar range of beliefs encompasses much of the literature on the coming millennium (Adams, 1992; Bunson, 1999; Heard, 1999). Frequently one person or group holds the extremes of

both views at the same time. Even U.S. President Clinton, who predicts a happy bridge into the 21st century, recognizes “the hopes and fears this time presents” (White House Millennium Council, 1998). Let popular psychologist Joyce Brothers have the last word here: “We often celebrate to hide our fears, which is why we’ll celebrate the millennium” (cited in Thorton, 1997, p. 14).

“Y2K: Is end near?”

The American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (1999) poses the question “Y2K: Is end near?” (p. 1). The most salient current reason for cautiously welcoming the millennium is “Y2K,” the problem of converting two digits on computers to recognize two zeros in the date as the year 2000 not 1900. By the mid-1970s computer experts were converting banks’ and others’ computers to handle this problem (Welsh, 1999). But not until the mid-1990s was the general public alerted. Even then they were not getting the information they needed—or sometimes getting misleading information (Squeo, 1998). By now the estimated final costs of conversion and lawsuits have reached 4.6 *trillion* dollars (Newman, 1998). Meanwhile computer makers and vendors are raking in the cash selling their correction programs, while governments get ready to quell any panics or riots (Gleick, 1999).

Though our correspondence forum was not even aware of the Y2K issue in the 1980s, now there is more literature on it than on any other aspect of the millennium. And there are more organizations dealing with Y2K preparedness than with any other millennium activities. The U.S. Government created more committees, action weeks, budget reports, Presidential councils, Presidential orders, Congressional acts, and Web pages for Y2K than for AIDS and global warming combined (Gleick, 1999).

When our correspondence forum thrived, some of us kept at it as a way of counteracting the uncritical praise of the future of high technology. At the end of the 20th century the techno-literature continues that praise (Hensley, 1998). As serious as the Y2K problem is, there is one reason to be pleased. It has put a damper on some of the technological optimism about computers and other supposedly time-and-money-saving devices. Y2K could encourage those previously uncritical of high-tech to put their minds to broader perspectives instead of seeing technology as a solution to every problem (Atlee, 1999; Foote, 1999; Scanlon, 1998).

The Yearlong Christmas: Selling the Millennium

Groups benefiting from Y2K almost as much as profit-seeking businesses are the religious ones. Some conservative Protestants have capitalized on the recent interest in videos for their religious adult education programs. Reverend Jerry Falwell's \$28 video, *A Christian's Guide to the Millennium Bug*, sold close to 2,000 copies in five months. On the tape Falwell says Y2K may "be God's instrument to humble this nation" into a spiritual awakening. Other prominent Protestants such as Pat Robertson with his Christian Broadcasting Network, Jack Van Impe with his video *2000 Time Bomb*, and the associate publisher of one of the world's largest religious publishing firms with his book *The Millennium Bug: How To Survive the Coming Chaos*, share Falwell's concern about the bug (see "Doom and Dollars," 1999, review of the book).

Conventional wisdom has until recently seen scientific technology and religion as totally separate and opposed domains. But since the current concern with Y2K by church leaders "suddenly, technology has become intertwined with theology" (Bullers, 1999). However, a professor of history at York University in Toronto contends technology and theology have actually been enmeshed since the early days of Christianity: Noble (1998) presents a great deal of evidence that technology really advanced only when it was linked with the belief in Christian redemption, often tied in by both scientists and theologians with predictions about the coming millennium as well as support for elitist, anti-democratic goals.

Among American Catholics there is a small but growing apocalyptic subculture, which combines Biblical millennialism with right-wing political conspiracy theory (Allen, 1998). But the dominant Catholic view follows Pope John Paul II. One of the current pope's first acts was to declare the year 2000 a full year's Christmas celebration (O'Brien, 1994). Freburger (1986) commented in the liberal, Catholic *National Catholic Reporter*: "Given the propensities of our consumer economy, the mind boggles at the commercial activities surrounding an official yearlong celebration of Christmas" (p. 19). According to Monsignor Illich (1970):

The Roman Church is the world's largest non-governmental bureaucracy. It employs 1.8 million full-time workers—priests, brothers, sisters, and laymen. These employees work within a corporate structure which an American business consultant firm rates as among the most efficiently operated organizations in the world. The institutionalized Church functions on a par with the General Motors Corporation and the Chase Manhattan Bank (p. 71).

The Vatican is expecting 30 million visitors, because the year 2000 will officially be the bimillennium of Christ's birth (see "Zero-Based Celebrations," 1998). The pope is calling for a great jubilee to celebrate the occasion. He sees the jubilee as a time for reexamination and recommitment to the faith, not as a time of apocalypse (Dulles, 1995). At least nine books are being specially published and sold for adult education purposes about the Catholic millennial celebration (Tickle, 1997).

Like many churches, colleges and universities are succumbing to commercial pressures. As 2000 dawns, large private for-profit universities are listed on the stock exchange. They invade the budding distance learning arena. And many universities, both for-profit and non-profit, are turning faculty into part time "adjunct" peons without security or benefits. Now the very definition of higher education is compromised (Ohliger, 1990a, in press-a). Thus, another reason for cautiously welcoming the millennium is its effect on increasing the commercial and corporate domination of religion, higher education, and all other aspects of society. A few months before he was assassinated, as the American Civil War was winding down, Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter to one of his officers:

I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country. As a result of the war, corporations have been enthroned and an era of corruption in high places will follow. The money power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands and the Republic is destroyed. (1864/1999, p. 78)

Some deny Lincoln wrote that letter (Boller & George, 1989), but there is no denying that corporate power has spread, concentrated, and internationalized until today it is the single strongest force in the world (Brosio, 1998; Derber, 1998; Ohliger, in press-a; Saul, 1994, 1997; Singer, 1999; Vidal, 1998).

The Landscapes of Time

I agree with O'Brien (1994) that the millennium "should be an occasion for self-questioning" (pp. 165-166). The years of self- and mutual-questioning I have been engaged in about the millennium has led me to the tentative conclusion that time itself has a variety of meanings, not just the linear one. Murdoch (1994) calls time that "strange medium we live in" (p. viii). It is the same with the term millennium, which means, among other

things, a period of exactly one thousand years, or "an indeterminate length signified by a symbolic denomination of a thousand" (McGinn, 1996, p. 3).

The year 2000 as the millennium means little to the majority of the world's population, including those following the different Chinese, Japanese, Muslim, Buddhist, Hebrew, Indian, Persian, or Baha'i calendars as well as those for whom *any* calendar plays no part in their lives (2000 group, 1998; Lee, 1999).

Moving back and forth across the invisible line between literal and symbolic reality makes it possible to discover that time does not just march forward in a straight line, it stops, it speeds up, it slows down, it circles, it weaves itself into a thousand landscapes. Calling the clock the only way of experiencing time is like calling American money the only real money. Labeling differing views of time as *landscapes* assists in viewing time as "place" and gives it more concrete meanings other than the oversimplified linear one. Those, like some of the poor and indigenous populations, who are not trapped in the view that time moves only ahead bit by bit, are freer to live in these different places, these landscapes. And there are many popular and classic examples of these landscapes in fiction, drama, movies, television, painting, and poetry (Ohliger, 1990c). These various ways of understanding time often accord with striking events in people's lives when, for instance, they experience love, or encounter beautiful nature.

Also consider investigating the hundreds of examples where time is the chief adult educator—for instance poet Carl Sandburg's (1936) "Time is a great teacher,/ Who can live without hope?" (p. 286).

Exploring *all* these landscapes of time offers a measure of peace and serenity instead of the hectic feelings of pressure brought on by the crushingly constricted movement forward of one moment following inexorably after another. It is one way of moving from only a cautious view of the year 2000 toward welcoming the millennium wholeheartedly in the context of worthwhile social change. Such a wholehearted welcome meshes with other similar views of time that include but also go beyond the narrow straight line one. For instance, think of time as a "funnel, meaning a place where the 'here and now' and the 'there and then' can live side by side" (Hiss, 1999, p. 19). Study those who write powerfully to encourage democratic social action within different time vistas (Collins, 1994; Gorz, 1989; Priestley, 1962; Rifkin, 1987).

And don't neglect those who write with literary quality and expressive clarity about the different time perspectives *within* the linear one. In his new book *Whose Millennium? Theirs or Ours?* Singer (1999) points to the significance of both historical time and personal time as he seeks "a realistic

utopia." (p. 6). Such masters of prose as Gore Vidal, Studs Terkel, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Eduardo Galleano endorse the accomplishment and importance of his writing. Singer concludes his book with this stirring summons to a fundamentally improved 21st century:

We are at a moment, to borrow Whitman's words, when society "is for a while between things ended and things begun," not because of some symbolic date on the calendar marking the turn of the millennium, but because the old order is a-dying, though it clings successfully to power, because there is no class, no social force ready to push it off the historical stage. The confrontation between the old and the new—the sooner it starts the better—will now have to be global by its very nature. On the ground littered with broken models and shattered expectation, a new generation will now have to take the lead. Chastened by our bitter experiences, they can advance with hope but without illusions, with convictions but without certitudes, and, rediscovering the attraction and power of collective action, they can resume the task, hardly begun, of the radical transformation of society. But they cannot do it on their own. We must follow their lead and, to the dismay of the preachers and propagandists shrieking that the task is impossible, utopian, or suicidal, and to the horror of their capitalist paymasters, proclaim all together: "We are not here to tinker with the world, we are here to change it!" Only in this way can we give a positive answer to the rhetorical question asked in this book: whose millennium, theirs or ours? It is also the only way in which we can prevent the future from being *theirs*--apocalyptic or, at best, barbarian. (p. 279)³

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³ From *Whose Millennium? Theirs or Ours?* by D. Singer, New York: Monthly Review Press. Copyright 1999 by Monthly Review Press. Reprinted with permission.

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