

Who Knows What Tomorrow Might Bring

by Perry L. Norton

*Somewhat back from the village street
Stands the old-fashioned county seat.
Across its antique portico
Tall poplar trees their shadows throw;
And from its station in the hall
An ancient timepiece says to all
Forever - never
Never - forever*

Thus wrote Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in "The Belfry of Bruges and Other Poems."

This essay is about Time, which is both forever, and never. And it is about what we do with Time to fashion the world we live in.

Considering how long *yesterday* was and how long *tomorrow* will be, our *today*s are a very small slice of time. Yet, what we decide, or choose not to decide, in this small slice of time, will to large measure determine what tomorrow will be: what kind of cities we will have, what kind of towns, how we will grow the food we need, how we will move from place to place. After all, everything, absolutely everything, we see about us by way of plantings and buildings and roads and vehicles, is the end result of decisions made, or not made, in all our *yesterdays*.

At one time, not so very long ago, Manhattan Island was occupied by a few small settlements of a people who had arrived one day at an unoccupied place via a land bridge at what we now call the Bering Strait. Today, except for one or two exceptions (most spectacular being Central Park) that island is paved and built upon, from north to south, and from river to river. It was brought thereto by decisions made, and by decisions that were not made, decisions that were determined to be too unpopular, or politically difficult.

This flags the engine that drives architects, planners, and those who would preserve and conserve the irreplaceable. They know, and remember, that Manhattan Island was once pristine and natural; and

that today it is paved. They know that a population of 1500 people in 1665 took over 100 years to grow to 25,000, and that no one then even dreamed that Manhattan would become what it is today. They also know that like Topsy, in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Manhattan "just grewed."

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Does it strain the imagination too much, then, to wonder if anyone in that Manhattan, in 1775, speculated on what might be the best way for the community to grow? Or even that someone might have been able to "take a reading" on what was happening in the world at that time, to survey, as it were, the forces at work and anticipate their impact on Manhattan? Does it strain the imagination to wonder if anyone, today, is able to take a reading on what is happening — in any of our cities or towns — and to anticipate (perhaps to steer) those happenings into a vision for the future?

It begins with that "taking a reading." The most startling dimension of "forces at work" is population growth. The population of the whole world at the time of Columbus, 500 years ago, was approximately what the population of the U.S.A. is today. Think about that for a moment, and try to imagine that the population of the U.S.A. 500 years from now may be the equivalent of what the world population is today. The numbers are in the billions. Is such growth inevitable? Who knows? It depends, finally, upon decisions to be made — today.

The point of this is not to urge the start of a National Urban Plan for the year 2500 A.D. It is to urge that we always remember that the decisions we make today, and the decisions we choose to avoid making, will in fact define the world, and the community, we will live in, tomorrow. We need to take honest readings of reality, and to have the courage to say what we think *tomorrow* ought to look like. ♦

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