Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Predicting the future…Yeah right

Clay Nelson © 13 February 2022

The future has a history. My guess is that humans have always been obsessed with predicting the future. It doesn't matter if they were using tea leaves, animal entrails, numerology, bumps on the head, palmistry, tarot cards, or dreams interpreted by oracles, shamans, prophets, priests or spiritualists, they craved to know what was going to happen next.

The only thing that has changed from the time of the Mesopotamian Empire is technology and Artificial Intelligence. One of my favourite factoids is no one predicted the personal computer, never mind the one in my pocket or on my wrist (Dick Tracy's walkie-talkie came close). One CEO of a computer company, Ken Olson, predicted in 1977 no one would want one in their home just three years before IBM began marketing their first personal computer to great success and six years before I bought my Apple IIe. I predicted at the time it was all the computer I would ever need. One of my favourite wrong predictions was by famed movie producer Darryl Zanuck in 1946: "Television won't be able to hold on to any market it captures after the first six months. People will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night." The all time winner of bad predictions was made in 1955 by Alex Lewyt, president of the Lewyt vacuum company,"Nuclear-powered vacuum cleaners will probably be a reality within ten years." This probably explains why the company went bankrupt in 1962.

It is an understandable compulsion to read an Agatha Christie mystery by beginning with the last chapter, but life doesn't tell us the ending before we've lived what led up to it.

There are several difficulties with predicting the future. One is the assumptions we begin with, in particular what we think is the most desirable outcome. If you make movies you see TV as a threat. If you are an inventor then a nuclear-powered vacuum is a sound idea. Even high-tech predictions offered by artificial intelligence are infected by the assumptions of the programmer. My assumption is that humans let their assumptions determine their predictions.

In fact modern writers of crime and mystery TV series play with our predilection to operate out of our assumptions. It is no longer Colonel Mustard did it with a candlestick in the dining room. It's not even "the butler did it." We are given a host of suspects with motives, means and opportunity to sift through with our personal assumptions to predict the killer.

Another problem with predictions is their proximity to power. Throughout history, futures have tended to be made by white, well-connected, cisgender men. This homogeneity has had the result of limiting the framing of the future, and, as a result, the actions then taken to shape it. Further, predictions resulting in expensive or undesirable outcomes tend to be ignored by those making the ultimate decisions. This was the case with the nearly two decades worth of pandemic war-gaming that preceded the emergence of Covid-19. Reports in both the US and the UK, for example, stressed the significance of public health systems in responding effectively to a global crisis. They did not convince either country to bolster their systems. What's more, no one predicted the extent to which political leaders would be unwilling to listen to scientific advice. From what I understand, when Covid arrived in New Zealand the government had an inadequate, poorly funded public health system they are still working to repair while trying to keep us safe while they do so.

There is one particular difficulty with predicting the future: the unexpected. The flaming chalice we light at the beginning of our service is an example. Back before World War II there wasn't a single Unitarian or Universalist congregation which began its service by lighting a chalice. The symbol, although very old, and known in northern Europe, was not well-known elsewhere. But slowly, in spite of lots of resistance, the symbol took hold, first as a drawing, then as a three-dimensional symbol with real fire. It was first used at the ceremony of consolidation in the early sixties, when the Universalist Church in America fused with the American Unitarian Association to create the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Next, it was used in a single California congregation in 1963. Now, 59 years later it is a global symbol. Few can imagine not beginning a Unitarian Universalist service by lighting the chalice. Yet, not one visionary ever predicted the arrival of such a ritual. The unexpected can be both a blessing and a curse. In this case, it has been a blessing, giving our fledgling denomination a unifying symbol.

Tom Chatfield in a BBC article says that in spite of all the pitfalls there is one simple rule for successfully predicting the future.

Take as an example predicting what will remain in 100 years' time of the city or town where you were born: which landmarks or buildings? What about in 500 years? The controversial author Nassim Nicholas Taleb offers a counter-intuitive rule-of-thumb for answering questions like this. If you want to know how long something will endure then the first question you should ask is how long it has already existed. The older it is, the more likely it is to go on surviving.

Take London. Predicting which of its buildings will still be standing a few centuries from now, Taleb's rule of thumb suggests starting with the very oldest. At 944 years, the keep at the heart of the Tower of London is a good choice, closely followed by Merton Priory in south London, which has also made it past 900. London's oldest place of worship, the Church of St Bartholomew-the-Great in Smithfield, has also proved pretty tough: parts of it date back 899 years.

The logic of Taleb's argument is simple. Because the only judge that matters when it comes to the future is time, our only genuinely reliable technique for looking ahead is to ask what has already proved enduring: what has shown fitness and resilience in the face of time itself, surviving its shocks and assaults across decades, centuries or millennia. The Tower of London may seem modest in comparison with the Shard skyscraper — which sits across the Thames at 11 times the height — but it has also proved its staying power across 94 times as many years. The Shard may be iconic and imposing, but its place in history is far from assured. When it comes to time, the older building looms larger.

Taleb named this line of reasoning the Lindy Effect. In June 1964, American author Albert Goldman published in The New Republic an article entitled "Lindy's Law" in which he presented the "cautionary fable" of showbiz conversations in Lindy's delicatessen in New York. It was here that in-the-know comedians gathered to discuss the likely staying power of their peers. If someone over-exposed themselves by using up their material in a short burst of activity, the reasoning went, their career would soon be over. But if they played the long game, making fewer but higher-impact appearances, this conservation of resources might see them endure for decades in the industry.

A book that has been in print for half a century, Taleb argues, can expect to be in print for half a century more. Thanks to an inscrutable variety of intermeshed causes, this volume has continued to find an audience – and its capacity to keep on doing so deserves more respect than the hundreds of thousands of copies of that brand new book sold last year.

Consider London's buildings once again. They are subject to the same forces of wear and tear as everything else on Earth: they may be tough, but they cannot remain in good condition without human support. The longer something has endured, the more significance and symbolic meaning it has accrued – and the more tests of function and fashion it has passed. The modern city of London bends and weaves itself around its monuments. Over the centuries, fortune and favour have fixed them into the city's identity. Within days of the fire at the 800-year-old cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris, the watching world had pledged over a billion Euros to fund its reconstruction. It's unlikely the Shard would have commanded quite the same response.

The force of the Lindy effect – and the relationship between architecture and culture – can also be seen in the efforts of those who wish to eliminate something old. In the name of efficiency and anti-idolatry, Saudi Arabia has over the last few decades destroyed vast amounts of its ancient heritage, aiming to accommodate both the immense number of pilgrims who visit the holy city of Mecca and the ultraconservative Wahhabi ideology of its rulers. Much of the country's culture and heritage are treated as a threat to this ideology, perhaps because those things that have lasted for centuries may engender more complex and enduring loyalties than absolute rulers are comfortable with.

At this point, that which has proved its worth and adaptability by surviving – may seem to be in conflict with one of the basic principles of reasoned argument. If you cannot give good reasons for something, it is not reasonable to believe it: and saying "things have been like this for a long time" is surely not a good reason to keep on doing something. Yet this is only a problem if we confuse "good" reasons in the sense of strong reasons with "good" reasons in the sense of praiseworthy or ethically desirable ones. Plenty of terrible practices have a terrible vigour to them, for reasons rooted in the darkest parts of human nature: slavery, murder, rape, fanaticism. The darkest human crimes are also the most anciently attested – and it's for this very reason that any

efforts to mitigate and move beyond them need to be similarly rooted in a close reading of history.

Lindy is one half of Taleb's toolkit for thinking about the future. The other half is equally important: fragility. Something is fragile when, rather than adapting and surviving, it shatters into pieces at its first major shock. In the evolutionary scheme of things, individual creatures are horribly fragile – but this fragility serves the greater robustness of their species. The varied and competing existences of perishable individuals ensure adaptation and renewal from generation to generation, much as the immense variety of life as a whole on this planet has ensured some survivors of even the most cataclysmic events. When it comes to human creations – buildings, artefacts, ideas – there's a similar adaptive superfluity in play. Even the hardiest buildings are fragile in the grander scheme of things. But the emotions and ideas that lead us to admire, maintain and emulate a handful of them are robust.

Similarly, while individual artefacts may be fragile, their lineage is likely to continue if they serve and extend deeply-rooted needs. Hence the innovator's twin adages: "what significant problem does it solve?" and "how does it make life easier?" If you can't answer either of these questions about something new – if you can't in some way connect the temporary to the timeless – it probably makes sense to wait rather than betting the farm.

If you were to reduce the Lindy Effect to an equation it might look like this: The future is those pieces of the past that have evolved and endured, minus those parts of the present most likely to crack and crumble. And this is where we should look if we're hoping to make predictions that matter: at time's twin extremities of adaptivity and inadequacy. As the author Ursula Le Guin once put it, if you wish to understand that which is enduring, you're better off exploring the spaciousness—the resounding, unexpected roominess—of myths than fine-tuning present lines of reasoning. "True myth may serve for thousands of years as an inexhaustible source of intellectual speculation, religious joy, ethical inquiry, and artistic renewal. The real mystery is not destroyed by reason. The fake one is."

I have no idea what will endure or shatter and fall away in our foundling experiment as a faith movement, but I do predict our principles will still be at the core of the denomination's identity, if they at the core of who we are. Then, and only then, will our faith become a true myth lasting millennia.

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

How good are you at making predictions?
What was your most accurate one?
What was your worst?