

Delicate Immortal Meanings

Introduction from *Recovering the Future*, Graduate School of Environmental Science, Monash University, Melbourne, 1988.

The notion that rapid change is altering every aspect of our lives has become an accepted cliché that we no longer think unusual. Yet few observers have noted that it points beyond the present toward very different futures. Outside the often-disappointing speculations of science fiction writers and the influential but spurious images generated by films, there is a distinct lack of credible images of futures to help give definition to some of the consequences of change. This imaginative gap between 'change' and what it implies is evidence of the short sightedness of our culture, its absorption in the here-and-now. How might we move beyond the impasse? The answer is implicit in the previous chapters: by understanding what has gone wrong, by recovering our ability to know and act, and by pursuing different ends.

That's all very well, but the most frequently asked question is "what can I do?" The question has very many good answers but only the over confident or the foolish will give precise directions. One can make suggestions about this book, that critic, this workshop, that course. But I have come to believe that the best answer is to say that *the answer is a journey*. It is simultaneously a journey of self-discovery and external exploration. The self-discovery part is about finding out who one really is. Another word is vocation and it is a world away from a narrow, imposed vocationalism. It has a great deal to do with the skills and disciplines of quiet listening or reflection. The important thing is to look and listen in the right ways and to learn this one should ideally ask those who are already good at it. Once one has discounted the hucksters and charlatans there remain many capable people who can help others find their vocation.

The external exploration is a search for materials, resources, concepts and understandings through which to make sense of the world. It is true self-education and the key items involved already exist. Those who persist in looking tend to find them. Hence a slightly-expanded answer to the question could be something like this: "you could embark on a journey of inner and outer discovery. As you do so you will find everything you need, including the nature of projects you could undertake and any associates (if any) who may help". To my mind this is a reasonable answer, particularly since it is non-directive.

Delicate Immortal Meanings is a story about the very beginning of one such journey of discovery. It is fictional in one sense, yet true in another since it reflects aspects of our lives and world which have been widely under-valued and overlooked. The story is a practical embodiment of suggestions made in earlier chapters, particularly chapters 1 and 6. It attempts to contrast two modes of consciousness and to evoke a sense of interconnectedness. It recapitulates the central theme of the book by looking into the abyss - and then beyond it toward the recovery of vision that our culture so clearly needs.

The point is not just about the validity of this particular vision so much as the wider capacity to create and utilise visions which transcend the banal catastrophes generated by a short-sighted but powerful technological culture.

Delicate Immortal meanings

Richard Slaughter

On the day the last L-5 colony blew David arrived with his mother at the Life Institute. There was a strange reluctance in the way he walked up the smooth marble steps toward the appointment which could eventually mean a thousand years of active life.

Jane looked at her son as they reached the smoked glass doors. If she sensed his reluctance she did not show it for there were tears in her eyes and a tight choking sensation in her chest. A tangle of emotions vied for dominance: envy, regret, relief.

"Just check you've got everything", she said.

The boy considered his mother. When the life-extension process had been made available to the island's children Jane had been too old. Since the ageing mechanism deep in the pituitary gland could not be inhibited after puberty this revolution had been a gift only for the young. At 42 she remained an attractive woman. But with each passing year the hand of time would more clearly indicate her declining status as an ageing member of the old order. David answered softly.

"I have the cards. Why don't you go on home?"

"No. I promised your father I'd be present. Anyway, the veemat's set up to record 'Loveskills' so there's no hurry."

Seeing that Jane's mind was firmly made up, David turned his back on the bright Bermuda sunlight and passed through the silently-opening doors of the Life Extension Institute.

Riding home on BERT Jane could not shake off her depression. The vehicle hissed over the crest of Trimmingham Hill and past the burned-out ruins of a late '70s development. As a child she had lived in one of those luxurious apartments and played in the open-air pool which now lay derelict and empty. She remembered her father helping to lime wash the white roof and to clean out the rainwater tanks under the patio. But the buildings had been commandeered for base personnel after the American takeover and had subsequently been bombed by the F.B.L.A.

The outer desolation mirrored her inner pain. It was so unfair! How the hell was she supposed to feel with her life ebbing away and these youngsters just walking into a clinic for their treatments? Only two more visits. The boy's molecular 'clock' would cease to function and the ageing process would cease. He would be a different person, almost a different species, cut off from her forever. The tears coursed silently down her cheeks leaving dark streaks of mascara to mimic the charred wood outside.

By the time they reached the Devonshire Bay stop it was early evening. A mini-bug whisked them silently to the old fisherman's cottage on the south shore which was their home. Only the solar collectors set skillfully into the stepped roof and the ubiquitous satellite dish on the lawn told the house apart from its earlier use. Perceiving his mother's distress, David quickly left the house knowing that Jane would set up the evening meal and retire to the sensormat for a run-through of all the shows she had missed that day. Sitting on the rocky shore, David could see out past the shallow aquamarine water to the reefs and the deep blue beyond. As ever, something spoke to him from that vast arc of sea and sky. But what was it? Something awesome yet wholly benign. Perhaps there would now be time to find out. After all, barring accident, he ought to have centuries to explore this and many other puzzles. Time to help reconstruct the battered ecology of the islands and, maybe, venture out into the wider world in search of experience and understanding. Now that the space programme had failed the Earth seemed more precious, more vulnerable, than ever. Who would have guessed that the destruction of the moonbase and all four L-5 colonies would virtually bring manned space flight to an end?

As the sun sank and the calm sea flowed like molten metal, David turned for home. But before reaching it his eye was caught by an odd glow from the old main road. It couldn't be the rapid transit and private cars had been banned decades ago. Quickly he sprinted back to the South Shore Road and peered out at a very strange sight.

A procession was passing eastward. At its head strode two men carrying a banner with the words NUNC STANS flashing and flickering across it in elaborate letters. There followed a group bearing torches which seemed to burn more brightly than any he had ever seen. The collective brilliance not only highlighted the features and clothes of all those present but also lent a surreal animation and warmth to the trees and other vegetation lining the old routeway. Behind the torch-bearers walked a small group of musicians playing eastern instruments in a harmonious, meditative fashion. The music was quite unlike anything David had ever heard and it evoked a sensation of calm celebration which quite unsettled him. But this did nothing to prepare him for what followed: a horse-drawn trailer bearing a simple wooden coffin which, so far as he could see, remained empty. The lid lay half buried by hibiscus blossom and oleander.

David's mind struggled to make sense of the unusual sight. What kind of a procession ... funeral? ... was this? Where was the body? Where were the mourners? Meanwhile, the

tail of the procession passed by: half a dozen jugglers wove intricate patterns with balls of golden light. Jugglers? As the figures disappeared around a bend in the road he caught a last glimpse and realised with a start that all were walking with their hands clasped behind them. The glittering pattern impressed a last half-seen motif upon his brain before it too vanished, leaving the boy shaking and startled. He looked along the empty road. No answers there. A BERT vehicle whispered by on its elevated track bound, no doubt, for the densely-populated Collector's Hill township a mile or two on. Leaves and papers fluttered in its wake and one of the latter fell at David's feet. As his eyes re-focused in the darkness the sheet flared briefly leaving a line of bright letters standing boldly forward from its surface. The words NUNC STANS lay once more before him. Quickly he reached to retrieve the paper and yet as his hand touched it the large letters vanished. In their place sprang up a new pattern of smaller words picked out in neat silver letters. Putting aside the temptation to read it there and then, he folded the sheet carefully into his shirt and ran home.

After supper Jane vanished into the study where the data-link to Boston was kept in its nest of electronic locks. She worked there most evenings for a software company in the States. Quietly the boy went to his room, secured the door with his personal code and carefully opened out the hidden paper. As he smoothed it flat the small bright script shone forth again. This time he read it with care.

The Walsingham Settlement at Blue Hole
invites you to celebrate and witness the passing
of Rinpoche the Elder to a higher plane.

Here in the ruins of a decaying civilisation
we sow the seeds of sustainable futures,
of Wisdom Cultures.

Time no more our enemy.
We pass beyond illusion to the nunc stans,
all of eternity, now.

Cast off conditioning and fear,
look beyond artificial 'life-extension'.
Be at the settlement
Friday 12th April 2028, 20:00 hours.

IT WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE FOR EVER

Celebrate the death of an elder at Walsingham? He'd heard that the military council had approved the conversion of the old dolphinarium into a research centre of some kind, but nothing had prepared him for this. And what about the criticism of life-extension?

Certainly it was artificial but in view of the pay-off who could complain? Perhaps there was something about the process which his mother and the community instruction programs had failed to tell him. Even something they didn't know. At that point David knew he had to go.

By 19:00 on Friday he was aboard BERT and heading along the edge of the still radioactive waters of Harrington Sound. His father had sailed there, studied the small tern colony and dived for calico clams. That is, before the Flatts reactor had shed its coolant into those sheltered waters. Now a green scum of mutated algae dominated the warped ecology of that once attractive basin. Soon the vehicle was passing the guarded perimeter of Tucker's Town. Several members of the Tucker's Town Defence Association could be seen behind the bullet-proof windows of the checkpoint. The boy's mother had shown no interest in the excuse he had given that he would spend the night with his uncle in that privileged ghetto. He thought of the rich elderly residents who had opted for a life of gilded isolation. Whatever the Twenty-First Century was about he could not believe it involved a privatised retreat into the haze of hallucinogenic booze, the augmented reality of the latest sensormat or compulsive channel-hopping via DBS on a wall-sized threevee!

He stepped from the vehicle just beyond the ruins of the Bermuda pottery and walked down the hill toward the settlement. Others were also heading in that direction. But it was the new base on the far side of old Kindley airfield which caught his attention. The great military arcology had been part of a wider deal struck with the British before they handed the place over. Now it completely dwarfed the small islands of St. George's and not only dominated Castle Harbour but the entire eastern half of the country. David could never see that looming mass of concrete and stone without thinking of his father who had died there in an undisclosed accident. And to what purpose? Since the military annexation of most of the eastern end it was clear that the new arcology was not intended simply for defence, reconnaissance and undersea monitoring. No, the war games were no longer games and the islands were being integrated into a world-wide network of offensive strike bases. The boy shuddered, turned his back on the hideously bristling structure and walked into the settlement.

Groups of people were drifting into an impressive wooden building which lay half hidden by trees in a small depression by the sea. As David passed through the entrance he again heard the serene music of the procession. But this time the atmosphere was quite different. A sense of enormous energy and power seemed to flow out from the centre of the hall where lay a tiny figure upon a small raised platform. The banked seats along each of the walls were almost full and David had to squeeze in as best he could. Globes of amber light seemed to hover and sway over the central area as if moved by invisible hands. But David's attention was taken up by the shrunken figure. There, clad only in a loin cloth, lay what looked like a dwarf. But this was no dwarf. It had the proportions of a normal human male, but seemed to have shrunk to the size of a small child.

"There's very little left now", whispered another at his side. "A week ago he was fully two metres tall. Now the process is nearing its end. You just arrived in time", he added with a smile.

David barely had time to comprehend before the collective sound of indrawn breath drew his attention back to the platform. A dull glow seemed to emanate from the figure. It began to pulse, to swell and fade in a gentle rhythm, like breathing. Slowly the glow gained greater definition and a rainbow-coloured aura poured forth from the wrinkled skin, washing over the faces of those present and painting the walls with bands of glowing colour. A million needles of piercing white light leapt up and outward passing through walls, ceiling and all those gathered round. Waves of heat rippled through the air and David heard a whispering, dry as old leaves. A potent stillness filled his being. Gradually the small figure collapsed inward and, as it vanished, a dazzling ball of energy exploded out from that single point to the very ends of the universe.

As each successive wave washed over and through him, David felt his awareness drawn out, extended, refined until it seemed to encompass the whole world. But he was no longer an isolated ego marooned in a single body. He felt at one with all things, all beings, all forms and phases, all time and space sharing in the same ground of being. Close by he witnessed with a new, inner sight the brightness of myriad others, sparks of sentient awareness each with their own subtle shades of individuality, their quirks and differences, yet all enfolded in a great and endless stream of energy and light arching through the wide world and beyond. Layer upon layer of harmonic complexity. The steady rhythm of currents and tides, the seasonal cycles of vegetative life, annual migrations of whales, birds, turtles, fish, tiny planktonic pulses embedded in billions of fine crystal lattices. Here too was the endless beat of wave upon rock, of wind upon sand and leaf, of sun and moon upon water, of energy, meaning, intention woven into all things. Connectedness and continuity supporting all forms and all lives.

As the great chain of being unfolded before him, the nature of the life-extension business and the manipulative mode of consciousness underlying it became clear. Yes, bodies could certainly be made to last longer. One day that would happen almost without effort and without the need for drugs of any kind. But that was really a side issue. The point was not to cheat time and mortality but to transcend them by waking to higher levels of awareness.

From the calm shores of this wider world the bright net of David's consciousness leapt upwards through layers of temporality until it emerged into an eternal and endless present, the *nunc stans*. Here the outlines of infinite futures beckoned and he knew with a clear and unshakeable insight that some of those futures led on and up beyond the great design he had glimpsed to stages and states of being that could only be guessed at.

Moreover, that distant view was tied to him personally in the here and now of island life in the Twenty-First Century.

The outlines of a vision began to form within the vast arena of his broadened awareness. He saw the islands restored, the great military complexes dismantled, the teeth drawn from a vast orbiting armada of death. He saw new forests of cedar, a new flowering of the semi-tropical ecology, great flocks of sea birds as once there had been before, new lines of speciation arising from the now-barren limestone outcrops, the depleted and polluted soil. Nor was this a landscape without people. Within the vision moved men and women unlike any he had ever known. These long-lived beings moved through a renewed world with insight and grace, touching the Earth lightly but with awesome power, nurturing, supporting, celebrating new growth and development in the life around them. In this future humankind had taken the next steps. Nothing was guaranteed. However, small though the islands were, a new balance here could affect the world.

His own life stretched out before him. Tasks like pearls lay superimposed upon this compelling landscape. David saw his own commitment to the process of global healing, the formation of an inter-species multiversity, a new dialogue with artificial minds, a flowering of Third World Cultures, the decline of war-making impulses and the re-launching of an altogether different kind of space programme. All of it lay within grasp. All lay like unfertilised seeds in the multiplex present. If the ruinous conceits of the past could be discarded new beginnings could be uncovered, negotiated, brought to fruition.

When David returned home he told his mother that he could not continue with the anti-ageing treatment.

"But why?" exclaimed Jane. "It's too late for me, but how can you throw it all away? The most precious gift of all?"

"Is it?" replied David quietly. "Is it the most precious gift? I think not."

"What do you mean?"

"Last night I saw a wider pattern. Life-extension will come, but not yet and not this way. It's still too early. Besides, I no longer fear death, for I have seen beyond it. If I fear anything it's an empty life. The pretence that a sensormat in every home will make people happy. It won't. It's so clear now. Technology gave us everything to live with, yet it provided nothing to live for. No purpose. On its own there are just a lot of very clever dead ends. It's all such a waste, such a diversion. I can't follow you on that road, so please don't ask me to."

David went to his room, packed a few clothes, a holo of his parents and a small stack of tapes. He left his universal access card on the dining room table and embraced his mother. Jane was crying again. But as he bid her farewell, David reached within and drew on that endless pool of benign energy he now shared. He touched his mother gently, healed her sorrow and walked away.

The boy, no longer a child, left the house and stood facing the sea. Beyond the sharp rocks a small flock of longtails wheeled and dipped over the ivory surf. For the first time he understood the delicate immortal meanings flowing from the tips of their streaming articulate wings.

Published in the *Gollancz – Sunday Times SF Competition Stories*, Gollancz, London, 1987, pp 35-42.