

On My Mind

12/31/99

Today marks the last day of the year. It also marks the last day of the decade of the numbing 90's. It marks the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And it marks the end of the 2nd millennium. Each event is worthy of note; each successive event more worthy of note than the one before; that I am experiencing all four of them at once is almost more awesome than I have words to express. Until the realization emerges that not everyone in the world shares that awe - that, indeed, probably more than half of the people in the world do not.

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This western definition of time - that this is the year 1999, and that the third millennium is about to begin - may be observed by the rest of the world in its commercial transactions, but in its cultural and religious transactions, many peoples - from the Hebrew to the Muslim to the Chinese - do not share this western view. And so the awesomeness loses some of its lustre, its wonder.

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There's been some obeisance to the enormity of the occasion, with the lists of the greatest men, the greatest women, the greatest books of the century or the millennium, the discussions of time-capsule contents, the evaluation of past forecasts and the making of new ones.

Unfortunately, though - at least it looks that way from here - much of what grandeur the occasion has, has been trivialized by soothsayers of Y2K gloom and doom.

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The emphasis has been on the possible problems, snafus, disasters, crises, emergencies, fiascos that could be brought about by users of the new technology of computers - after all, a very recent arrival on the scene - or brought about by bomb-carrying terrorists - also a rather new phenomenon - instead of on the more compelling, more significant, and more long-lasting growth, development, discovery, achievement, and wonders that humans have accomplished over the span of the last thousand years.

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Which, I guess, is to be expected, considering that the media is in business to make money, and everyone knows that scare headlines sell better than "feel good" ones.

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And while some coverage has been given to predictions of the marvels science and new technology may bring in the future, little attention has been paid to the future consequences of peoples' ordinary day-to-day behavior in the here and now. I've seen no space given to such questions as: What will the world be like if global warming continues? If the level of air, ground and water pollution continues at its present pace? If reefs continue to be destroyed, and marine life continues to be hunted, fished, dynamited and poisoned as it is now? If forests continue to be cut down and not replaced; agriculture continues to decline and cities to grow bigger? If oil wells start to run dry, and solid waste - garbage - continues to pile up? If the pestilences of war - from mine fields to poison and germ-laden gasses - continue to befoul our planet?

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The thoughtful appraisals, the enlightening insights, the methodical calculations that would have helped at least those of us observing today's four finales and tomorrow's four beginnings to put into perspective where we've been, what we're doing, where we're going, have not been very visible, if indeed they've even been pulled together. Discussion of the "lessons learned" and

guides, goals, aims, for the future, have been conspicuous by their absence.

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No one has asked, much less tried to answer how long can a world subjected to such destructive behavior last. Or whether there even will be a third millennium. Isn't that where our focus should be - on ensuring that there is a future?

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<I>En passant</I>, it's worth noting that more than two thousand years ago, civilizations flourished in Egypt, China, the middle East, Europe. The pyramids had already been built, the Great Wall begun, Jerusalem was thriving, and Caesar had already 'come, seen and conquered,' and in turn been assassinated on the infamous Ides of March.

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Within 24-48 hours, we will learn just how accurate the dire predictions of Y2K disaster really were. Of course, as some have pointed out, there are ripple effects that may not be felt for some time - for instance, a failed cement shipment won't affect us tomorrow, but it could three months from now when current stockpiles and enroute deliveries have all been exhausted, and the "missing" shipment does not show up.

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I'll stick my neck out, and predict that what problems there are will be on the mainland, where infrastructure systems of power and water are interlocked and interdependent across state lines, whereas the islands of the CNMI, each with infrastructure independent of the other, will, by and large, escape unscathed.

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Within the last week or so, a fear of terrorist attacks seems to have replaced the fear of computer snafus in news stories. Will be interesting to see whether that too is media driven, or whether the threat was real.

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For Tinian's Dynasty - thanks to its own creative marketing - it appears that the celebration of all those new thresholds will give it its first chance to really "strut its stuff," to perform as it has always said it could, and hoped it would.

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The hotel-casino is fully booked for New Year's eve, for the first time since its completion. There's been close cooperation with the Tinian Mayor's office from the looks of things - with the island offering early fireworks and a fiesta on the grounds of the hotel, together with performances by local musicians and a midnight fireworks show by the hotel. And, of course, the casino in full swing.

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I hope someone takes a count of participants - how many were tourists, how many were residents of the CNMI. The Dynasty may just discover that it has a larger customer base among CNMI residents than it thought it did.

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With thoughts of the future - and a concern about just how well the earth will survive in light of the destructive habits of its inhabitants and the low level of their effort to do better - on my mind, I can't help taking issue with a recent column in the <I>Tribune</I> in which its publisher asserted that every citizen of the U.S. has a right to own land. It is, perhaps, begging the question to ask why it is seen as a right only of U.S. citizens.

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But it does seem plain to me that, regardless of who's right it is, if land ownership is considered a right, it won't take long before all land in the CNMI will be spoken for. Then what? What does the next generation do about its right to own land?

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The fact is that here in the CNMI land is a finite object. It has a fixed quantity. One cannot produce more on demand. The supply will run out.

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Moreover, the same can be said world wide.

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The real issue is to what extent anyone owns land. Isn't there an old Indian saying about land being but borrowed from future generations? Not all land can be individually owned. Land must be set aside for farming, for animal husbandry, for lumber, for water sheds, for green space, and even for schools, for cities, for roads, for utilities, for a hundred other things. Our responsibility is to make sure that land resources are properly used for the benefit of all peoples. Not to make sure that each person's "right" to own land is fulfilled.

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May the new year, the new decade, the new century, the new millennium bring peace and understanding to us all.