

EXCLUSIVE CONTENT

The Day Before the Renaissance

The only antidote for 100-days mania and 24-hour news cycles is to shift focus from the urgent to the important.

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When I was 17 years old, I watched a documentary on nuclear winter that described the imagined aftermath of World War III. Hundreds of millions were dead. Hundreds of millions more were displaced or starving or slowly dying of radiation poisoning.

The summer day on which I was presented with all this was especially beautiful. Nonetheless, the film had left me in a kind of fog, shocked by the enormity of what seemed a plausibly imminent and horrific future for all mankind. Catastrophe palpably loomed even for leafy, green Summit, New Jersey, prosperous, oblivious, and bathed in sunshine as it was. I went looking for my father.

My father was a scientist. He had come to the United States in 1939 at the age of 13. He and his parents left one step ahead of the Nazis. Almost all the rest of our immediate family, almost three dozen people, were lost to the senseless horrors of the Holocaust. Five years after my father arrived he was in the U.S. Army on his way back to Europe. There, he would command artillery batteries, and later embark on a journey to find the traces of lost relatives amid the desolation of the recently liberated concentration camps.

You would have thought that enduring such horror — growing up in fear in Nazi-controlled Austria, seeing his father dragged off on Kristallnacht, fighting in the bloodiest war in the history of mankind, adjusting to life after loss and dislocation in a new and unfamiliar country — would have produced a certain grimness in my father, perhaps even pessimism. It did not. That does not mean that he forgot what had happened. Every year on the anniversary of Kristallnacht he would send my brother and sister and me reminders of the day. Right now, as I write this, the last handwritten note he ever sent me — a postcard of Dachau, Germany — hangs taped to the wall over my desk. It reads “November 10.”

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My father channeled his energies into science. Some people found solace in religion. Others found it in expressing their feelings or sense of alienation via the arts. He chose with each blow to become more rational, to turn not to God

as limned in dogma and ritual but as manifested in nature. He sought understanding in facts, proofs, and algorithms. Specifically, he sought to understand how the human brain worked, how we learned. He asked questions. Constantly. Finding the right questions and seeking answers became his mission and, I believe, his own personal religion. His work brought him to perhaps the foremost scientific and technical research institution on Earth at that time, the Murray Hill, New Jersey, headquarters of Bell Telephone Laboratories.

Bell Labs was a sprawling campus. In 1973, I had a summer job there. It was a world in which scientists were given free rein to do pure research, and the results in the nearly half-century since the labs were established had already proven to be transformational. Unlike other corporate labs or sponsored research in think tanks, this was a place that, in its heyday, was about creative minds being set free to first search for the most important questions, then for the best possible answers.

On one beautiful, but for me disturbing, afternoon that summer, I finally found my father outside near the tennis courts at the neighborhood swim club to which we belonged. We sat down and I explained what I had seen. “Hundreds of millions of people will die!” I said, “And it could happen. It could happen any minute. In fact, it probably will happen.” The U.S. and Soviet militaries were on a hair-trigger setting. Missiles were waiting in their silos and onboard submarines lurking just off our shores and theirs.

He paused for a minute and then asked with a kind of contrarian perversity that I know he and many other scientists thought was wryly charming, “I see. So, what is it that has you so upset?”

This kind of curveball question had been thrown at me my whole life. But still it made my head spin. “What do you mean, why am I so upset? The whole planet will be devastated. Hundreds of millions will die. Even if you survive, there will be no point in going on living.”

He paused for a moment and stared out into the distance. “Well,” he said calmly and with a slight trace of a Viennese accent, “you know, a hundred million people — a third of the population of Europe — died during the 14th century of bubonic plague. The result was the Renaissance.”

The Renaissance represented a civilizational watershed. It produced changes of scope and profundity that touched every aspect of human lives. The nature of states and the rules that governed kings and kingdoms, their relationship with the church, the fundamental tenets of religious belief, the nature of work and of economics, the nature of war and of peace, even the basic philosophies which societies embraced regarding the role of individuals, individual rights, the nature of the social contract, the very purpose of civilization would be rethought and changed forever. It was an upheaval that for Europe and, ultimately, the world, was epochal. How does the seemingly distant past, a time that for us is depicted only in the yellowing pages of books and in the cracked images of centuries-old frescoes, have any relevance in this era of virtual reality, big data, mapping the genome, and an entire world that seemingly has its eyes glued to glowing screens?

Imagine that you lived during the 14th century. It would be very hard to have much long-term perspective. During the outbreaks of the plague, survival was the only priority. And of course, as bad as it was, the plague was hardly the only concern. The Little Ice Age was beginning.

The Great Schism was dividing the Roman Catholic Church. Mongol rule was ending in the Middle East. The Hundred Years' War had begun. Dynastic upheaval in China ushered in the beginning of the Ming dynasty. The Scots were fighting for independence (some things never change). Much as it is today, Christian Europe and the forces of Islam were in conflict, resulting in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389.

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With the advantage of hindsight, we can see that every one of the shocks that rocked the era led not just to substantial progress, but to reordering of the basic way in which society was viewed. In the wake of the human losses of the Black Plague, labor became more valued, and a middle class began to emerge. Trade

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A weakened Roman Catholic Church began to be challenged by reformers. States began to emerge in forms like those we know today. Ultimately, within a few hundred years of the change, principalities gave way to nation-states, which in turn were locked in a power struggle with the church. The nature of governance had also been transformed.

Universities and scholarship began to take root and spread in new ways. Education for commoners, beginning with literacy, began to spread. Combining the rise of the middle class and the needs of new governments to win support from other powerful members of society, the seeds of more democratic government were planted in places like Europe, themselves predicated on a changing view of the rights of individuals and of states, the role of law, and the nature of communities.

With new technologies of navigation and new networks of roads, not only did societies interact with each other differently, thus instigating changes in cultures, but so did the nature of warfare — navies grew more important, and gunpowder and other new technologies of fighting ushered in the end of the reign of knights and local warlords. With governments and political systems changing, substantial shifts in the nature of the diplomacy required to resolve such conflicts also took place.

In other words, while the average citizen of the 14th century saw struggle and chaos, changes were afoot that would redefine how people thought of themselves, who they were, what a community was, and of the nature of basic rights, of governance, of work and economics, of war and peace. To understand the future and how it would be different from the past, it would therefore have been essential to consider the questions associated with such changes. To ask in the context of the changing world — and to ask again, amid what was to follow — how does all this change how I view myself, my community, my rights, my government, my job, and the way the world works around me?

As was the case during the 14th century, we too are living in what might be described as the day before the Renaissance. An epochal change is coming, a transformational tsunami is on the horizon, and most of our leaders and many of us have our backs to it. We're looking in the wrong direction. Indeed, many of those in positions of power and their supporters are so actively trying to cling to

the past we can almost hear their fingernails clawing at the earth as they try to avoid accepting the inevitable and momentous changes to come.

If we sense that such changes are coming, we have an urgent responsibility to ourselves, our families, and our communities to prepare for them. How do we begin to address these massive shifts in nearly every facet of our lives? How can we begin to prepare for changes that are of a scope and substance that may be greater than any faced for 20 generations, some that may be so great that they force us to reconsider our most fundamental ideas about ourselves and our world? And how can we shift our focus away from the old, comfortable formulations about how societies are organized and operate, what they look like, who should lead them, and what course corrections are essential?

Technological shifts will be only a part of the cascading disruptions associated with the new era. As history shows, these shifts will, in turn, change human behaviors, open new areas to human understanding, enable new forms of creative expression, empower new means of economic activity, and inspire new thinking about the way lives and governments and businesses should be organized. These changes will empower the reweaving of the fabric of our lives much as the steam-powered looms of the Industrial Revolution did not only with textiles but with the lives of workers, the rise of a new middle class, the empowerment of unions, the recasting of politics, the remaking of the relationships associated with colonialism, the shifting of the power of nation-states, and so many other changes.

In every area of our lives — whether we are rich or poor, residents of a great city or a desolate region untouched by technology — it seems certain that disruptions on a similar scale are coming. Indeed, they are already beginning.

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Of course, asking the right questions, and getting the right answers, is easier said than done. We have loads of biases. We expect the world will confirm those biases, and we mishear and misread events around us as a result. We expect

the future to be like the past. (After all, we live in a world in which 85 percent of

the time the weather tomorrow is the same as the weather today.) We are also harried and so busy reacting to the demands of the moment, much like the average citizen of the 14th century dealing with war and plagues and climatic catastrophes, that pausing to get to the root questions often seems like an impossible luxury, and one we are ill-prepared for. This last point is also important. If we don't understand the technologies or other forces at play in changing our world — be they the burgeoning sciences of the early Renaissance or the neural networks or cyberthreats of today — then how can we possibly understand what is to come?

Furthermore, if those who are supposed to lead us don't understand the changes, they can't ask the right questions either. What's more, they typically have a vested interest in resisting the questions. The status quo got them where they are, and they have a strong interest in preserving it. For example, the predisposition of our political leaders to seek to capitalize on the fears of the moment to advance their self-interested desire to cling to power regularly leads us to keep our eyes on yesterday's headlines rather than on the horizon. Fearmongering is not only exploitative — and, by the way, plays right into the hands of some, like terrorists, who seek to promote fear — it is also a potentially fatal distraction from the bigger risks associated with potential coming changes for which we are ill-prepared.

I know some of this from personal experience. In the late 1990s, I founded a company devoted to using the power of technology to help top policymakers and business leaders get the answers they needed. My proposition was that now, thanks to the internet, we can use sophisticated tools (this was before Google) to find any answer you need. Seemed like a gold mine. It was not. Why? Because what we discovered was that the big problem in most organizations was not finding the answers, it was getting our would-be clients to figure out the right questions. I've spoken to many top intelligence officials who acknowledge that they have the same problem in the US government — vast apparatuses with huge resources devoted to gathering information, but real problems when it comes to arriving at the questions that might make those people and satellites and computers useful. One current top intelligence official said to me, "Asking the right question is the biggest challenge we face. People typically let the immediate past shape their questions — how do we avoid another shoe bomber is an example, when that's not a risk that we're likely to face. Or they let their

area of expertise and their desire to be useful shift their focus. This is kind of the when-all-you-have-is-a-hammer-everything-looks-like-a-nail problem, and it leads people who feel the future is drone warfare to ask questions that end in answers that require drone warfare. Or, to choose an example, it leads people who have spent much of their adult lives fighting Saddam Hussein to ask questions after 9/11 about his role, even though he didn't have one. And that did not turn out well."

So, in the end, Hamlet had it wrong. "To be or not to be" is not the question. The question of questions is, "What is the question?" In this respect, history tells us to start with the basics, the foundational questions that we have for too long taken for granted. There are questions like: "Who am I?" "Who rules?" "What is money?" "What is a job?" "What is peace?" and "What is war?"

One lesson is that the more profound the changes, the more basic the questions we should be asking; it is the simplest and most direct questions that cut to the fundamental issues of life, that resist nuance and evasion and rationalization more effectively.

A question like "Who am I?" can lead to questions about how we derive our identity and, in a connected world, how that and our view of communities is likely to change. The answers to those questions can lead us to question whether our old views and systems of governance for communities will work as well in the future, or whether they need to be changed. And they will also raise questions about the role of technology in helping to implement those changes, in creating other kinds of communities, good and bad, driven by our search for identity that might also impact our lives in profound ways.

While there are, as always, a few bright minds out there pioneering new ways of thinking and starting to ask the right questions, it is the responsibility of *all* of us as citizens to see the questions raised here or in similar discussions as more than intellectual exercises. Our futures depend on getting this right — as individuals, as communities, as nations, and as a civilization.

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fear of the unknown. You cannot be intellectually rigorous in your analysis of where we have been without coming to the conclusion that where we are going

will be a better place. Rather than the fear that seems to have suffused so much of our discussion of the recent past, the fear that is exploited as a tool by so many leaders, it is my deeply held belief that asking the right questions about tomorrow's world and looking for those who are helping us to arrive at the answers is a certain path not only to greater understanding of the massive changes to come but also to greater optimism about the world we are bequeathing to our children and grandchildren.

In the end, at least, that is the message I think my father was trying to convey to me that summer afternoon in 1973, and it is certainly the one that he, like his innovative colleagues at Bell Labs, and a lifetime of study have left me with. Thanks to human ingenuity, most of the changes history has brought, large or small, whether they seemed catastrophic in the moment or not, have ushered in progress in its many forms and led us to the better world in which we live today — a world in which people live longer, are better educated, are healthier, have access to more opportunities, are wealthier, and have every reason to be happier than any prior generation in history.

If we can keep that in mind, then perhaps not only will we not shy away from these questions, but approach their answers with real imagination, not only wondering what might be possible, but by helping to make better outcomes more likely by considering them and becoming their champions.

This article is adapted from David Rothkopf's new book, [The Great Questions of Tomorrow](#).

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