

The soft path to change is collapse.

Are we there?

By Don Hill

I imagine this.

It is the 1980s. I am in New York City, attending a *World Futures Society* annual convention; this is where 'futurists' of every sort gather – not so much the wild-eyed and fanciful, but rather the best and the brightest thinkers of the day. The media hang on their every word. Forecasts are given bold headlines. I am one of hundreds of journalists on site.

Alvin Toffler delivered the keynote address, an outline of his just published book *The Third Wave*; it is one of his seminal works (of course, we could not know that then). Another prophet of the 1980s, **Roger Smith**, the chairman of General Motors is also in attendance. He talks of robots replacing people on automobile assembly lines. "It is the way toward relieving human drudgery," he predicts confidently. He did not foresee the 'rust belt', the mothballing of countless auto plants during his watch, and the displacement of blue collar workers idled by his push to automate. The future shock of **Michael Moore** and his film *Roger & Me* is likely the last thing on his mind.

It is also *Morning in America* and **Ronald Reagan** is the president. The evil empire is the Soviet Union, and *Star Wars* is no longer a movie but a military proposal to control a ring of space that encircles the earth with laser technology. It is the darkest days of the Cold War. Kids begin to think they will not live to be adults. A new entry is compiled into the DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, the medical guidebook used by psychotherapists), to account for childhood anxiety over the future. Pills are prescribed.

Against this backdrop, one of the most memorable conversations of my career as a documentary-maker unfolded in New York City. I remember it as if it... well, it was such a long time ago.

WASN'T THE FUTURE WONDERFUL?

A petite woman, **Hazel Henderson** grasps my hand in greeting and utters a firm but pleasant hello. I am told she is an *evolutionary economist*, "an up and comer" according to my colleague **Robert Theobald**, himself no less influential, one of the so-called Prophets of Doom in the 1960s. We are at the *World Futures Society* conference conducting interviews for a proposed CKUA radio documentary series. He assures me Henderson is "someone you will be hearing about." He is quite right. Her

editorials now appear in more than 400 newspapers worldwide. She has provided counsel to the White House and the **Clintons**.

The world I described to Henderson in the 1980s seems so much like the one we live with today: war spiraling out of control... social woes... financial calamity... bad weather too. After a long and earnest rant, I finally framed a question around the bleak picture I painted. "I understand your concerns," she said, quietly.

And then a heartbeat later, she dropped this bomb. "The soft path to change is collapse."

I have thought about Henderson's candid response for a long, long time. And I now take it to mean that the soft path to change is not about giving *in* or giving *up* on a situation, but rather giving *way*—especially to circumstances that never seem to improve despite our best intent and countless

interventions.

My column in *Edmontonians* several months ago outlined a financial calamity [*The 4th Quarter: Stormy Weather Ahead?* October 2007]. One forward thinking economist based in our city (who will go nameless), dropped me a line after reading the column. "You articulated in print what everyone I

know is discussing in private," he admitted. This response reminded me of my daughter's habit as a youngster of closing her eyes and thinking the world had disappeared.

It is now likely the worst-case scenario I sketched out last fall: a stock market meltdown and economic conditions not seen since grandma and grandpa's mom and dad were children. This is an old movie. And I don't dare predict the ending. Might it be smarter instead to invoke Hazel Henderson's maxim? Could it open the door to authentic change?

The way forward might begin with some fresh thinking. I say *might* because the history of the future tells me it is impossible to predict where the next bright idea is going to emerge. Innovation is like a river that goes underground: It will pop up in unexpected places.

Experience tells me, however, it is possible to create the conditions to bring about positive results in the world, the workplace, the community and, something you and I have immediate control over, *ourselves*. My CKUA radio program, *Inspiring Leadership*, for instance, gave voice to countless great ideas—some prescriptive, others food for thought—a map toward a future where imagination counts for everything. (The documentary series ended in January, but remains on the web at www.ckua.com).

THE WAY FORWARD

If we can agree that at best democracy is a messy affair, you know that merely being 'first past the post' can set substantial groups of people off on a siding (we used to call it Western Alienation). Just because you have silenced someone by winning the overall vote doesn't mean you have changed their mind; it creates the conditions for future conflict. And there is always the potential for a majority of people in a room to lift up their hands and make a terrible decision.

"The opinion of 10,000 men is of no value," Roman Emperor **Marcus Aurelius** complained long, long ago, "if none of them know anything about the subject."

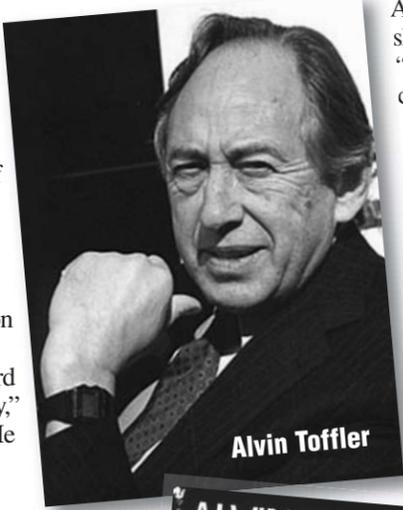
So what to do?

The Quakers are a faith-based group that employs a unique model of governance which, I believe, creates the conditions for an informed and genuine consensus that sustains long-lasting decisions. Leaders are obligated to bring everyone up to speed. There must be a comprehensive level of understanding about the issues at hand—the big stuff that will affect the future welfare of the community—before a vote is taken. In this way, there can be an agreement to disagree and still move forward. There is also an implicit understanding that collaboration requires the best ideas must be acted upon no matter what quarter they come from; the voice of a child is just as important as the elder's.

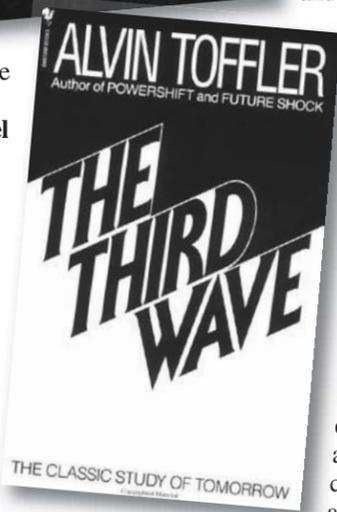
And, if it is true that the soft path to change is indeed collapse then we have a remarkable opportunity at hand.

You already know what makes the world weary—what is wrong is self-evident. I have another idea in mind for a new column and series of broadcasts. It will require your assistance—yes, *you*—to let me know what's going right. Send me a message. ✓

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Alvin Toffler



Edmontonian IN EXILE

By Janet Edmondson in Calgary

Calgary's 17th Avenue—The Red Mile—is lined with trendy restaurants, popular bars, and expensive boutiques. Lots of shoppers... lots of tourists... lots of sports fans celebrating, or lamenting, the Flames latest game.

And, as is the case in most major cities, this popular location is also home for a variety of panhandlers, prostitutes and addicts. There is a serious lack of public toilets in uptown Calgary. When nature calls, where can all these folk "go"?

This month, the City of Calgary will complete the installation of an automated public toilet—APT—in Tomkins Park,



Sample 100...

right in the middle of The Red Mile. This self-contained unit will have an automatic sink and self-cleaning toilets and floors.

After each use, it will disinfect itself for about 45 seconds, then dry with a high pressure blower. Located right on the corner of the park, at a busy intersection, its visibility will make it accessible and safe. The unit will monitor the length of time a user is inside, automatically opening the door after 10 minutes, to minimize criminal activity.

The city already provides several public washrooms and port-a-potties in the downtown area, but these are often hard to find, dirty, scary or closed. The APT can be accessed 24 hours a day, is big enough for wheelchair users or families, and will be sanitized after each use. There's even an emergency panic button inside.

The toilet costs about \$250,000. City administrators are investigating sponsorship and advertising possibilities to defray installation and maintenance costs of future units.

The City of Edmonton has chosen a cheaper, less satisfactory solution to the same problem on Whyte Avenue. Merry-makers will get four portable urinals, on weekend nights in the summer only. The units will be set up each evening and be removed in the morning, at a cost of \$20,000. I can think of at least three reasons that these would be insufficient: Think winter, think female, think beyond #1.

Is Calgary really that much more "flush" that it can provide permanent, safe and accessible-to-all public washroom facilities? ✓



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