

A History Lesson Offers Hope for the Future

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New Year's is fast approaching, and we can expect a certain sort of e-mail to make the rounds as usual. It's one of those lists of interesting factoids about what life was like 100 years ago – sure to elicit “ooo's” and “ah's” as it reveals how much everyday life can change over the course of a century.

When this year's e-mail came around, I paid special attention. I am particularly fond of the year 1909. In a rare coincidence, all four of my grandparents were born that year. My paternal grandparents came early in the year, a month apart, and eight months later came my maternal grandparents, two weeks apart.



The author's maternal grandparents met in the 1920s.

This unusual alignment of the stars gave the 1909 factoids an especially meaningful context for me. When my grandparents came into the world, people weren't expected to live beyond 50 years, the Model T Ford was just coming off the assembly line, and so many things we take for granted didn't even exist yet: toasters, sunglasses, ballpoint pens, antibiotics, airports, and plastic, to name a few. Women couldn't vote, there were 46 states in the U.S., and people bought homes from Sears Roebuck. An especially sobering fact for me, having had my first baby just over a year ago: infants made up almost 20 percent of all deaths in 1909.

Both sides of my family prepared celebrations to honor the centennial of our grandparents' births, and we marveled at the social and technological changes that they witnessed during their lives. I got to thinking about what that pace of change suggests for the next 100 years. I work in the realm of environmental sustainability, and I couldn't help but wonder: Will my son inherit an earth dominated by the political and social turmoil that inevitably accompanies insufficient resources? Or will human innovation continue finding cleaner and ever more efficient ways to feed, clothe, transport, and house a burgeoning global population? Is there reason to be optimistic about the future?

Sometimes I feel quite dejectedly that the answer is no. People seem too caught up in today to envision a different sort of life for tomorrow, and more importantly, too unable to take the actions needed to turn that vision into reality.

Recently I overheard a caller on a radio station. He was berating the bride and groom of a recent wedding for their announcement that they were making a donation to an African village as a carbon offset for their celebration. OK, so were the wedding guests at a posh urban hotel the wrong crowd for this announcement? Maybe. Could it be argued that if the couple *really* wanted to do the right thing with regard to climate change, they would have had a smaller, simpler, cheaper wedding? Probably.

But the caller's hostile tone, and the radio show host's empathetic response about "climate change and all that hooley," left me sad and dismayed.

Other times I feel more hopeful. The wind and solar energy industries are growing at unprecedented rates. My reusable grocery bags don't elicit funny looks from cashiers anymore. And I just found out about a plastics company that not only offers a line of products – from toothbrushes to food storage containers – that are 100% recycled plastic, but you can *ship your toothbrush back to them when you're done*, and it gets recycled into something else! Isn't that wonderful? And isn't it crazy that I could get excited about something that seems like such an obvious solution?



The author's son was born in 2008, 99 years after all four of his maternal great-grandparents.

A-ha – but it's only obvious to people like me who spend their days thinking about issues of sustainability. For many, if not most Americans, the reactions (I think) would range from, "Huh?" to "I don't have time for that!" to "Gross! They're going to re-use my *toothbrush*!?"

And this is where the historical perspective comes in. It helps to look into the rearview mirror. As 2009 comes to a close, peek back for a minute and remember how incredibly different life is for a baby born this year than for one born in 1909. When my grandma was a child, a special Christmas gift was *toothpaste*, not a plastic toy or electronic game. Then fast-forward to 2109 and consider what life will look like for your descendants.

Sweeping changes in short periods of time are par for the course under the current pace of human technology. Remembering that can, I think, help people feel more open to (and accepting of) the tiny little changes that need to happen from day to day and year to year. Eventually, we're all going to have to recycle our toothbrushes – and lots of other things – instead of throwing them away. And eventually, our kids, or our grandkids, are going to say, "Grandma, you *still* throw your toothbrush in the garbage? You are *so* old-fashioned."

Most aspects of everyday American life in 2009 would have been beyond the imagination of people a century ago. So I won't even venture to predict what life will be like in 2109. What I do know is that women are going to continue raising children and grandchildren, living lives one day at a time, and trying to leave a legacy for the future. Political events and great discoveries make the textbooks, but it is the way in which we shop, eat, get around, manage our households, and guide our families that will have the biggest impact on the course of history.

The next time you feel helpless in the face of rapidly changing technology, or find yourself resisting change, remember to look into the rearview mirror. But don't dwell there too long. Keep your eyes on the road ahead and keep driving forward (in your solar-powered, battery-operated car).

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