



## So It's 2000—Now What?

*What lessons does the new century bring?*

BY BRUCE GLASRUD

If you're reading this issue of *Nonprofit World* in your usual timely manner, you've probably decided that the following things are true:

- You've dodged a major bullet from the Y2K bug.
- Armageddon is holding off, at least until your next funding cycle.
- Nostradamus shoulda stuck to being a physician instead of a psychic.
- The turn of the century has brought your organization plenty to celebrate—even if you simply rejoice in disaster averted.

It's too bad that apprehension over the Y2K computer problem robbed us of much of the celebratory mood surrounding the new century. Much attention and resources were diverted toward fixing a problem that should have and could have been anticipated years before. That should be a lesson in itself.

### Use High Ceremony to Mark Big Transitions.

Perhaps it's just as well we were preoccupied. We've largely lost our sense of ceremony. We know how to produce a lot of superficial noise and glitz. Yet, our social rituals have lost much of their ability to mark meaningful transitions. Our graduations

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and weddings have become empty parodies of themselves.

Our modern neglect of meaningful celebration explains why gang membership is attractive to many young people. Being “jumped-into” a gang, no matter how violent a process, marks an intense rite of passage and leaves a lasting psychological imprint. Whether Y2K was a bang or a bust, perhaps we've been granted a reprieve to create some meaningful and lasting transitions for our nonprofits and communities.

Of course, the 21st century actually begins January 1, 2001, not 2000, but we always like to celebrate at junctures delineated by nice round numbers. If there's ever been a time to symbolically observe a big transition, this is it. Here are some suggestions:

#### Toss Out the Trash.

Over the past few years, you've probably heard the phrase “building a bridge to the 21st century” a hundred times. The problem is, even though we've built that bridge, we're dragging our 20th-century baggage across it.

Now's the perfect time for some organizational spring cleaning. Start with the junk in your office: outdated brochures, typewriter ribbons, and carbon paper for heaven's sake! Make archive copies of material you've produced over the years. It's important to preserve organizational history. But the rest goes!

Carry out your organizational spring cleaning with consensus, celebration, and ceremony. Here are steps to take:

- Make up a theme such as “Dumping Things Off the Bridge to the 21st Century,” “21st Century Make-Over,” “20th Century Compost Pile,” or “Trashing the 20th.”
- Have a scavenger hunt for stuff needing to be tossed. Organize in teams so that no one makes decisions alone.
- Hold nominations for the “Object Most Likely Not to Be Needed in the 21st Century” and have staff vote for the things they would like to see headed for the garbage.



- Invite your staff, board, clients, funders, and other stakeholders to a goodby-to-the-past ceremony. You'll impress them with your readiness for the future.
- At your ceremony, perform a ritual in which you consign your junk to the dustbin of history. Our ancestors threw their old stuff into ceremonial bonfires to mark the passage of time. They probably didn't need a burning permit, though. Perhaps you could have each person throw something into the dumpster and say a few words of farewell.

### **Put Yourself on Trial.**

Next, it's time for more serious cleansing. At this level, you must challenge your policies, procedures, plans, strategies, goals, and even your mission. Here, you're likely to

run into serious opposition, but the rewards are worth the challenge. Here are steps to make this process more palatable:

- Put your core programs on trial. You might call it "The Trial for the Century."
- Appoint a defender and prosecutor from among your board and staff. The prosecutor's job will be to send old programs to the dungeon. The defender will try to prove that the programs are appropriate for the future.
- Appoint a judge and jury—neutral people volunteering from the greater community—to attend your trial and make the final decisions.
- Call witnesses from among your stakeholders, clients, and funders. Have them role-play about the future outcomes of your present

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programs to show why they will or won't be viable in the future. Get adventurous and put those outcomes a few years out ahead!

Have fun with this exercise. If taken too seriously, the creative learning about what works and what doesn't work gets lost. The trial should be a way of evaluating your core programs to see if they are 21st-century-ready, in as non-threatening a way as possible.

Every organization needs to put its programs on trial, whether literally or figuratively, to be sure they're ready for the challenges ahead.



Funders such as United Way would do well to perform this sort of creative review as an alternative to the connect-the-dots outcome evaluations currently in vogue.

### **Do Unto Yourself Before Others Do Unto You.**

Most strategic planning leads nonprofits through a paradigm of business-as-usual, just bigger and better. If you don't have a clue that our fast-changing society won't be well-served by business-as-usual nonprofits, your millennial awakening will be rude indeed.

The social climate among your funders, legislators, clients, and constituents is for change and action. For better or worse, we live in anxious times. If your stakeholders become nervous about your organi-

zation's field of endeavor, change will be swiftly imposed upon you. Wouldn't you rather control your own change? Here's how to determine your 21st-century destiny:

- Have good competitive intelligence. Scan external and internal environments for possible impacts on your mission. Do so constantly.
- Envision what you might need to do. Run through scenarios to prepare for possible action. Be proactive, not reactive. Reaction is for the clueless.
- Become a lean, mean mission machine. Turbo-charge your board and staff so that your organization can operate in a high-speed, low-drag mode under whatever conditions it finds itself.

- Cultivate optimism. Banish pessimistic thinking.
- Transform your mission and workproduct. Modernize from problem-solving drudgery to evolution-generating confidence.
- Keep your eye on the future, not the past or present. What worked before won't work in the years to come, at least not in the same way.

One bright spot on the horizon is that you'll no longer be subjected to a plethora of Vision 2000 planning themes. (We'll have to pick out another cool number. How about Vision 2020.5?)

So, let's get goin' across that ol' bridge to the 21st century. But please do leave as much of your 20th-century baggage behind you as you can. Your clients and communities need your full attention.

Regain your sense of pro-future optimism as 2001 boots up. Celebrate! Create! Innovate! And, above all, anticipate! ■



*Bruce Glasrud is an anthro-futurist and president of Third Sector Horizons (4837 Hanson Road, Shoreview, Minnesota 55126-5919, 651-482-0324, futururer@aol.com), specializing in nonprofit organization futures.*