
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



To the Future, through Difficulty

Imagine it's 2063.

A copy of this column has been sealed inside a stainless steel box hidden in the lobby of the Memorial Union at Emporia State University for 50 years, waiting for the university's bicentennial.

The column is written on paper — paper, imagine that! — because I don't know how technology will have changed in 50 years; I only know that it will change. Whatever electronic medium we consider state-of-the-art today will certainly be obsolete in a few years. Remember floppy disks and eight tracks?

There are other things in the box as well: A copy of the student newspaper, sports memorabilia and a stuffed toy Corky, the school mascot. There are messages from students here to their future selves, mostly warnings about sloth and procrastination.

But what I'm most interested in when the lid is lifted and sunlight again fills this box is not what is inside it, but the faces of the people who peer into it. These will be the faces of a new generation of Kansans. A few may remember the hard winter of 2013-14, but many more were as yet unborn when the capsule was sealed.

I'd like to be there to meet them, but I know the odds are against me, unless I'm lucky enough to become a centenarian.

Although I was asked to write this as a "letter to the future" and seal it in the time capsule, I've decided to share it with you now because I have a message that just won't wait:

What are you doing today to make the future a better place?

As I write this, I'm leafing through two yearbooks — one from 1913 and the other from 1963. What I love about both books are the faces of our faculty, staff and students.

Each individual came with hopes and dreams — and fears — and they took a stand here, to make the future their own. Not all of them won. Some were crushed by the weight of financial obligations, others were felled by illness or accident, and yet others did not return home from wars fought on foreign shores. But all of them contributed to making Emporia State University — and Kansas — into what it is today.

If you've followed this column, you probably know how much I love books. One of my favorites is "The Swerve: How the World Became Modern," by Stephen Greenblatt.

As a student back in the 1960s, Greenblatt bought a used copy of a translation of "On the Nature of Things," a long Latin poem by

Lucretius. Among other things, the poet said that human beings are part of the material world, made up of atoms locked in eternal and swerving motion. He also suggested that a full life should include friendship, philanthropy and happiness.

This book, containing what some have called the greatest thought that mankind has ever hit upon, was lost during the Dark Ages. But after a thousand-year slumber, it was rediscovered, by a solitary book hunter during the Renaissance who spent his life scouring monasteries for ancient manuscripts, which he copied for a few friends. "On the Nature of Things" went on to influence generations of thinkers from Isaac Newton to Thomas Jefferson. It helped create the modern world.

"There are moments, rare and powerful," Greenblatt writes, "in which a writer, long vanished from the face of the earth, seems to stand in your presence and speak to you directly, as if he bore a message meant for you above all others."

I had that feeling reading "The Swerve."

History turns on the hinge of what we do every day, whether we think our actions are significant or not. Sometimes, like the book hunter and scribe Poggio Bracciolini, what we do has consequences that reach far beyond our own lives. Let us strive to perform our tasks with an eye to the common good.

You've probably heard the phrase *carpe diem*, which is Latin for "seize the day." Well, I think we should add another phrase to our vocabulary:

Seize the future.

My dream is that we make the future a better place for them, just as past generations did for us. We are all of us part of a great chain of being, stretching from the most remote post to an unimagined future. We are responsible for our particular link of the chain. Sometimes, it's easy to push or pull the chain in the direction of the common good; at other times, it seems nearly impossible, because of custom or circumstance.

But keep pushing we must. There is nothing we can do to change the past, but the future is ours to lose.

Carpe futurum.

Michael Shonrock is the 16th president of Emporia State University, an undying optimist, and self-described futurist. He welcomes reader comments at adastra@emporia.edu
