

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN STRATEGIC PLANNING AND STRATEGIC FORESIGHT?

Strategic planning and foresight are both approaches to planning for the future. But they are different in several important ways:

Strategic Planning	Strategic Foresight
Starts in the past: What can we do better, faster, or cheaper than we've done before?	Starts in the future: What trends and forces are on the horizon, and how can our strategy make us more competitive and resilient?
Time horizon: 1-3 years	Time horizon: 10+ years
Assumptions about the future: • The future will be similar to the past • Current trends will continue linearly • We can predict and control outcomes	Assumptions about the future: • The future will be different from the past • Multiple futures are possible • We can influence but not control outcomes
Activities: • SWOT analysis • Historic lookback at key metrics • Competitive analysis • Financial projections based on historical trends • Risk assessment of known variables • Performance benchmarking	Activities: • Horizon scanning • Scenario development • Signals and sensemaking • Implications wheel analysis • Cross-impact analysis • Wild card planning
Most useful in stable, predictable environments	Most useful in volatile, uncertain, complex environments
Helps you navigate change when the rules and variables are known	Helps you thrive when the rules are changing, when there's a lot of ambiguity
Decision-making approach: • Optimize based on past performance • Minimize known risks • Focus on efficiency improvements	Decision-making approach: • Build adaptive capacity for multiple futures • Prepare for emerging opportunities and threats • Focus on resilience and agility
Success metrics: • Achievement of predetermined targets • ROI on planned investments • Variance from plan	Success metrics: • Readiness for multiple scenarios • Speed of adaptation to change • Early identification of emerging opportunities

WHAT STRATEGIC FORESIGHT IS NOT

Strategic foresight is not a crystal ball or a woo-woo process. Done well, strategic foresight has guts. And data. [Lots of data]. And heart. And meat. And creativity. And compelling calls to action.

Strategic foresight is harder than strategic planning because it's NOT cut-and-paste. It requires an open [not fixed] mindset, scanning a wide variety of sources for data [not opinions], and talking to people outside your normal field of vision. It also requires us to think and act beyond our current situation and self-interests, to consider what we're leaving to our heirs, successors, children, and grandchildren.

Strategic foresight is not easy. But it is rewarding. Like having a superpower.

**“ THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION WE
MUST ASK OURSELVES IS, ‘ARE WE
BEING GOOD ANCESTORS?’ ”**

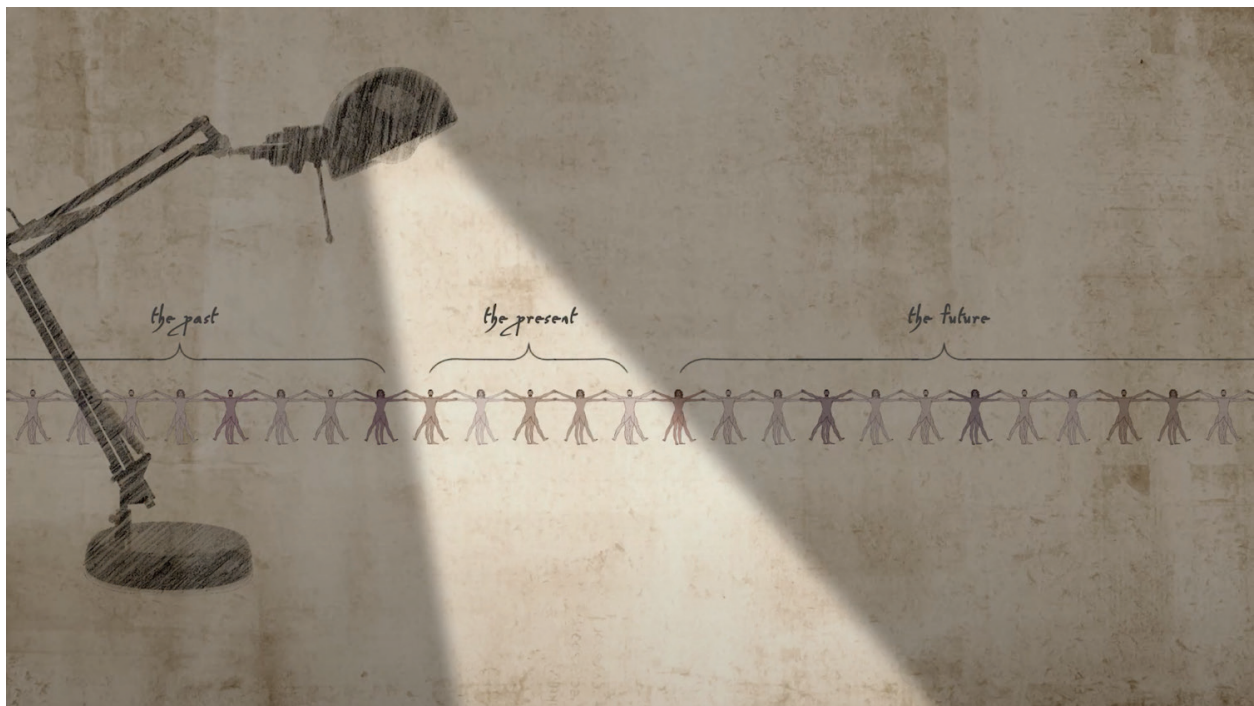
— JONAS SALK

PRE-READING

The purpose of the pre-reading assignment is to “prime” you for expansive, long-term thinking. Please review the article below published on the Long Now Foundation blog at <https://blog.longnow.org/2020/07/20/six-ways-to-think-long-term-a-cognitive-toolkit-for-good-ancestors>, or watch the video at <https://longnow.org/seminars/2020/oct/28/becoming-better-ancestor>.

Six Ways to Think Long-term: A Cognitive Toolkit for Good Ancestors

by **Roman Krznaric** on July 20th, 2020



Human beings have an astonishing evolutionary gift: agile imaginations that can shift in an instant from thinking on a scale of seconds to a scale of years or even centuries. Our minds constantly dance across multiple time horizons. One moment we can be making a quickfire response to a text and the next thinking about saving for our pensions or planting an acorn in the ground for posterity. We are experts at the temporal pirouette. Whether we are fully making use of this gift is, however, another matter.

The need to draw on our capacity to think long-term has never been more urgent, whether in areas such as public health care (like planning for the next pandemic on the horizon), to deal with technological risks (such as from AI-controlled lethal autonomous weapons), or to confront the threats of an ecological crisis where nations sit around international conference tables, bickering about their near-term interests, while the planet burns and species disappear. At the same time, businesses can barely see past the next quarterly report, we are addicted to 24/7 instant news, and find it hard to resist the Buy Now button.

What can we do to overcome the tyranny of the now? The easy answer is to say we need more long-term thinking. But here's the problem: almost nobody really knows what it is.

In researching my latest book, [*The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long Term in a Short-Term World*](#), I spoke to dozens of experts — psychologists, futurists, economists, public officials, investors — who were all convinced of the need for more long-term thinking to overcome the pathological short-termism of the modern world, but few of them could give me a clear sense of what it means, how it works, what time horizons are involved and what steps we must take to make it the norm. This intellectual vacuum amounts to nothing less than a conceptual emergency.

Let's start with the question, 'how long is long-term?' Forget the corporate vision of 'long-term', which rarely extends beyond a decade. Instead, consider a hundred years as a minimum threshold for long-term thinking. This is the current length of a long human lifespan, taking us beyond the ego boundary of our own mortality, so we begin to imagine futures that we can influence but not participate in ourselves. Where possible we should attempt to think longer, for instance taking inspiration from cultural endeavours like the [10,000 Year Clock](#) (the Long Now Foundation's flagship project), which is being designed to stay accurate for ten millennia. At the very least, when you aim to think 'long-term', take a deep breath and think 'a hundred years and more'.

The Tug of War for Time

It is just as crucial to equip ourselves with a mental framework that identifies different forms of long-term thinking. My own approach is represented in a graphic I call 'The Tug of War for Time' (see below). On one side, six drivers of short-termism threaten to drag us over the edge of civilizational breakdown. On the other, six ways to think long-term are drawing us towards a culture of longer time horizons and responsibility for the future of humankind.

These six ways to think long are not a simplistic blueprint for a new economic or political system, but rather comprise a cognitive toolkit for challenging our obsession with the here and now. They offer conceptual scaffolding for answering what I consider to be the most important question of our time: *How can we be good ancestors?*

The tug of war for time is the defining struggle of our generation. It is going on both inside our own minds and in our societies. Its outcome will affect the fate of the billions upon billions of people who will inhabit the future. In other words, it matters. So let's unpack it a little.

The tug of war for time



Graphic: Nigel Hawtin

Six drivers of short-termism

Tyranny of the Clock
the acceleration of time
since the Middle Ages



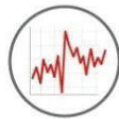
Digital Distraction
the hijacking of attention
by technology



Political Presentism
myopic focus
on the next election



Speculative Capitalism
volatile boom-bust
financial markets



Networked Uncertainty
the rise of global risk
and contagion



Perpetual Progress
the pursuit of
endless economic growth



Six ways to think long

Deep-Time Humility
grasp we are an eyblink
in cosmic time



Legacy Mindset
be remembered
well by posterity



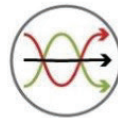
Intergenerational Justice
consider the seventh
generation ahead



Cathedral Thinking
plan projects beyond
a human lifetime



Holistic Forecasting
envision multiple pathways
for civilisation



Transcendent Goal
strive for
one-planet thriving



Drivers of Short-termism

Amongst the six drivers of short-termism, we all know about the power of digital distraction to immerse us in a here-and-now addiction of clicks, swipes and scrolls. A deeper driver has been the growing tyranny of the clock since the Middle Ages. The mechanical clock was the key machine of the Industrial Revolution, regimenting and speeding up time itself, bringing the future ever-nearer: by 01700 most clocks had minute hands and by 01800 second hands were standard. And it still dominates our daily lives, strapped to our wrists and etched onto our screens.

Speculative capitalism has been a source of boom-bust turbulence at least since the Dutch Tulip Bubble of 01637, through to the 02008 financial crash and the next one waiting around the corner. Electoral cycles also play their part, generating a myopic political presentism where politicians can barely see beyond the next poll or the latest tweet. Such short-termism is amplified by a world of networked uncertainty, where events and risks are increasingly interdependent and globalised, raising the prospect of rapid contagion effects and rendering even the near-term future almost unreadable.

Looming behind it all is our obsession with perpetual progress, especially the pursuit of endless GDP growth, which pushes the Earth system over critical thresholds of carbon emissions, biodiversity loss and other [planetary boundaries](#). We are like a kid who believes they can keep blowing up the balloon, bigger and bigger, without any prospect that it could ever burst.

Put these six drivers together and you get a toxic cocktail of short-termism that could send us into a blind-drunk civilizational freefall. As [Jared Diamond](#) argues, ‘short-term decision making’ coupled with an absence of ‘courageous long-term thinking’ has been at the root of civilizational collapse for centuries. A stark warning, and one that prompts us to unpack the six ways to think long.

Six Ways to Think Long-term

1. Deep-Time Humility: grasp we are an eyeblink in cosmic time

Deep-time humility is about recognising that the two hundred thousand years that humankind has graced the earth is a mere eyeblink in the cosmic story. As John McPhee (who coined the concept of deep time in 01980) put it: ‘Consider the earth’s history as the old measure of the English yard, the distance from the king’s nose to the tip of his outstretched hand. One stroke of a nail file on his middle finger erases human history.’

But just as there is deep time behind us, there is also deep time ahead. In six billion years, any creatures that will be around to see our sun die, will be as different from us, as we are from the first single-celled bacteria.

Yet why exactly do long-term thinkers need this sense of temporal humility? Deep time prompts us to consider the consequences of our actions far beyond our own lifetimes, and puts us back in touch with the long-term cycles of the living world like the carbon cycle. But it also helps us grasp our destructive potential: in an incredibly short period of time — only a couple of centuries — we have endangered a world that took billions of years to evolve. We are just a tiny link in the great chain of living organisms, so who are we to put it all in jeopardy with our ecological blindness and deadly technologies? Don't we have an obligation to our planetary future and the generations of humans and other species to come?

2. Legacy Mindset: be remembered well by posterity

We are the inheritors of extraordinary legacies from the past — from those who planted the first seeds, built the cities where we now live, and made the medical discoveries we benefit from. But alongside the good ancestors are the 'bad ancestors', such as those who bequeathed us colonial and slavery-era racism and prejudice that deeply permeate today's criminal justice systems. This raises the question of what legacies we will leave to future generations: how do we want to be remembered by posterity?

The challenge is to leave a legacy that goes beyond egoistic legacy (like a Russian oligarch who wants a wing of an art gallery named after them) or even familial legacy (like wishing to pass on property or cultural traditions to our children). If we hope to be good ancestors, we need to develop a transcendent 'legacy mindset', where we aim to be remembered well by the generations we will never know, by the universal strangers of the future.

We might look for inspiration in many places. The Māori concept of *whakapapa* ('genealogy'), describes a continuous lifeline that connects an individual to the past, present and future, and generates a sense of respect for the traditions of previous generations while being mindful of those yet to come. In Katie Paterson's art project [Future Library](#), every year for a hundred years a famous writer (the first was Margaret Atwood) is depositing a new work, which will remain unread until 2114, when they will all be printed on paper made from a thousand trees that have been planted in a forest outside Oslo. Then there are activists like Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1977 she founded the [Green Belt Movement](#) in Kenya, which by the time of her death in 2011 had trained more than 25,000 women in forestry skills and planted 40 million trees. That's how to pass on a legacy gift to the future.

3. Intergenerational Justice: consider the seventh generation ahead

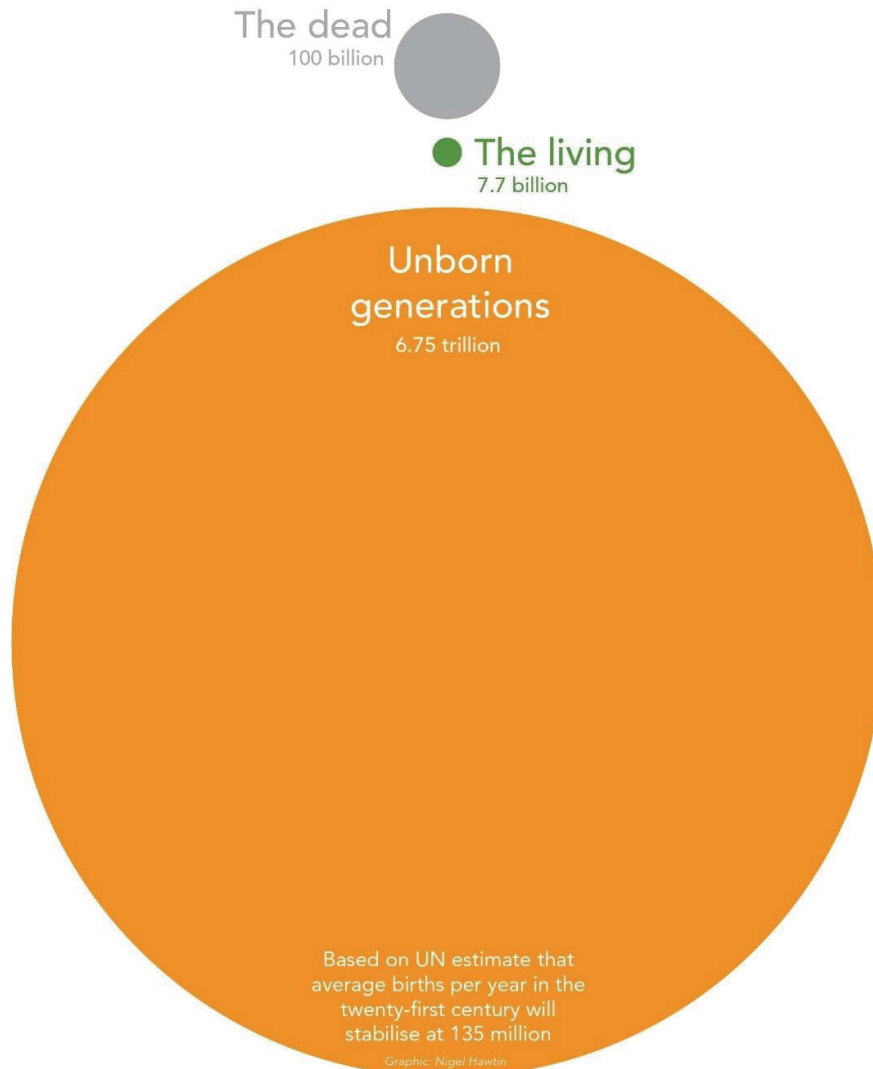
"Why should I care about future generations? What have they ever done for me?" This clever quip attributed to Groucho Marx highlights the issue of intergenerational justice. This is not the legacy question of how we will be remembered, but the moral question of what responsibilities we have to the 'futureholders' — the generations who will succeed us.

One approach, rooted in utilitarian philosophy, is to recognise that at least in terms of sheer numbers, the current population is easily outweighed by all those who will come after us. In a calculation made by writer [Richard Fisher](#), around 100 billion people have lived and died in the past 50,000 years. But they, together with the 7.7 billion people currently alive, are far

outweighed by the estimated 6.75 trillion people who will be born over the next 50,000 years, if this century's birth rate is maintained (see graphic below). Even in just the next millennium, more than 135 billion people are likely to be born. How could we possibly ignore their wellbeing, and think that our own is of such greater value?

The scale of unborn generations

Looking 50,000 years into the past and 50,000 into the future – assuming that the twenty-first century's birth rate remains constant – all human lives ever lived are far outweighed by all those yet to come



Such thinking is embodied in the idea of 'seventh-generation decision making', an ethic of ecological stewardship practised amongst some Native American peoples such as the Oglala Lakota Nation in South Dakota: community decisions take into the account the impacts seven generations from the present. This ideal is fast becoming a cornerstone of the growing global intergenerational justice movement, inspiring groups such as [Our Children's Trust](#) (fighting for the legal rights of future generations in the US) and [Future Design](#) in Japan (which promotes

citizens' assemblies for city planning, where residents imagine themselves being from future generations).

4. Cathedral thinking: plan projects beyond a human lifetime

Cathedral thinking is the practice of envisaging and embarking on projects with time horizons stretching decades and even centuries into the future, just like medieval cathedral builders who began despite knowing they were unlikely to see construction finished within their own lifetimes. [Greta Thunberg](#) has said that it will take 'cathedral thinking' to tackle the climate crisis.

Historically, cathedral thinking has taken different forms. Apart from religious buildings, there are public works projects such as the sewers built in Victorian London after the 'Great Stink' of 1858, which are still in use today (we might call this 'sewer thinking' rather than 'cathedral thinking'). Scientific endeavours include the Svalbard Global Seed in the remote Arctic, which contains over one million seeds from more than 6,000 species, and intends to keep them safe in an indestructible rock bunker for at least a thousand years. We should also include social and political movements with long time horizons, such as the Suffragettes, who formed their first organisation in Manchester in 1867 and didn't achieve their aim of votes for women for over half a century.

Inspiring stuff. But remember that cathedral thinking can be directed towards narrow and self-serving ends. Hitler hoped to create a Thousand Year Reich. Dictators have sought to preserve their power and privilege for their progeny through the generations: just look at North Korea. In the corporate world, Gus Levy, former head of investment bank Goldman Sachs, once proudly declared, 'We're greedy, but long-term greedy, not short-term greedy'.

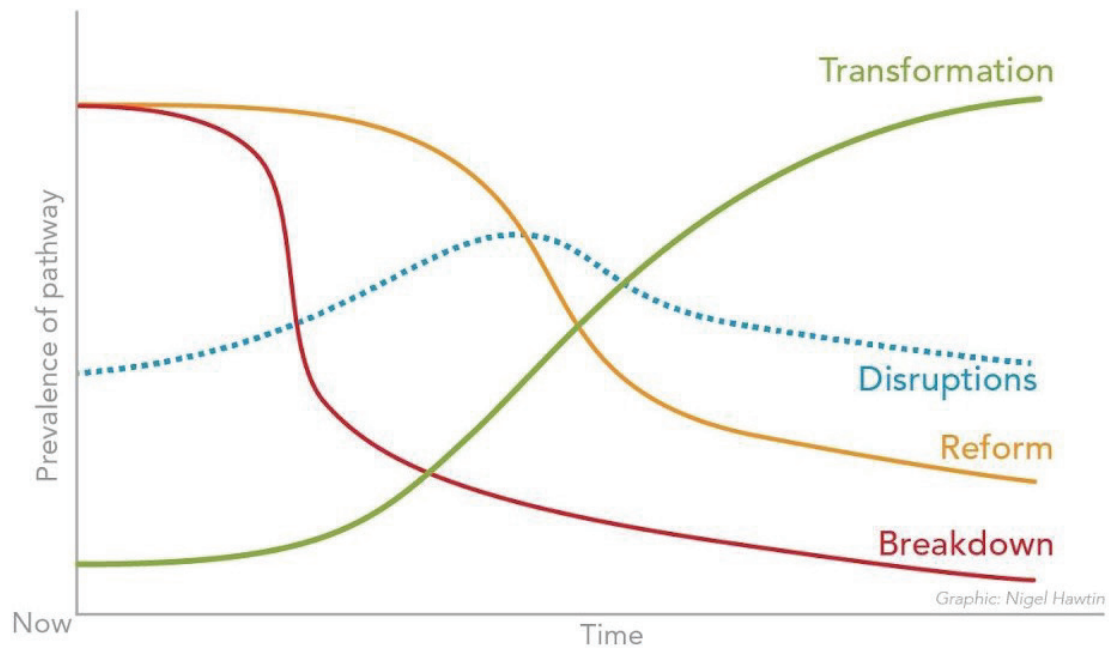
That's why cathedral thinking alone is not enough to create a long-term civilization that respects the interests of future generations. It needs to be guided by other approaches, such as intergenerational justice and a transcendent goal (see below).

5. Holistic Forecasting: envision multiple pathways for civilization

Numerous studies demonstrate that most [forecasting professionals](#) tend to have a poor record at predicting future events. Yet we must still try to map out the possible long-term trajectories of human civilization itself — what I call holistic forecasting — otherwise we will end up only dealing with crises as they hit us in the present. Experts in the fields of global risk studies and scenario planning have identified three broad pathways, which I call Breakdown, Reform and Transformation (see graphic below).

Breakdown is the path of business-as-usual. We continue striving for the old twentieth-century goal of material economic progress but soon reach a point of societal and institutional collapse in the near term as we fail to respond to rampant ecological and technological crises, and cross dangerous civilizational tipping points (think Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*).

Three pathways for civilisation



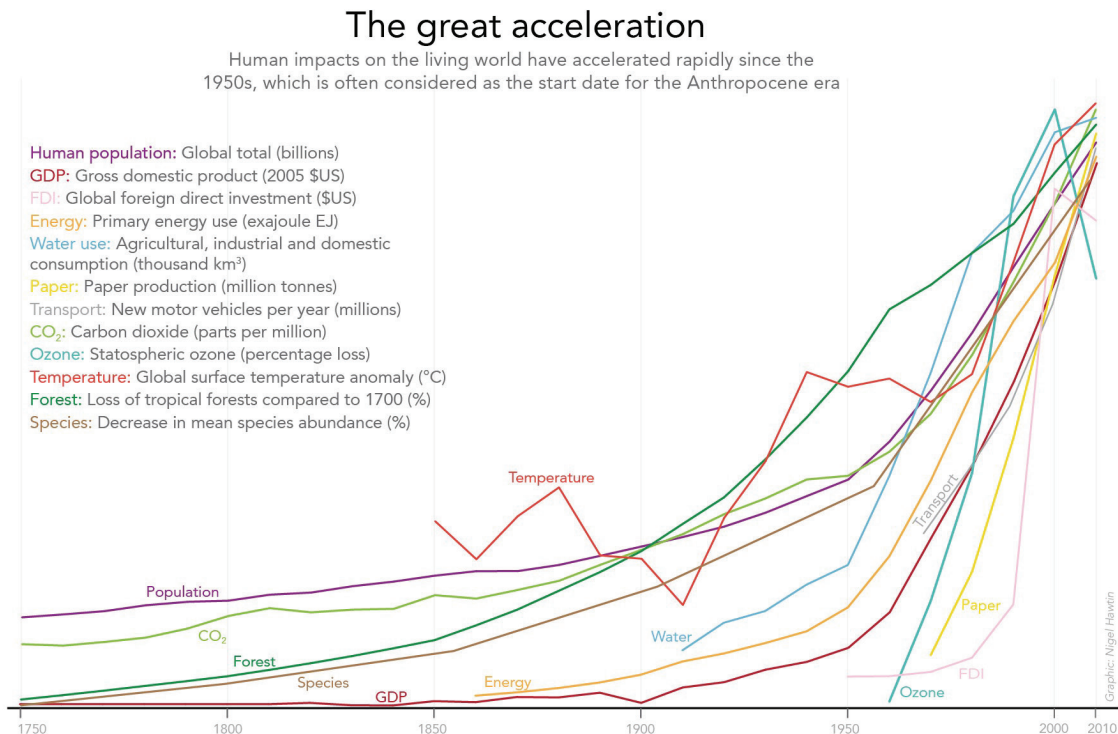
A more likely trajectory is Reform, where we respond to global crises such as climate change but in an inadequate and piecemeal way that merely extends the Breakdown curve outwards, to a greater or lesser extent. Here governments put their faith in reformist ideals such as ‘green growth’, ‘reinventing capitalism’, or a belief that technological solutions are just around the corner.

A third trajectory is Transformation, where we see a radical shift in the values and institutions of society towards a more long-term sustainable civilization. For instance, we jump off the Breakdown curve onto a new pathway dominated by post-growth economic models such as [Doughnut Economics](#) or a [Green New Deal](#).

Note the crucial line of Disruptions. These are disruptive innovations or events that offer an opportunity to switch from one curve onto another. It could be a new technology like blockchain, the rise of a political movement like Black Lives Matter, or a global pandemic like COVID-19. Successful long-term thinking requires turning these disruptions towards Transformative change and ensuring they are not captured by the old system.

6. Transcendent Goal: strive for one-planet thriving

Every society, wrote astronomer Carl Sagan, needs a '[telos](#)' to guide it — 'a long-term goal and a sacred project'. What are the options? While the goal of material progress served us well in the past, we now know too much about its collateral damage: fossil fuels and material waste have pushed us into the Anthropocene, the perilous new era characterised by a steep upward trend in damaging planetary indicators called the [Great Acceleration](#) (see graphic).



An alternative transcendent goal is to see our destiny in the stars: the only way to guarantee the survival of our species is to escape the confines of Earth and colonise other worlds. Yet terraforming somewhere like Mars to make it habitable could take centuries — if it could be [done at all](#). Additionally, the more we set our sights on escaping to other worlds, the less likely we are to look after our existing one. As cosmologist Martin Rees points out, 'It's a dangerous delusion to think that space offers an escape from Earth's problems. We've got to solve these problems here.'

That's why our primary goal should be to learn to live within the biocapacity of the only planet we know that sustains life. This is the fundamental principle of the field of ecological economics developed by visionary thinkers such as [Herman Daly](#): don't use more resources than the earth can naturally regenerate (for instance, only harvest timber as fast as it can grow back), and don't create more wastes than it can naturally absorb (so avoid burning fossil fuels that can't be absorbed by the oceans and other carbon sinks).

Once we've learned to do this, we can do as much terraforming of Mars as we like: as any mountaineer knows, make sure your basecamp is in order with ample supplies before you tackle a risky summit. But according to the [Global Footprint Network](#), we are not even close and currently use up the equivalent of around 1.6 planet Earths each year. That's short-termism of the most deadly kind. A transcendent goal of one-planet thriving is our best guarantee of a long-term future. And we do it by caring about *place* as much as rethinking *time*.

Bring on the Time Rebellion

So there is a brief overview of a cognitive toolkit we could draw on to survive and thrive into the centuries and millennia to come. None of these six ways is enough alone to create a long-term revolution of the human mind — a fundamental shift in our [perception of time](#). But together — and when practised by a critical mass of people and organisations — a new age of long-term thinking could emerge out of their synergy.

Is this a likely prospect? Can we win the tug of war against short-termism?

‘Only a crisis — actual or perceived — produces real change,’ wrote economist Milton Friedman. Out of the ashes of World War Two came pioneering long-term institutions such as the World Health Organisation, the European Union and welfare states. So too out of the global crisis of COVID-19 could emerge the long-term institutions we need to tackle the challenges of our own time: climate change, technology threats, the racism and inequality structured into our political and economic systems. Now is the moment for expanding our time horizons into a [longer now](#). Now is the moment to become a time rebel.

Roman Krznaric is a public philosopher, research fellow of the Long Now Foundation, and founder of the world's first Empathy Museum. His latest book is [The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long Term in a Short-Term World](#). He lives in Oxford, UK. [@romankrznaric](#)

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